

**THE PHILOSOPHY AND TENETS OF THE  
*BALANCED LITERACY PROGRAM***

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## THE PHILOSOPHY AND TENETS OF THE *BALANCED LITERACY PROGRAM*

In designing the *Balanced Literacy Program*, the first step was to create a philosophical underpinning; a series of basic principles through which approaches, methods, and materials would be filtered. As noted in the previous chapter, the framework was created within a sociocognitive view of literacy acquisition. This model influences the twelve basic tenets delineated as follows.

### TENET 1

*Children will move from supported to independent learning in Language Arts.*

In the last quarter century, it has become obvious that literacy learning is an apprenticeship (Clay, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). Children learn from experienced literacy users and travel along a path that moves from support to independence. The *Balanced Literacy Program* is based on the knowledge that, as children learn something new in the process of learning to read and write, they need to be supported. Children gradually gather enough knowledge and competence to take over the independent application of literacy concepts. On a daily basis, the *Balanced Literacy Program* helps them to move along the learning continuum and provides activities and approaches that offer the range from complete support to independent literacy action.

#### ***Read Aloud***

As the teacher reads aloud to the class, complete reading support is offered. The teacher models engaged reading and the rhythm, sound, and sense of written language.

#### ***Shared Reading***

The teacher offers scaffolded support by modeling reading, but also invites and encourages the children to read along and interact with print. Strategies are taught to help students with contextual word recognition and comprehension.

#### ***Guided Reading***

The teacher uses leveled texts and ensures that students read at their *Instructional Levels*. The supports and challenges of each text are evaluated. The teacher provides enough guidance to help the children to engage in reading problem solving, balanced with a successful reading experience.

#### ***Independent Reading***

The teacher provides leveled materials that the students can read on their own. These materials need to be at the children's *Independent Reading Levels* (e.g., easier books than those used in *Guided Reading* groups).

### **Write Aloud**

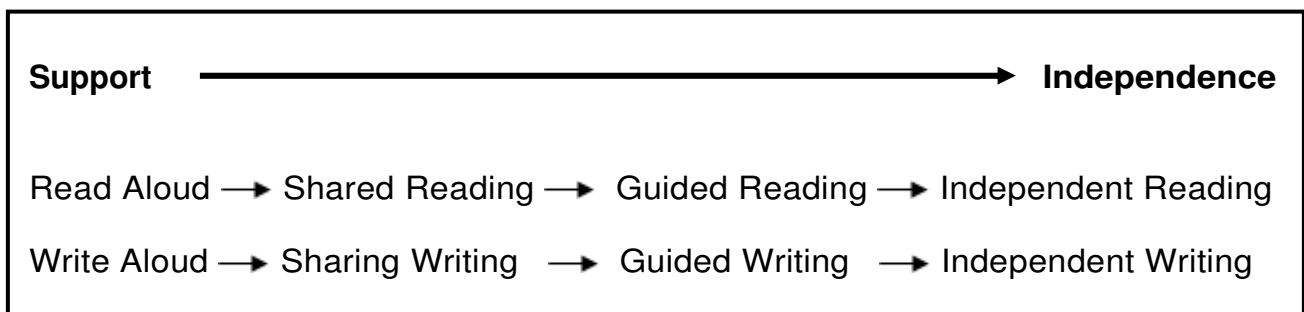
The teacher models and talks aloud as she writes on chart paper or uses an overhead projector (e.g. a writing demonstration is provided for the students). The topic and content should match the students' needs as writers.

### **Shared Writing**

The teacher shares the writing with the children. All of the class contribute to a shared topic. The teacher facilitates and guides as the students add ideas, spellings, punctuation and editing suggestions.

### **Guided and Independent Writing**

The children write on their own but receive guidance and support from the teacher as required. Groups may be convinced to work on aspects of writing when there are several children with the same needs. The whole class receives prewriting support via the use of text structure organizers.



## **TENET 2**

*All children will read their Instructional Levels in their Guided Reading groups, and at their Independence Levels when reading on their own.*

Children progress as readers when they read at their Instructional Levels (i.e., at a level where each child comprehends a minimum of 70% of the ideas and has 90 – 95% contextual word recognition accuracy in a teacher guided situation [Gillet & Temple, 1982]). This has long been established in research (Fitzgerald, 1999; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) and the *Balanced Literacy Program* puts this knowledge into action in the classroom. *Guided Reading* groups are formed to maximize children's growth by enabling them to read at, or close to, their *Instructional Levels*. In addition, it is helpful for children to read slightly easier books when they read independently (i.e., with 90% comprehension and 95%+ word recognition [Gillet & Temple, 1982]). Able readers are never 'held back' because they may use the next grade's materials, and less advanced readers are ensured that they are never reading at *Frustration Level* (i.e., less than 70% comprehension and below 90% contextual word recognition).

### **TENET 3**

*Students will receive direct, explicit instruction and incidental teaching on spelling, word recognition/analysis, comprehension, and writing strategies on a daily basis.*

The *Balanced Literacy* structure stresses that all key components occur daily to ensure that the children have predictable routines and a truly *balanced* program.

Direct, whole class instruction (Adams, 1990) is a vital part of the approach to ensure that all students are exposed to concepts in explicit ways. It also provides a vehicle for increasing the metacognitive awareness of students as we make explicit how reading and writing processes operate (Wilkinson, 1999). For example, a teacher demonstrates how to write a journal entry and models the process by thinking aloud and writing in a classroom demonstration. The teacher's metacognitive processes are exposed to the students in this whole class demonstration.

In addition, diverse organizational groupings are embedded in the program to permit individuals and small groups to benefit from valuable critical moment incidental instruction (Goodman and Watson, 1998, p.137). This type of teaching accommodates for differentiated learning needs.

### **TENET 4**

*Direct instruction will be multilevel to meet the needs of all class members.*

When direct instruction occurs in our classrooms, it needs to be multilevel in that it offers something for all class members (Cunningham, Hall and Sigmon, 1999). So often, direct instruction has failed in classes as the content is too hard for slower learners, too easy for the high achievers, and *only* reaches a third of the class. In all the direct, whole class lessons in *Balanced Literacy*, there is an embedded awareness that content has to address the needs of ALL class members. Two examples of this are outlined below.

#### **Word Wall Activities**

Each week's words are the high frequency words needed by most students in word recognition and spelling. However, optional challenge words are also included in daily activities for students who need more advanced words. Review periods are also provided for students needing frequent revision in order to learn effectively.

#### **Modeling Journal Writing**

As described in *Tenet 3*, the teacher's modeling of an aspect of the writing process can offer helpful explicit instruction on a writer's thought processes as she engages in the act of writing. To ensure that the activity is multilevel, the teacher needs to include self-talk that covers the learning needs in the classroom. For students at the earlier stages of the writing continuum, she might include talk related to print directionality, beginning letter sounds, and using *Word Wall* words. The teacher can also add comments on capitalizing, adding plurals, and expanding descriptive words to create more detailed word pictures in order to engage the more advanced learners.

## TENET 5

*Children will receive daily Independent Reading and Guided Writing practice.*

Achievement is directly connected to the amount of time students are actively engaged in an activity (Anderson, Wilson & Fielding, 1988). Thus, regular practice with appropriate materials and tasks can significantly improve children's reading and writing skills. As emphasized previously, all components of the *Balanced Literacy Program* need to be covered daily to ensure that children experience the support to independence continuum, and receive sufficient practice to internalize their learning. To stimulate *independent Reading*, leveled materials need to be provided to enable students to experience success as they read alone. Independence will grow slowly, as it is allied with competence and confidence. Support strategies and practice are needed to help the children move towards independence in both reading and writing.

## TENET 6

*Modeling and mini lessons will be planned to preface each Writing session.*

The importance of demonstrations and modeling cannot be overemphasized (Cambourne, 1988). Some teachers initially find this an uncomfortable aspect of the *Balanced Literacy Program* because it requires them to talk aloud and make their own thought processes explicit. However, it is vital that we provide literacy apprenticeships for children which include modeling and demonstrating how we write.

## TENET 7

*Integration of Balanced Literacy strategies with other curriculum areas is strongly encouraged.*

Curriculum time expectations require the integration of some aspects of the Language Arts program with other subject areas. For example, *Writing* can occur within Social Studies instruction, and *Read Aloud* may be allied with Science instruction. It makes clear sense in students' learning experiences to ensure that there are links across the curriculum (Harvey and Goudvis, 1999).

## TENET 8

*Professional development for teachers is intrinsic to the program.*

*It is recommended that teachers receive continuous inservicing, coaching, and support during the first year of the program. This type of consultative help should continue during the second year.*

What has been obvious from the long term research on *Reading Recovery* (DeFord, Lyons & Pinnell, 1991) is that teacher change needs to occur over time and with a great deal of support. The professional development of teachers is crucial, and it is plain that it cannot be accomplished in quick sessions but requires a planned, long term program

that uses a variety of strategies in order to be optimally effective. Demonstrations, coaching, observations and feedback, consultations and support groups with other teachers are examples of such strategies. Teachers are lifelong learners who, like all learners, need to move from support to independence as they implement the program.

*It is recommended that teachers trained in the Balanced Literacy Program support new teacher learners within their schools. Teachers should be able to visit other teachers' classrooms in an open manner to both receive support and provide support for professional learning.*

An informal mentorship between experienced and new *Balanced Literacy* teachers is recommended. Depth of knowledge takes time to acquire (Lyons and Pinnell, 2001) and opportunities are needed for the osmosis of ideas. Intervisitations amongst *Balanced Literacy* classrooms have been shown to be extremely helpful for teachers. Such visits are especially useful in situations where there is only one teacher at each grade level in a school, or when there are combined classes and teachers are able to share strategies. Many teachers who have had this type of exchange endorse intervisitation as a positive aspect of the staff professional development plan.

## **TENET 9**

*A regular timetable and routines will be established to cover all components of the program. Continuity of direct instruction and literacy practice will then follow.*

Implementing the *Balanced Literacy Program* implies a significant commitment of time, energy, and resources. Some changes may need to occur in school programming in order to permit the program to operate effectively.

For example, it should be noted that including all of the program components on a daily basis will demand more Language Arts time than is usually allocated by provincial curricula. The *Balanced Literacy Program* described in this manual requires 2 hours and 20 minutes every day. Some of the components may be combined with other subject areas and discretionary time will be required.

It is important to discuss timetabling and plans for school events as part of the preplanning before introducing the *Balanced Literacy Program* in a school. *Balanced Literacy* requires a significant investment of time, and it is most helpful to avoid interruptions to programming. For example, a school assembly might be held in the afternoon rather than during the morning when most of the key components of *Balanced Literacy* occur.

Similarly, teacher inservicing and classroom visits by reading specialists should have as few interruptions as possible in order to ensure continuity of professional development.

## **TENET 10**

*Homes will be encouraged to be part of the program via the provision of developmentally appropriate practice activities (e.g., Word Wall and Making Words activities, and home reading).*

We all recognize the importance of home support in students' learning (Doake, 1988; Hewison & Tizard, 1980; Holdaway, 1979; Mooney, 1990). *Balanced Literacy* will provide definite and explicit activities for caregivers at home to pursue in helping their children to become better readers and writers. However, *Balanced Literacy* also recognizes that not all children enjoy supportive reading and writing activities at home. Whereas we will *work as hard as we can* to encourage parents to participate, we also know that we are **PRIMARILY RESPONSIBLE** for teaching students to read and write.

## **TENET 11**

*The intent of the program is to create lifelong readers and writers. Affective engagement in all activities is a goal.*

All learning requires on-task engagement. This is most likely to occur when students are successful and emotionally involved (Jobe & Dayton-Sakari, 1999). Hence, materials and methods utilized within the *Balanced Literacy Program* should offer immediate and ongoing success and interest for all of the children. Fountas and Pinnell (1996) stress the importance of finding the 'just right' book to engage the reader in guided reading; that is, 'just right' in terms of the level of difficulty and the emotional appeal for the children.

Taberski (2000) notes that 'motivating children to read' is a key role for a teacher. She observes that some programs emphasize the solid acquisition of skills before books are introduced. In effect, this requires the student to wade through layers of skill instruction before books, stories, and poems are encountered. Such programs, she states, stultify enjoyment and appreciation of books and leave emotional engagements with print to a later date. In contrast, the intent of *Balanced Literacy* is to engage children affectively from the first stages of literacy programming.

## **TENET 12**

*Assessment is an integral part of the Balanced Literacy Program.*

Standardized testing is used in many school jurisdictions to monitor student achievement. However, the results of such testing may not provide the necessary feedback to inform instruction (Serafini, 2000/2001; Wilkinson and Townsend, 2000; Winograd and Arrington, 1999). Daily diagnostic monitoring of some aspect of literacy growth has been shown to assist teachers in this regard (Taberski, 2000). An 'Assess-as-You-Go' philosophy is intrinsic in the *Balanced Literacy Program*. Teachers are encouraged to conduct diagnostic assessments in such areas as word recognition, spelling, reading comprehension, and written language, and to plot growth in book levels for each student. Opportunities for such assessments occur during the course of teaching and are detailed in the assessment chapter in this manual.