— *Chapter 1* —

BALANCED LITERACY IN THE CLASSROOM

There has been a progression of change during the past several years from a more traditional style of skill-based, directed instruction to a literature-based, holistic approach to teaching reading and writing. Currently there is less controversy among most educators over which is the best way to teach reading and writing because a ''balanced approach'' to literacy instruction, which is supported by the research, is understood to be what works best. For many of us, this has always made sense. We know that balance in any aspect of life tends to bring the most success. In this book we will look at balanced literacy as encompassing balance in a number of components of the literacy classroom—such as instructional practices, approaches, formats, resources and materials, and other factors.

Our belief is that any literacy program that is going to be successful will incorporate the best of methods and approaches that have been proven effective in teaching students. Children *need* reading material that will captivate their interest, fuel their creative thought, motivate them to think critically, and allow them to make meaningful connections to their lives. The holistic approach, using high-quality literature and other published works, fulfills these needs most effectively. In addition, we know that many students need a more structured, explicit, and systematic approach to learn specific skills fundamental to becoming fluent, competent, independent readers, writers, and speakers. What makes best sense is to find a *balance* in language arts instruction—utilizing a host of strategies and techniques to meet the needs of all learners.

BALANCE AND THE CHALLENGES OF REACHING AND TEACHING DIVERSE READERS AND WRITERS

All students need to be challenged at whatever level they happen to be—pushed beyond their comfort zone while being supported in their learning. High-achieving, advanced readers and

writers generally need more choice of assignments and projects, and time to investigate independently, explore their topic of focus at a deeper level, and pursue their passions or interests. They need to be challenged and motivated to work hard and keep growing—sometimes well beyond demonstrating grade-level proficiency in reading and writing standards. Many high-achieving students who are highly competent in some areas of reading and written language will still be average or even have weaknesses in other literacy skills that will require direct teaching and support.

Other students, such as English language learners and those with reading and writing challenges, may require a higher degree of scaffolding and teacher or peer support in order to build their competencies and achieve success. They may also require intervention (from mild to intensive), depending on their needs. Many schools, in their effort to ensure that "no child is left behind," are implementing interventions for students in need of support. These generally involve providing more direct teaching for the struggling student at his or her instructional level (such as extra guided reading and skills instruction). This time for additional instruction and practice may take place during the school day or in before- or after-school programs. Targeted students may also receive more support and intervention through push-in or pull-out services from specialists, and sometimes supplementary reading and writing programs are utilized as well. See Chapter Eleven for a list of some research-validated intervention programs.

COMPONENTS OF BALANCED LITERACY

A balanced literacy program for upper elementary and middle school students includes the following components:

- Explicit teacher modeling for students of effective strategies, skills (general and specific), and metacognitive processes that good readers and writers use
- Opportunities for student modeling and sharing of standard-setting, proficient reading and writing work
- Reading to students (aloud), together with students (shared and guided), and by students (independently), using quality pieces of fiction and nonfiction text
- Oral language development and listening experiences
- Word study instruction and practice to developmentally build students' vocabulary, word recognition, spelling, and fluency skills
- Independent reading and writing to build stamina and fluency and provide for creativity and choice
- Expository and narrative reading and writing experiences throughout the day and threading throughout all the content areas
- Multiple opportunities for engagement, inquiry, and expression through various reading and writing groupings, formats, resources, and projects
- Multiple and varied student assessments to drive instruction

A combination of these strategies works best to enable students to build their communication and meaning-making competencies. In this book, we provide guidance, strategies, and activities and address other essential elements of a balanced literacy classroom.

Balancing Quality Literature and Other Resources in Our Libraries

Through the balanced literacy approach we strive to provide upper graders and middle school students with opportunities to comprehend, appreciate, and respond to a wide variety of pieces of quality literature. Through their reading, writing, speaking, and listening, we hope they will begin to synthesize their understanding of customs and beliefs of different cultures, and they will compare and contrast their own lives to the characters in the books. We want to provide them with opportunities to read other materials besides books, so that they possess the survival reading skills needed in the world of their everyday lives. Classroom textbooks, trade books, magazines, poetry books, newspapers, plays and readers' theater scripts, and digital sources should reflect grade-level standards in both fiction and nonfiction. To accommodate the wide range of reading and writing abilities of upper elementary and middle school students, we need to provide motivating materials at multilevels so that all students can find quality text to access. Each student should have books and resources available that he or she is capable of reading, that address the standards, and support the theme, or "big idea" of the content being taught. See Chapter Two, Setting Up a Balanced Literacy Environment, for ways to incorporate all of these elements.

We must also provide experiences in practical content reading, as well as self-selected, pleasure reading. Through good literature, our students will feel comfortable listening to others, responding in classroom discussions, and transferring their acquired learning into their own writing.

Balancing Reading, Writing, Speaking, Listening, and Word Study

When we look at literacy as a big umbrella (reading, writing, listening, and speaking), although called out separately in the standards, these literacy components really are not separate at all. They are intertwined like strands of a rope held tightly together to form one stronghold. Balanced literacy is much the same.

It allows us to move back and forth and in and out of reading, writing, word study, listening, and speaking to build a strong base in meaning making. For instance, as we read aloud a piece of literature, such as *Donovan's Word Jar* (DeGross, 1994), we might focus on the idea that learning new words can be a very powerful tool. We might front-load or preteach some of the vocabulary such as *orchestral, chortle,* and *definitive* before reading the story aloud at the rug area, where good listening will help us co-create a sequence chart retelling the story. We might gather new words for our personal word jars. We might *turn* and *talk* to our partners about Donovan and how to solve his problem. We might write a response to Donovan about what to do with all of his extra words or write a letter to tell him how we are going to get more knowledge about words. We might reread parts and put a copy of a couple of pages on the overhead or document camera to learn about how good writers structure sentences or use conversation. We might share what we wrote in our response journal with a partner or small group. We might revisit the story to question the author or have a hot-seat character study. There is no end to the conversations, dialogue, word study opportunities, and connections we can make and talk about. We should look at each of these domains as blended experiences that are seamlessly threaded through one or more literacy periods. Looking at a piece of literature provides numerous avenues for us to explore.

Integrating Content in the Literacy Block

Figuring out how to balance everything we have to teach about literacy in the time we have available within the school day is a balancing act in itself. There are only so many

minutes, and we have a lot of curriculum to teach. Therefore, it is essential that we prioritize what we teach, when we teach it, and on what day. If you are in a district that has a two- or three-hour literacy block, you must decide how to get more done and be more efficient. Many teachers have begun to double-dip, using their literacy block to integrate content (social studies, science, health, music, or art) into their literacy time. Using content-based literature during the literacy block integrates the curriculum into a thematic unit, helping our students to see the relationships between fiction and nonfiction and how reading, writing, and speaking fit together in the big picture of learning. By integrating this content during literacy, we utilize our multileveled resources. Many of our books and topics address the issues and subjects in our science and social studies content areas and the standards for our specific grade levels.

BALANCING INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACHES

To become proficient in all the domains of literacy, teachers must use and students must be provided with a variety of instructional approaches throughout the day. These approaches move children from the greatest amount of teacher support to the least amount of teacher support. The *gradual release of responsibility* model (Pearson & Fielding, 1991) moves the child from the most teacher support such as through *read-alouds* and *modeled writing*; to *shared and guided* experiences, during which children begin to slowly take more of the responsibility; and finally to the *independent* stage where they take full responsibility for these tasks. If we look at our own childhoods, this gradual release of responsibility is basic to how most of us learned things such as riding a bike, swimming, diving, cooking, building, and even using a computer. Scaffolds were built and then gradually removed as we gained proficiency in learning these new skills. In most cases, we did not have to do these things alone—we were supported by others who made sure that we had a foundation for our learning.

Balancing Learning Style Preferences of Students

Not all students learn the same way. To reach and teach students with diverse learning styles and needs, teachers must employ strategies that will tap into their varied learning strengths and multiple intelligences. This requires using multisensory strategies when instructing, so that all students can receive information through their preferred modalities (auditory, visual, tactile, or kinesthetic) such as graphics and visual displays, demonstrations and hands-on activities, or explanation and discussion. It also means recognition that students are adept in different abilities (such as verbal, mathematical, musical, artistic, or physical) and need learning experiences that let them use and showcase those strengths and talents to their peers. We must provide students options in demonstrating their learning, such as choice in how they will publish their written work and share with an audience or the type of book project they create (for example, a poster or minibook, a summary through song, or a dramatic reenactment of a scene). Some people learn best and are happiest when interacting with others, while others prefer to work and study alone, and this preference, too, needs to be considered when differentiating instruction in the literacy classroom. We must also structure the day or class period taking into account students' need for a mix of high activity level and low, time for lively interaction and for quiet contemplation and reflection, as well.

Balancing Grouping in the Classroom

A literacy classroom involves a mix of grouping formats—whichever is most conducive to the instruction or student practice taking place. Whole-group, heterogeneous grouping is often used to expose all students to the grade-level standards for which they need to demonstrate proficiency. Read-alouds, modeled writing, and shared reading and writing work well for the whole-group format. When students are grouped by interest or ability level or for cooperative group activities, small-group formats are generally used. This instructional format is used for guided reading, guided writing, book clubs or literature circles, and minilessons to teach specific skills and strategies needed for a particular group of students. Collaborative learning experiences such as those that take place in a small group also take place in partner formats. The literacy classroom will frequently involve students paired for partner activities such as for shared reading, providing and receiving feedback and assistance throughout the writing process, comprehension checks, and so forth. Students will also be working alone while they are reading and writing, using the independent format as well. Teachers will meet with students individually for conferencing about their reading and writing and will also provide individual assistance, re-teaching, or other supports, as needed.

It is imperative in the balanced literacy program that students have multiple opportunities to work collaboratively with the teacher and their classmates. No single program works for all children, so it is up to the teacher to modify and adapt lessons into tiered fashion, making instruction multilevel to address the special needs of students with different learning styles, backgrounds, and abilities.

When we *know* our students—their interests, academic abilities, personalities, learning styles, behavioral issues, and home support—we have the knowledge we need to decide what type of group the child needs for a particular task. Most of the time grouping *will* be flexible—it will change for a variety of reasons to address the specific needs of the students and the teacher for that hour, day, week, month, or year.

For instance, if one of our standards is to address homophones in spelling, we have several ways to tackle this subject with students. Through preassessment, a teacher may see that the class needs whole-group instruction, some students may need guided small-group support, others need one-on-one support, and some are ready to embark on their own independent search. Knowing when and how to group or switch groups is an integral part of a focused and effective literacy program. By working in groups of varying size, students see that throughout the year they will be given assistance when needed as they are challenged in a new or renewed learning situation.

Teachers also know that they will sometimes select heterogeneous or homogeneous groups for particular reasons and that students will sometimes be able to select their own groups. Choice is built into the program. There are also times for random groups to be formed. Again, this is part of a balanced literacy program that encompasses teacher expertise. Moving in and out of whole-group, small-group, and one-on-one instruction provides a stable sequence to the literacy block that students learn to feel comfortable with.

Balancing Teacher Talk and Student Talk

Teachers like to talk, and we have a perfect audience: a classroom of students to listen to us. Over the last few decades the amount of teacher *talk* has been curtailed. Experience tells us that students have a lot to say and when children constructively *talk,* there are plenty of peer listeners. Whether it is math, science, reading, or writing, it is time for teachers to become good

listeners too. We must allow students to share their ideas and strategic thoughts, their ways of doing things, allow them to be student models for others, and partake in the actual instruction by becoming experts in specific areas. Finding a balance between student and teacher *talk* and active participation builds a safe and comfortable literacy community. Sometimes the classroom is quiet, whereas sometimes it is bustling with engaging discourse and collaborative conversations. Child-centered exploration and inquiry-based instruction put learning back where it belongs—with the kids.

Balancing Teacher-Directed and Student-Directed Activities

Another feature of a literacy classroom that requires balance is the degree of structure built into the learning tasks and the choice students have in assignments and activities. Parts of instruction, assignments, and learning activities are teacher-selected and directed; others give the student freedom to choose and make more decisions. For example, some writing assignments will require students to respond to a specific prompt or use a particular graphic organizer in their planning. Other writing assignments will allow for student choice in topic and planning tools used. Some instruction will involve very explicit, step-by-step teacher instruction, while other tasks will involve an exploratory, discovery approach. There will be some assignments that are very structured. They may, for example, include designated time lines and specific due dates for steps of a project to be accomplished. Other assignments and learning tasks will be more flexible in requirements for completion.

Balancing Formal and Informal Assessments

For most teachers, high-stakes testing has become the reason to teach with such intensity. Their performance is judged by how many of their students scored proficient or above on the tests. Fountas and Pinnell (2001) indicate, "We need to find ways to cope with the demands of the testing environment and still help our students have happy, productive, and satisfying literacy experiences." Although this is a fact of our professional lives, we must be cognizant of other types of assessments that will give us more realistic feedback about our students' successes and challenges.

In the balanced classroom, informal assessments (those done within the same classroom, usually by the classroom teacher) should also hold weight. They tend to be more useful because they are often observational, immediate, and on the spot. Such assessments are helpful for informing instruction and include such methods as teacher, peer- and self-evaluations, reading and writing samples, one-on-one conferences, peer conferences, summaries, interest and attitude surveys, portfolios, spelling tests and inventories, oral presentations, speaking assessments, and checklists.

ESTABLISHING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS

The balanced literacy classroom is an engaging environment where students feel comfortable expressing their ideas and learning new things, where thoughts are respected and valued, and where needs, interests, and abilities are honored and attended to. It is a place where children feel successful, challenged, safe, and where they want to be.

It takes a skillful teacher to know how to develop a climate of respect and appreciation for all levels of learning. We must instill in our students the idea that we all have different strengths

and weaknesses and that these differences make our classrooms unique. We must set our standards high for all students to achieve, but we must create a safe and trusting environment for even our weakest reader or writer to feel comfortable.

During the first weeks of school, building a sense of community is very important. This can be achieved through the use of specific books that teach about reading, writing, and words. Several of our favorite books for this purpose are *Marianthe's Story: Painted Words and Spoken Memories* (Aliki, 1998), *The Armadillo from Amarillo* (Cherry, 1994), *Donovan's Word Jar* (DeGross, 1994), and *Teammates* (Golenbock, 1990).

To create this literacy community, a two-week unit of study such as the one found in Appendix B can be implemented in the classroom. A detailed first-day lesson plan for this unit is provided below for reading, writing, and word study. The books and standards mentioned in this lesson plan can be substituted with others that are appropriate for your grade level and standards.

GRADE 5 BUILDING COMMUNITY

Read-Aloud Lesson Plan: The Moon and I

Day 1

Focus. Introducing the genre of memoir and making connections to our own lives to make meaning of the story.

Introduction. Authors often take events from their own lives to create all or part of their stories that you and I read. The story that I am going to read to you today is called "Miss Harriet's Room" from *The Moon and I,* by Betsy Byars. You will find a tub of her books in our classroom library. This kind of book is called a memoir, and I'll be sharing other memoirs with you throughout the year. As readers, we connect or relate to these stories in our own special ways depending on our own lives and our own personal experiences. Many times they spark ideas in our own minds and we understand or remember the story better because we personally are linked to it. As you listen today, use your personal connections to help you hold on to the story and understand how Betsy might have been feeling. Think of your first days of school over the years. Were they the same or different from Betsy's?

Text Summary. Betsy has been anxiously awaiting her first day of school in Miss Harriet's room. She has been anticipating the many fun activities that her sister had participated in three years earlier, including the store, painting, and the book called *The Adventures of Mabel,* "the best book in the world." Things do not go as she planned, but her tenacity gets her what she wants in the end.

Questions, Prompts, and Modeling. Have the students clustered near you. This is a real bonding time with your students. Make the most of it. Being prepared is a must. Make sure that you have read the story before you read it to your students. Adding your own personality makes the book come alive. Kids will know that you love the book. Make the story like Miss Harriet did—better than the circus. Engage the students through your voice, your actions, and your delight. You might want to use a highlighter, sticky notes, or notes in the margins to remind you where to stop and question students to make sure they are making meaning. Use a variety of involvement techniques such as volunteers, calling on specific individuals, pairs, triads, and combining two pairs in think-pair-square interactions.

At the very beginning of the year some students are hesitant to risk raising their hands, so you might call on volunteers to get you going. Take it in little steps. Here are a few sample questions that might guide your questioning as you read:

Page 70. What do you think *coveted* means? Is there anything that you have ever coveted in your life? What does Betsy mean that the old shirts and the purse were *sacred*? Is there anything in your house that would be sacred?

Page 71. Were you surprised at what Betsy did? Is it okay for a kindergartener to speak up so boldly about something she wants so badly? How do you think you would have handled the situation? Would it be the same? Different? What does this tell you about Betsy Byars as a person?

Page 72. What do you think made Miss Harriet's room so special? Have you ever felt that way about a teacher? Have you ever had a favorite book that meant as much to you as *The Adventures of Mabel?* Explain your answer. How did Betsy change in the story?

Closure. What kind of connection did you make with Betsy Byars? How did this help you make meaning from the story and understand her character? How do you know that this is a memoir?

Writer's Workshop Connection. Just like Betsy Byars, you might have a special school event or experience that you want to write about today. If not, you may write about another experience or event you have had outside of school.

GRADE 5 BUILDING COMMUNITY

Shared Reading Lesson Plan: "Testing New Waters"

Day 1

Focus. Visualization and introduction to reading poetry for meaning and enjoyment.

Introduction. During shared reading, all students should have easy access to the poem. Having an individual copy of the poem allows students to practice it at a later time independently. The poem may be made into an overhead, but make sure the words are in a font that is easy to read and large enough for all students to see. The poem may also be written on a chart. Make sure that the students are clustered close together and near you so that students can be actively engaged in discussion without distractions.

Since this is our first week of school together, some of you may feel a little scared thinking about what things are going to be like in this class—you are "testing new waters." Sometimes when we are in a new situation, we are hesitant to take risks. In this classroom we will appreciate and respect each other's space and time to grow. Some of you will take longer to warm up while others of you are raring to go. Today I am going to read a selection from *Wham! It's a Poetry Jam* called "Testing New Waters." As we read other poems in this book, I hope you will become actively involved in presenting poetry. We can have lots of fun performing solo and together. Learning seems more enjoyable when we do things together. Reading research finds that proficient readers draw pictures in their minds to see what they read. In poetry, since there are so few words, every word is important. Today, draw a

mental picture of a stream with banks along its edge and swirling water passing by. Put yourself in the picture. This will help you "see" the poem "Testing New Waters." As I read it through with you, visualize it and then think about what the poet is trying to say. Think about how that fits into your feelings being in a new classroom with a new teacher and students you might not know. How can we make this a safe environment for people to take risks?

Text Summary. A student is deciding whether to take a risk at something new by taking small steps.

Questions, Prompts, and Modeling. Use a variety of questioning techniques throughout the lesson including TPS (think-pair-share), triads, TPSQ (think-pair-square), volunteers, and calling on individual students.

What do you think the author means by "the bank of what-I-know?" "Unfamiliar water passing in a rush?" "With maybes swirling in my ears?"

What words would you use to describe the author of this poem?

What kinds of fears do you think he or she has?

What makes people have fears about things?

Have you ever felt fearful of something new?

What would be some of the fears people in our classroom might have today, tomorrow, and later in the year?

What can we do to squelch those fears in this classroom?

Have students read the poem in a variety of ways: individually to themselves (quietly whispering the words aloud); to a partner; as a whole class; boys take one stanza, girls another; assign lines; one person reads the whole poem to the class; partners take turns and decide on how to chunk it into segments, and so forth.

Closure. As we become better acquainted this year, we will become more comfortable in taking risks. Some of us love to perform with reading while others of us would prefer not to. We are all members of this team of learners, and as a team everyone is expected to try out new things, however challenging they may seem. We will encourage each person to be an engaged learner. Everyone's input is important to making this an enjoyable place to be.

GRADE 5 BUILDING COMMUNITY

Word Study Lesson Plan: "Testing New Waters"

Day 1

Reading Work. Making meaning in a reading selection when key words in the piece have multiple meanings.

Introduction. When we were reading the selection "Testing New Waters," there were several words that might have been confusing to you as a reader. Many good readers have to reread a piece of work so that they are sure they understand the true meaning of key

words. Unlocking the possibilities within the multiple meanings of basic words can be complex. Many words are not one-dimensional. They have several, sometimes many, meanings. If you are reading and it is confusing, slow down the pace of your reading, reread the passage, and try to unlock the correct meaning of the word so that it makes sense. Sometimes when we are confused, discussing the confusion with a friend is helpful. In this classroom we are all teachers. Helping each other is an important part of our reading work.

Text Summary. Use an overhead of the poem "Testing New Waters." Prepare a transparency of the dictionary definition of the word *bank*. Use a simplified children's dictionary to locate word definitions for review. Adult dictionaries are too complicated at this point for easy modeling of basic definitions.

Questions, Prompts, and Modeling. The teacher models the confusion in the word *bank* in the poem. It might mean a place whose business is to keep money safe, a place where a large supply of anything is kept, or the land along the edge of a river or stream. Ask students to think of other types of banks, such as blood bank, donor bank, and word bank. On the overhead, show the enlarged definition of *bank* from the dictionary. Help students determine what kind of word it is (noun, verb, or adjective) from their prior knowledge. Tell students that determining the type of word it is helps them discover the specific meaning the author intended. Elicit which definition makes sense in this selection. The teacher also models thinking about the word *flush* and uses the enlarged definition on the overhead. Which definition fits the author's meaning for the poem? How do you know? What makes you sure? Have students work together with partners, using the definitions for the word *rush*.

Closure. Check student responses. Working together helps us to find the real meaning of an author's word use. Making sure that we understand and question the meaning of a word helps us better comprehend the author's intention for using that specific word. When multiple-meaning words stump us, we can reread, slow down our pace, use a dictionary, and think and talk through the piece with others to become better readers.

See Appendix B for the full two-week unit lesson plan on building community.