Jill Fitzgerald

What is this thing called "balance?"

What does a balanced approach to teaching reading really mean? Teachers can examine their own philosophical outlooks on classroom reading instruction.

In two recent surveys of reading professionals, "balance" was declared one of the hottest topics in reading education (Cassidy & Cassidy, 1998/1999; Cassidy & Wenrich, 1997/1998). The reasons for the current popularity of balance are not immediately evident. Perhaps "balanced" instruction seems stable, reasonable, sensible, or moderate. However, it is clear that many teachers are now implementing balanced approaches. Some are being asked to use balanced approaches by state departments of education or by administrators in their schools (McIntyre & Pressley, 1996).

Just as more of us are trying to implement balance, more and more questions are raised about it. This questioning was especially evident to me last semester in a graduate seminar I taught entitled "Investigations in Reading and Writing." We read and discussed several articles on the balanced approach to teaching reading. During the class a veteran third-grade teacher in a neighboring school system said,

> Now I'm really confused. Different authors seem to mean different things by balance. Which one is right? Or are they all right? According to some of these articles, I'm doing a balanced approach in my room right now, but I never would have called it that before. What exactly *is* the "balanced approach"?

The purpose of this article is to address this teacher's central question: What does a balanced approach to teaching reading really mean? I first summarize some of the dominant recent approaches that have been called balanced. Then I examine the definitions of balance inherent in these approaches and point to some examples of differences and similarities. Next I suggest that there is no single, right balanced approach to teaching reading (Pressley, 1996). Rather, balance is a *philosophical perspective* about what kinds of reading knowledge children should develop and how those kinds of knowledge can be attained. I present a set of beliefs about the meaning of balance in reading and then a set of guiding principles for organizing a classroom reading program. Finally, I explore the potential benefits of considering balance as a philosophical position versus a fixed approach, or even as multiple variations on an approach.

Prior characterizations of balance

Prior characterizations of balanced reading instruction vary widely (Freppon & Dahl, 1998). Among the many are (a) combining or alternating certain kinds of curricula with other kinds of curricula (e.g., Hiebert & Colt, 1989); (b) combining or alternating certain kinds of instruction with other kinds of instruction such as learner- and teacher-initiated instruction (e.g., Spiegel, 1994) or indirect and explicit instruction (e.g., Dudley-Marling, 1996); (c) equally weighting curriculum with instruction where the types of curriculum and instruction have been viewed before as antithetical (e.g., Baumann & Ivey, 1997; Freppon & Headings, 1996; Graham & Harris, 1996; McIntyre, 1996; McIntyre, Kyle, Hovda, & Clyde, 1996; McIntyre & Pressley, 1996; Roehler, Hallenbeck, McLellan, & Svoboda, 1996; Spiegel, 1992, 1994; Strickland, 1994/1995, 1996); (d) some multidimensional

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combination of all of the above, which may even include other factors such as assessment (e.g., Raphael & Pearson, 1997); and most recently (e) a unique definition of balance as "a decision-making approach through which the teacher makes thoughtful choices each day about the best way to help each child become a better reader and writer" (Spiegel, 1998).

Take a deep breath and look at the list again. There are some pretty diverse views of balance on the list. It's no wonder that some teachers are having trouble sorting it all out. Let's look a bit closer at just two balanced programs. A study recently reported by Baumann and Ivey (1997) provides one example. In Baumann's second-grade classroom reading program, there was "curriculum balance between literature envisionment [creating meanings and responding to literature] (Langer, 1995) and skills/strategy instruction," and "instructional balance between teacher-initiated instruction and instruction responsive to students' needs and interests" (p. 2). Baumann didn't specify components per se in his balanced approach.

Another example is the four blocks reading program (e.g., Cunningham & Hall, 1998). This program is probably best characterized as a balance among diverse instructional methods. The primary goal of the program was to "combine the major approaches to reading instruction," and to do so, instructional time was "divided fairly evenly between the four major historical approaches to reading instruction" (p. 35). The resulting four blocks of instruction were guided reading, self-selected reading, writers' workshop, and working with words. The program also had a second goal, which was to provide "for a wide range of literacy levels without ability grouping," and to accomplish this, instruction within each block was "as multilevel as possible" (p. 35).

A first-glance comparison of these two approaches suggests that their authors mean different things by balance. To mention just a few of the points of apparent difference, Baumann spoke more generally about two features of curriculum—reading and exploring good literature and skills and strategy lessons—whereas Cunningham and Hall specified the four main components of the program. Presumably, in Baumann's approach, the skills and strategy lessons covered a wide range of topics, including word identification and comprehension. While Cunningham and Hall's approach allows for this wide range, it also highlights the necessity of instruction in word study. Baumann also spoke generally of balancing how much of the classroom work is done through teacher direction versus responsive instruction. I interpreted this statement to mean that the former would involve planned instruction and be more teacher directed, whereas the latter would involve on-the-spot teacher response and feedback or possibly student-initiated learning. While Cunningham and Hall would likely agree with this sort of balance, it isn't highlighted as a driving feature or component of the program. Baumann saw writing as important in his program, and so did Cunningham and Hall, but they proposed it specifically as one of the four components. Baumann used both heterogeneous and achievement level grouping in his classroom. In the four blocks method, Cunningham and Hall advised against achievement level grouping.

Across a variety of descriptions of balance, while there appear to be differences, there are also at least three common characteristics, two of which immediately stand out. First, in most discussions of balance there is a focus on equal weighting of *something*—key aspects of curriculum, key components, key kinds of instruction. Second, there is usually a focus on the *method* of doing the classroom program. We learn how to carry out the program. This is a focus on the teacher's work, what the teacher does to plan, set up, and conduct the program.

The third commonality is not immediately evident, and this commonality is, I think, the most critical one. Beneath the methodological layer of how to provide balance there is generally an inferable shared perspective on what aspects of the reading process are most important. That is, you can usually infer the *kinds of reading knowledge* children should attain from the methods that the authors of the program agree are most important.

For example, in the Baumann approach, we can infer from the emphasis on literature envisionment that children's ability to understand and respond to literature is a very important part of the reading process. At the same time, the emphasis on skills and strategy instruction suggests that cognitive strategic processes are equally important parts of the reading process. Similarly,

in the four blocks approach, the self-selected reading and guided reading components suggest an emphasis on the goals of enjoyment and understanding in reading, while the working with words component reveals the equally significant role of strategic word-identification processes in the reading process. From both balanced approaches, we can infer that the authors think that certain global abilities in reading, such as understanding and responding to what is read, and that certain local abilities, such as word-identification routines and strategies, are equally important in the reading process. In the following section, I will argue that this underlying common view of the significant kinds of *knowledge about reading* (that are goals for children's learning) is really what identifies balance in reading.

Balance is a philosophical perspective

A little over a decade ago Altwerger, Edelsky, and Flores (1987, p. 145) said that whole language "is a set of beliefs, a perspective. It must become practice but it is not the practice itself." I suggest that balanced reading is also "a set of beliefs, a perspective." Similarly, just as whole language is not a singular approach or practice, so balanced reading is not a singular approach or practice. There is no one right or wrong balanced approach, and likewise, there are many different manifestations of balanced reading approaches.

Balance is a philosophical perspective because it revolves around knowledge, or epistemological issues. Epistemology is "the branch of philosophy that deals with the varieties, grounds, and validity of knowledge" (Brown, 1993, p. 838; Cunningham & Fitzgerald, 1996; Fitzgerald, 1992, 1993). The following are important epistemological questions: What constitutes knowledge? Where is that knowledge located? How is that knowledge acquired? As I examine balanced approaches to reading, I ask, "What kinds of knowledge about reading do the activities in their entirety appear to nourish, and therefore what kinds of knowledge about reading appear most significant?" This is an epistemological and, concomitantly, a philosophical question.

What knowledge about reading is important?

What, then, is the balanced philosophical perspective? In a balanced reading perspective, individuals tend to see three broad categories of children's knowledge about reading as equally important: local knowledge about reading, global knowledge about reading, and love of reading or affective knowledge about reading.

Local knowledge about reading includes areas such as phonological awareness; a sight word repertoire; knowledge of sound-symbol relationships; knowledge of some basic orthographic patterns; a variety of word identification strategies (e.g., how to use phonics, how to use context in conjunction with phonics to guess at words); and word meanings. Global knowledge includes areas such as understanding, interpretation, and response to reading; strategies for enabling understanding and response; and an awareness of strategic use. Love of reading (affective knowledge) includes feelings, positive attitude, motivation, and the desire to read. It is important to note that these multiple kinds of knowledge are not entirely separate or discrete domains. Rather, in a complete view of the reading process, these are interconnected in many ways.

Balance even applies within the broad categories. For instance, in a balanced perspective, within local knowledge, multiple word-identification strategies would likely be chosen to represent significant kinds of knowledge about reading, as opposed to believing that a single kind of word-identification strategy (e.g., phonics) is the only way to figure out words. Therefore, if a teacher wants children to have and use a balanced reading process, that is, to have balanced knowledge about reading, she or he will think about the multiple kinds of word identification strategies she or he wants children to know and use.

The quintessential philosophical outlook in a balanced perspective is that these three broad categories of knowledge—local knowledge about reading, global knowledge about reading, and love of reading—are *equally* important and that the areas within subcategories also are themselves equally important. As a result, a teacher who holds a balanced philosophical view of the reading process makes these multiple categories of knowledge the goals for his or her children's learning.

Who has "expert" knowledge about the three broad categories, and how might children attain the knowledge?

As a teacher with a balanced philosophy of reading begins to map out a classroom program, he or she also considers the epistemological questions, "Who has expert knowledge of these reading abilities?" and "How might children attain the knowledge?" From a balanced philosophical perspective, the answer to the first of these two questions is likely to be something like, "Well, the teacher knows a lot about the whole list of kinds of knowledge. Parents and other adults may know some or all of the areas in the list. Sometimes, some children know some of the things in the list before other children." So while the teacher most often is the knowledgeable other, in many instances children and other adults can be the knowledgeable ones for children's learning. Books and television are other examples of knowledge sources. In other words, there are diverse sources of knowledge. As a result, a teacher who holds a balanced philosophical view of the reading process makes use of each of various knowledge sources, that is, teachers, parents, and children learning from one another.

From a balanced philosophical perspective, the answer to the second of the two questions is, "There are multiple ways that children can gain the knowledge." Moreover, it is widely believed that different *ways* of learning can be associated with different sorts of knowledge attainment (Bredo & Feinberg, 1982; Fitzgerald, 1992). What you learn is associated with how you learn. For example, discussion groups have been shown to enhance different sorts of knowledge when compared to teacher-directed explicit questioning (Roehler et al., 1996). Children might learn more, and more deeply, about their own thoughts, feelings, and responses to a story from a peer-led literature response circle involving student discussion than from an explicit teacher-directed questioning sequence. As another example, children who have had considerable difficulty learning about main ideas in texts might profit more from explicit teacher modeling of a strategic way of thinking for creating main idea statements than from reading stories with peers (Delpit, 1995).

This is not to say that there is with certainty one best way of learning that is associated with each kind of reading knowledge we want children to have. Rather, the point is that there is a tendency in many cases for some ways of learning to enhance certain kinds of reading abilities more than other ways of learning. As a result, a teacher who holds a balanced philosophical view of the reading process values multiple ways of learning and arranges her or his reading program to incorporate diverse instructional techniques and settings.

A balanced approach arises from a set of beliefs

In sum, a balanced approach to teaching reading arises from a philosophical perspective about what children should know about reading (including how different kinds of knowledge are weighted relative to each other), who has the knowledge, and how the different kinds of knowledge can be learned. It is based on a set of beliefs:

- There are equally important multiple kinds of knowledge about reading that children should attain. Local knowledge about reading is important, such as being able to read words at sight, knowing how to use various strategies to figure out unknown words, and knowing word meanings. Global knowledge about reading is important, such as understanding, interpreting, and responding to reading. Love of reading is important.
- There are equally effective multiple knowledge sources, including the teacher, parents, and other children.
- There are equally important multiple ways of learning through which children can attain the varied sorts of knowledge about reading.

Guiding principles emanate from a balanced philosophical perspective

A teacher who holds a balanced philosophical perspective of reading is likely to use at least three general principles to design a classroom reading program. These principles revolve around what reading knowledge she or he wants the children to attain and how they will attain it.

The first principle has to do with the curricular goals of the reading program. The goals drive everything else that follows. In a balanced philosophical perspective, the list of goals will include entries that address local, global, and affective sorts of knowledge. One meaning of balance, then, is that the teacher arranges

instruction and reading opportunities so that the children can acquire or create as many kinds of reading knowledge as possible.

A second principle of balance is that instructional methods sometimes considered to be opposites or contrasts are used so that the positive features of each, especially those features not present in the other way of teaching, can permit the fullest array of possible learning to occur. For instance, I think about balancing inside-out and outside-in teaching and learning. Inside-out refers to times when I arrange a setting and then allow the learning to be initiated by the students. Outside-in means I decide what I want the students to learn, and give it to them, usually by telling, modeling, and asking the students to then practice and apply the knowledge.

Another way to think of balancing ways of teaching has to do with how children are grouped. A key attribute of a balanced outlook is that different ways of grouping are seen as useful. For example, because different kinds of groups can be associated with different kinds of knowledge or different ways of learning, a teacher may want to make sure that she uses both homogeneous and heterogeneous achievement-level groupings each day as much as possible (on flexible grouping, see Flood, Lapp, Flood, & Nagel, 1992; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Some might say that since children make the most progress in reading when they read daily in "instructional"-level material (e.g., Barr, 1989; Chall, Conard, & Harris-Sharples, 1991; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Juel, 1990), at least some of the daily instruction should occur in small achievement-level groups (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). On the other hand, heterogeneous grouping also has benefits, such as when poorer readers learn from the modeling provided by a better reader. Consequently, a teacher might also want numerous daily opportunities for mixed achievement-level groups, such as during partner reading or literature circles.

More important, this outlook on using a variety of ways of grouping children does not mean that all teachers who have a balanced outlook will include both hetero- and homogeneous groups. Some teachers might decide never to use homogeneous groups. However, even these teachers will use a variety of other forms of grouping, such as partner grouping and small temporary heterogenous groups (e.g., Cunningham & Hall, 1998).

A third principle of balance, linked to epistemological outlook, deals with the kinds of reading materials that would be used in the classroom. Some knowledge goals, such as love of reading, would most likely be best encouraged by reading beautiful, interesting, substantive, and thought-provoking books. Other knowledge goals, such as word identification, would most likely be best encouraged by reading books with repetitive patterns and highly predictable words. Consequently, a balanced-approach teacher may choose a mixture of classic literature books, trade books, easy readers, and predictable books.

From philosophical perspective to the classroom approach

I have discussed what the balanced philosophical perspective is, its accompanying set of beliefs, and basic principles that guide decisions about a reading program. The last step is planning, arranging, and carrying out the classroom balanced reading program. Here is where we now find many different looks. As we move from the guiding principles to the actual classroom, we may make many different choices. One teacher may emphasize one instructional technique over another, while another may not choose that technique at all. Another teacher may balance grouping by having some homogeneous and heterogeneous groups. Yet another may balance grouping by having some small groups, partner readings, and whole groups, but always having heterogeneous groups. Each teacher may have a valid balanced program.

While a particular set of beliefs undergirds a balanced approach, it is important to keep in mind that over a number of years, children move through several developmental phases in learning about reading (e.g., Chall, 1996). It is well known that different kinds of knowledge about reading are critical at different phases of development. For instance, phonological awareness plays a key role for beginning readers, development of word recognition strategies is highly important through first and second grades, fluent integration of a variety of reading strategies (learning to be fluent) takes precedence around third-grade level, and comprehension and reading to learn become more important from then on (Chall, 1996; Fitzgerald & Shanahan, in press). Also, differing amounts of instructional

time are devoted to different aspects of learning about reading at different developmental phases. Similarly, different kinds of reading materials are emphasized at different developmental levels, with narratives dominating in the lower grades and informational texts taking on increasing importance in higher grades.

However, although different aspects of reading and different kinds of materials may be more critical to learning at particular developmental phases, teachers who hold a balanced perspective continue to see all features of knowledge (local, global, and affective) as important at every phase. For example, a first-grade teacher may know that it is critical for the children to develop phonological awareness early in the year. However, this does not mean that comprehension and response to reading should be eliminated. Rather, the teacher more likely would consider special sorts of instruction to try to enhance the children's phonological awareness while continuing to implement the guiding principles of balance. This may also mean that she or he spends more instructional time on phonological awareness than would teachers at upper grade levels. My point here is that balanced approaches can also take on different faces at different grade levels.

Likewise, teachers who hold a balanced perspective may shape actual instruction differently for diverse learners. Again, the beliefs and principles undergirding a balanced approach permeate the classroom, but for specific students, special activities may be used to shore up a particular kind of learning. For instance, a second-grade teacher may have several learners who speak little or no English. The ultimate goals for the kinds of knowledge about reading he or she wants these students to develop may be identical to those for the rest of the class. However, the teacher should realize that while they are developing abilities to understand and create meaning during reading, a critical feature of their learning will be acquiring phonological awareness in the new language, that is, learning about the oral distinctions between words, word parts, and individual phonemes. The teacher may then tailor instruction for these learners to highlight critical English phonological awareness while simultaneously providing ample opportunity for them to understand and create meaning in stories and to learn to love reading.

In short, teachers may share a balanced reading philosophy and beliefs, and they may use the three guiding principles of balance, but in the end, there are many faces of balance. Balance does not mean "one size fits all."

The benefits of thinking about balance as a philosophical outlook

Why do practitioners and academics in the reading education community need to have a common outlook on what balance means? Probably the most important reason is that many teachers are now trying to implement balanced approaches. As I said at the opening of this article, it's hot. This means that teachers, teacher educators, and principals need to know what it is so that they can help to implement it. Among the gravest criticisms of whole language during its inception was that it lacked clarity, that it wasn't well defined, and, consequently, many teachers weren't sure how to do it. It is possible that the concept of a balanced approach may be subject to similar criticisms and implementation problems. Consensus about the philosophical underpinnings of balance may help better define what a balanced view of the reading process is and what a balanced approach to teaching reading is. In turn, teachers and teacher educators may better understand the methods of balance.

Another benefit of understanding balance as a philosophical outlook is that knowing what the outlook is enables better evaluation and criticism, both of the outlook itself and of particular reading programs. For example, some might criticize the notion of equally weighting local and global knowledge about reading. It might be said that understanding and gaining meaning should be given much more weight, while knowledge of word-identification strategies is far less important. Others might argue that the opposite is true. Defining the philosophy of balance provides points around which we can talk, discuss, agree, and disagree. Similarly, it better enables comparison to other outlooks or programs by providing essential dimensions for consideration.

Further, classroom programs might be better evaluated by teachers or administrators. If a teacher wants to evaluate the extent to which her or his classroom program is balanced, she or he might consider the set of beliefs and the guiding

principles and ask, "To what extent does my classroom reflect these beliefs, and have I successfully used these principles?"

Reflecting on individual philosophical stances

In this article I have explored the meaning of balance and defined it as a philosophical perspective rather than one right approach. Teachers might find the process I used to examine balance useful for reflecting on their own individual philosophical stances toward reading instruction. To do so, a good starting place is to consider several issues surrounding the teacher's own outlook on what knowledge is important for children's learning about reading. Two sets of questions can be used to help center a teacher's reflection.

The first set is "What knowledge about reading do I believe is most important for children under my tutelage?" or "What features of the reading process are most important?" or "What are the main goals of my classroom reading instruction?" For example, a second-grade teacher who believes strongly that segmenting and blending words by sounds is the most important aspect of reading will hold a philosophical outlook that emphasizes phonics. Another who believes creating meaning is the most important feature, may more likely embrace a whole language philosophy.

The second set of questions is "Who are the experts?" and therefore, "How can children attain the important knowledge?" For instance, a teacher who has a philosophical outlook more aligned with a phonics perspective might answer these questions by saying, "I, the teacher, am the expert reader. I know what the children need to learn, and I will tell them, show them, drill them, and skill them." A whole language teacher might more likely believe that the children also share considerable expert knowledge, at their particular developmental levels, and that they can better learn some things about reading from one another than from the teacher telling and instructing them.

With these questions as a starting place, teachers might move from beliefs about important knowledge in reading and how students gain or create that knowledge, to a set of guiding principles that emanate from those beliefs. These principles should help the teacher to consider which forms of instruction would best lead children to learn about reading as the teacher defines it.

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