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The Search for "Balance" in a Literature-Rich Curriculum

JUST A FEW YEARS AGO, EDUCATORS who valued the role that literature plays in children's lives and learning were riding a wave of success. Libraries, bookstores, and classrooms were filled with more books and higher quality books than ever before. Literature had become more than just another way to teach reading; it was woven into children's inquiries and valued as a way of knowing about life.

The world looks very different now as politicians and the media call for systematic, intensive phonics instruction. Literature is once again a "frill" reserved for students who finish their work early or who reach a certain level of reading fluency. Even in literature-rich classrooms, literature discussion is being replaced by guided reading. Despite this political backlash, however, many educators persist in bringing students and books together in increasingly transforming ways.

Many of the current criticisms of literature-based curriculum revolve around the issue of "balance" in literacy instruction. I want to challenge these criticisms by first sharing my own history as a teacher and then proposing a curricular framework that provides an alternative view of balance, particularly in relation to the role of guided reading and literature discussion groups in children's lives as readers. I also propose several possible scenarios for the future of literature in classroom instruction and life.

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My Own History as a Teacher

My shift from an isolated skills approach based around a reading basal and ability groups to a literature-based approach was a response to tensions I experienced as an elementary teacher. One of the first indications that something was wrong was when I found myself falling asleep in reading groups. Since I was clearly the most active thinker in these groups, I figured that my boredom was problematic.

I also observed that the students who struggled the most as readers never finished their worksheets and so rarely got to read. I became increasingly suspicious that the worksheets that filled the majority of my students' time were only keeping them busy and not teaching them anything about reading. In fact, I often felt as if children were learning to read in spite of me rather than because of me.

Another tension occurred at the end of the day when my students and I gathered to reflect on what they had learned that day. They always talked about the afternoon experiences with our thematic units and never the morning instruction with the reading basal. The tension that finally caused me to take action was realizing that my students rarely chose books when we had "free choice" time. Reading books was a significant part of my life as a child,

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and it pained me to realize that books were only "schoolwork" for my students.

These tensions led me to explore literature based on my goal that children learn to love reading. I focused on read-aloud times, sustained independent reading, and book extension projects. These extensive experiences encouraged children to enjoy books and to become proficient readers. However, I also observed that while my students loved books, they did not necessarily think critically about what they read.

Once I realized what was happening, I engaged students in literature circles where small groups read books and met to share their responses with each other instead of answering comprehension questions. Their sharing led to dialogue as students critically thought about their understandings. These intensive literature experiences, however, dominated the classroom, and students rarely had a chance to just enjoy a book without having to talk about it. As I thought about my life as an adult reader, I realized that I discuss only a small portion of what I read with others. I talk about the books that touch me or puzzle me in some way, but there are many other materials that I read for information or pleasure and never share with others.

I also realized that in moving away from the basal reader and skills worksheets, I had not found another way to explicitly teach students about the reading process. My students needed support in developing strategies as readers and in thinking about how literature and language function. Previously I had put too much emphasis on isolated skills, but the answer was not to eliminate all explicit teaching. I integrated whole-class strategy lessons and individual conferences so students could balance reflection on reading strategies and literary elements with time to read for enjoyment and to dialogue about books.

My changes as a teacher reflect similar shifts in the broader educational context as well. Many school districts are currently experiencing major pendulum swings from one approach to another. Schools that previously engaged in "book floods," where they immersed students in books but did not provide strategy instruction, are returning to isolated skills approaches in the name of "balanced literacy." Unfortunately, frequently "balance" means a return to highly sequential, hierarchical approaches where children are first taught phonemic awareness and then must undergo isolated phonics lessons and read decodable texts (Honig, 1996). Only when they reach a specific level of reading "fluency" are they finally allowed to read literature. This type of "balance" is just another pendulum swing. Having already experienced this approach early in my teaching career, I can predict the problems that will arise when students are taught to read using a process that differs from how proficient readers actually read, gives them no purpose for reading, and asks them to read books that are not worth the effort of reading them.

Dewey (1938) pointed out that education has been plagued with an "either-or" mentality of thinking and acting on extreme opposites. My own search for balance in literacy instruction and in bringing children and books together makes it clear that getting off the pendulum is essential. To do that, we need integrated, comprehensive approaches to literacy and literature that are theoretically and research based. Such approaches must be based on reading as a process of constructing meaning for purposes significant to the reader (Goodman, 1996; Rosenblatt, 1938). Therefore, students must always read to learn. They do *not* learn to read and then read to learn. A long line of research on the "best" approach (Pearson, 1984) makes it clear that it is the teacher who makes the difference, and so these approaches must also be based on teachers as professionals who make instructional decisions using their knowledge of their specific students and of research, theory, and practice. Based on these assumptions, I propose an alternative view of balance.

Balance in Literature-Rich Classrooms

The research of Michael Halliday, a well-known linguist, frames my understandings of balance in a literature-rich classroom. In his studies of oral language development, Halliday (1985) found that in any meaningful language event, children have the opportunity to *learn language*, *learn about language*, and *learn through language*. As they go about their daily lives, they learn to talk by talking and listening to others, by exploring how language functions, and by using language to get something done, with all three operating simultaneously if events make sense to them.

Halliday's work provided a framework that helped me rethink the need for particular types of curricular engagements with literature. One of the frustrations I felt moving into literature-based instruction was the long, unending lists of engagements that were recommended. Were they all equally important? How was I supposed to choose from among them? What was the larger framework that would allow me to create curriculum with my students instead of simply engaging in a series of activities?

A curricular model

Halliday's research provided me with a way to sort out these engagements according to their central purposes. My goal is to ensure that students are involved in learning events that highlight each of the three opportunities Halliday identified. Students need opportunities to learn language by reading extensively, to learn about language by reflecting on their reading strategies and literary knowledge, and to learn through language by using literature to inquire about the world and their own lives.

Figure 1 reflects the framework I use to think about the types of engagements to consider in creating curriculum with students. The engagements in each circle are not complete; many other options and variations exist for each circle. My focus is on whether there are engagements in a specific classroom that highlight all three aspects of language learning rather than on choosing only one of these for a specific group of students. I recognize that each engagement incorporates all three aspects to some degree, but I have placed each

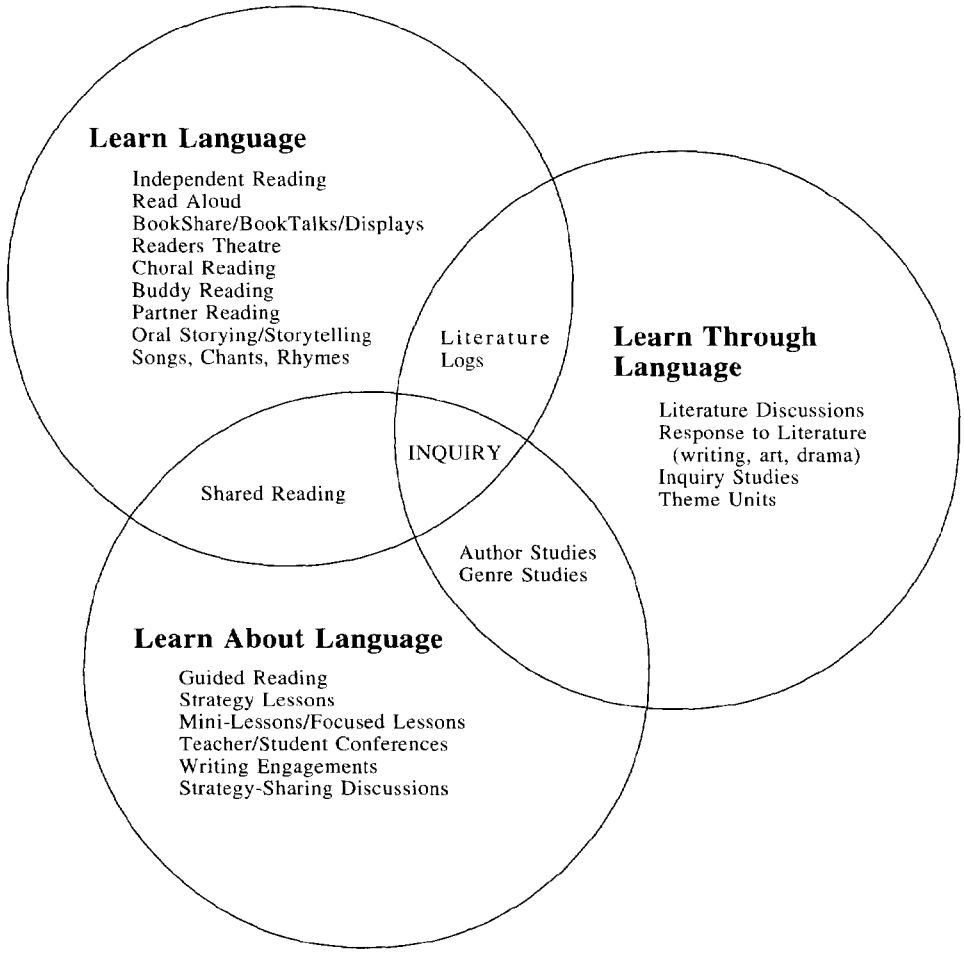

Figure 1. Curricular model for integrated language learning.

within a particular circle according to its central purpose. Independent reading, for example, primarily highlights learning language by reading, although students will also learn about language and learn through language as they engage in reading self-selected books.

Each of these aspects of language learning highlights different reading materials, different roles for teachers and students, and different goals for readers. Learning language highlights that children learn to read by reading and by being surrounded by other readers. They need both engagement and demonstration. These extensive experiences with many different kinds of reading materials give them the time to gain fluency, integrate their strategies, become familiar with how stories work, and build a broad background of literature.

Many of the materials students read independently are predictable, supportive texts, often from various high interest series. The read-aloud books include both predictable texts that invite reader participation and challenging texts that are currently beyond what students can handle on their own. Usually the role of teachers within these engagements is not to explicitly teach reading strategies but to provide demonstrations of their own reading lives and to organize the classroom and offer experiences that engage readers.

Learning through language highlights that reading is a way of learning about the world and oneself. Through dialogue and response to literature and using books to investigate their questions, children become literate. They go beyond literacy skills to thinking deeply and critically about their reading as they engage with challenging books that invite multiple interpretations. Teachers are participants in these discussions and investigations as they share their own thoughts, questions, and connections.

Learning about language involves looking at language itself. Through examining the nature and function of language and literature, readers work at becoming proficient and effective readers. They develop a broad repertoire of reading strategies and gain a knowledge of literary structures, elements, and genres. These engagements often involve teachers in explicit teaching to support students in examining and reflecting on their reading processes. Typically the books that support these engagements are less conceptually complex than the books discussed in literature groups. They are supportive texts in which readers can work at a particular strategy or without struggling to work out meaning with other readers.

Some engagements have overlapping central purposes. For example, shared reading involves first learning language by reading and repeatedly rereading a predictable text in the form of a big book or chart. Later that same text is used to learn about a particular aspect of language. Author studies and genre studies are forms of literature circles, but these discussions typically move into a strong focus on literary styles and genres. Literature logs are a way for readers to reflect on independent reading and to encourage them to move into thoughtful consideration of a book.

While each of these three aspects is different, it is the complex interplay among them that is most powerful for readers. When teachers overemphasize learning about language, students have no reason to care about reading strategies and skills because they are not using reading for purposes that are meaningful in their lives nor do they have enough opportunities to actually read and use these strategies.

Of course, the balance between the three aspects varies according to student needs. If students lack reading proficiency, engagements highlighting learning language and learning about language receive more emphasis. In many primary classrooms, for example, students may need more time to read widely and to examine their reading strategies. However, while young children need predictable books, guided reading, and shared reading to gain proficiency, these books and engagements do not support an intensive consideration of meaning. Children also need high quality picture books read aloud to them that they can discuss in literature circles. When these intensive engagements are excluded based on the assumption that young children are not "ready," they develop misconceptions about reading as a thoughtful process. They should not have to wait until third grade to find out that reading involves critique and inquiry and that literature is much more than reading instruction.

In contrast, upper grade students often spend most of their time reading content materials and rarely have time to simply enjoy a good book. They need to read widely and continue developing fluency

and flexibility as readers. They also need to continue developing their reading strategies, especially for reading informational texts.

Instead of arguing which one of these is "right," we need to create a literature-rich curriculum around what we know about language learning. Engagements that highlight learning language, learning about language, and learning through language all play essential roles in children's development. Unfortunately, the current pendulum swing focuses on strategic reading at the expense of thoughtful reading.

Literature discussion and guided reading

A curricular engagement that is currently receiving a great deal of attention is guided reading. In many classrooms, literature circles are being replaced with guided reading groups, especially for emergent readers. While guided reading is an effective way to explicitly teach students about reading strategies, I have several concerns about current mandates regarding guided reading. One is that while there are many ways that teachers can teach about language, school districts often operate as if guided reading were the *only* approach. The key issue is whether teachers have effective instructional approaches for teaching reading strategies—conferences, strategy lessons, mini-lessons, strategy sharing sessions, and/or guided reading—not whether everyone is doing guided reading.

Another troubling trend is that literature circles are being eliminated. Sometimes this occurs due to time factors—lack of time to do both guided reading groups and literature circles, given the mandates that teachers must daily have so many minutes of guided reading. It also occurs because literature groups are now viewed as simply a form of guided reading for fluent readers. The result of this assumption is that only fluent readers are invited into dialogue about thought-provoking literature.

Descriptions of "balanced literacy programs" (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) and "reading to, with, and by" models (Mooney, 1990) do not list literature circles or only mention them as an additional option. These models create an unbalanced curriculum because the "learn through" circle is optional rather than essential to every child's learning. Table 1 highlights differences between these engagements in terms of their central purposes, procedures, student and teacher roles, and types of texts. This comparison is not an argument for one over the other but demonstrates that both are important because of the different roles they play for readers.

While the table highlights differences, there are clearly overlaps between these two engagements. Students in literature circles frequently discuss their reading strategies as a natural part of their discussion, and students in guided reading groups discuss the meanings of the books they read. However, the central goals of the two engagements—reading to make sense of life versus reading to develop strategies—are quite different. As an educator, I do not want to choose one goal over the other or to put them into sequential order.

One of the key mistakes I believe we have made as educators over the years is to act as if one engagement can meet all purposes and needs. If literature circles are also the place where strategy instruction *must* occur, then the key focus on making sense of life through reading is lost. By the same token, if guided reading groups also take on in-depth dialogue about connections and interpretations, the central focus on teaching for strategies is lost. While occasionally both agendas can be supported in the same engagement, few students can sustain a focus on both as they read and discuss a single text.

The curricular model for language learning (Figure 1) highlights the interdependence and interconnections between various literacy and literature engagements within a curriculum based in inquiry. The goal is not to search for the one "right" engagement but to understand the complex ways in which multiple engagements interact to support children's development as readers and thinkers.

Literature within an inquiry-based curriculum

Halliday (1985) made it clear that the three aspects of language learning function *only* in a meaningful context, and so inquiry is at the center of engagements in all three intersecting circles. Instead of literature-based curriculum, curriculum needs to be inquiry based. Inquiry is a philosophical stance that highlights learners having time to search for the questions that are significant in their

lives and to systematically investigate those questions. Learners are problem posers as well as problem solvers within a democratic learning environment. Teachers do not just build curriculum *from* students but negotiate curriculum *with* students (Short & Harste, 1996).

Inquiry itself, not the subject areas or literature, becomes the heart of the curriculum. Instead of dividing the day into different subject areas or organizing theme units around subject area activities, the disciplines become tools and perspectives that learners use to explore their inquiry focus. Literature becomes a way of knowing that is woven throughout the inquiry process—a tool that influences questions that become compelling for students and the understandings they construct. Literature does not stand alone but is part of the experiences and resources that surround students.

If all learning is inquiry, then reading is a process of inquiry. Students read to inquire about their world and their lives. Inquiry is not a value-free process but one that involves taking multiple, critical perspectives on life. Dialoging about literature allows students to interrogate their views of the world and try on new perspectives. While previous work on literature discussion focused on getting groups organized and students engaged in productive talk about literature (Short & Pierce, 1990), the stakes are higher now. Not just any talk will do. Teachers are interested in thoughtful, in-depth discussions about books where students explore their literary and political significance (Smith, 1996). The dialogue in these groups has taken on a strong political tone as students critically examine the ways they and others live their lives. The teacher's role is not to impose a particular critical perspective but to establish learning contexts where students confront and dialogue about a range of perspectives.

If reading is inquiry, then learning about language and how the reading process functions is also an inquiry process. When teachers have solid understandings about the reading process and literary conventions, they can find ways to work at

Table 1
Comparison of Guided Reading and Literature Circles

Guided Reading	Literature Circles
Students as strategic readers.	Students as critical readers/thinkers.
Teacher supports each reader's development of reading strategies for processing new texts at increasingly challenging levels of difficulty.	Students think deeply and critically about text through dialogue with others to co-construct new understandings.
Students are grouped homogeneously according to similar reading processes and ability to read about the same level of text.	Students choose the text they would like to read and discuss with others. Grouping is heterogeneous by interest.
Teacher chooses text to be read.	Students choose text from options.
Texts are chosen according to the reading strategy the teacher wants to teach and the difficulty of the text (minimum of new things to learn).	Texts are chosen based on the issues students are exploring in personal and/or class inquiries. Texts must support multiple interpretations and critical thinking by readers.
Challenging texts = texts where there is an opportunity to build problem-solving strategies.	Challenging texts = texts that encourage readers to think deeply and critically about their lives.
Students must be able to read text with minimal support from teacher.	Text can be read to, with, or by student.
Teacher takes a major instructional role and teaches for strategies.	Teacher participates as a reader to demonstrate ways of thinking and responding to text.
Evaluate by running record/miscue analysis.	Evaluate by discourse analysis.
Art, music, drama, etc., as activities to extend a text.	Art, music, drama, etc., as tools for thinking about a text in more complex ways.
Reading to develop strategies.	Reading to make sense of life.

literacy instruction throughout the day. Some of this instruction will arise out of students' ongoing inquiries and the materials they need to read as part of these inquiries. Other times, the inquiry will be about the reading process as students and teachers puzzle out the kinds of strategies and knowledge students need to become proficient readers.

The Future of Literature in Schools

Given the current context, I see several possibilities for the future of literature in schools. The political context brings forth scenarios that reflect a restricted and narrowing role for literature. Literature will be banished into the upper grades—but only if students have become "proficient" readers according to standardized tests. Students will again be subjected to the isolated "skill and drill" boot camps that so many of us remember from our own days as students and our early teaching experiences. Their reading materials will consist of endless, and mindless, renditions of "the cat sat on the mat." Teachers will use "teacher proof" scripts, which tell them what to say and do at all times. Teacher educators will return to teaching reading "methods" separate from meaningful reading of literature.

Even within this grim scenario, however, things will not quite go back to what they were before. Educators from very different theoretical perspectives believe that literature should be available in all classrooms as a daily part of children's school experiences. While literature may be withdrawn from "reading instruction," I believe teachers will find ways to weave powerful experiences with books throughout the rest of the school day. Teachers understand more than in the past about the importance of dialogue and story, and these understandings will have a lasting effect on instruction.

Another important recognition teachers bring is that of themselves as professional decision makers. The literature-based movement was led by teachers with strong backgrounds in reading process, literary theory, and curriculum (Smith, 1996). These teachers developed their own theories of learning and reading to guide them in the classroom. They no longer need basal readers to control the lesson and the meanings children make of their reading (Hade, 1994). In fact, they explicitly reject the ways in which basal readers (including those labeled "literature anthologies") control instruction and define reading as decoding and encoding skills.

These teachers will resist programmed, isolated instruction. Because of their strong theoretical and curricular base, they will transform the mandates and materials that are handed to them. The surface structures of their classrooms may change as a survival mechanism, but the deep structure of their teaching will remain the same.

Of course, many educators at universities and schools who jumped on the bandwagon of literature-based instruction did so without any real understanding of literature, story, dialogue, or the reading process. These educators relied on activities handed to them by consultants and basal companies. They will most likely continue to follow the current mandates and return to isolated skill instruction. Literature-based instruction was never a transformation of teaching for them, but an activity to add to their basal frameworks and was viewed only as a better way to teach reading. They will now simply add phonics drills to replace or supplement literature activities.

Many of these educators are thoughtful teachers who plan carefully and care deeply about their students. However, they lack the theoretical and curricular understandings needed to construct effective learning environments with their students. The failure of literature-based instruction in their classrooms indicates the failure of the educational system to give teachers time for professional development and research into the nature of reading and the role of literature in their classrooms (Freeman, Freeman, & Fennacy, 1996; Routman, 1996; Smith, 1996).

For a more positive and broadly-based future scenario, ongoing focused professional development is essential. Time for teachers to think, read, dialogue, and research will have to become part of how we "do school." This dialogue is essential to support teachers in becoming knowledgeable, informed professionals who are in control of their classrooms and who can articulate their beliefs and practices in response to public debates about education.

While the curriculum in most classrooms is becoming an eclectic one that shifts according to the public mood and the current set of teacher manuals, in a few classrooms and schools, teachers

will continue to seek out the potentials offered by integrating literature into an inquiry curriculum. They will explore their understandings of reading as an inquiry process and the ways in which literature and dialogue can provide critical perspectives on students' worlds and lives. As informed, articulate professionals, they will remain in control of their classrooms and will push their theoretical boundaries. They understand that literature is not just a way to teach reading but a way of knowing and thinking about the world.

This work has the potential of transforming students' lives. Instead of producing adults who expect that their thinking will be controlled by those in authority, this dialogue could lead adults to expect to thoughtfully participate in the decisions that affect their lives. There is much we do not yet understand about creating democratic environments to support critical thinking, but children's dialogue about literature will undoubtedly play an essential role.

This dialogue must occur in ever widening circles within and outside of the school context if long-term change is to occur. One of the major mistakes many educators made as they worked to bring literature and process-centered approaches into the classroom was that parents and community members were excluded from the conversations. Just as we developed more collaborative approaches with students, so must we now open up those approaches to include parents, administrators, and the broader community. Together we need to examine the complexity of life in schools instead of trying to find simple solutions to complex problems.

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