



Guidance for Educators Using a Balanced Literacy Program

The balanced literacy context of individual classrooms and schools can vary dramatically from class-to-class, school-to-school, and district-to-district. If your data shows that *all* your students are achieving at high levels, be sure to maintain what’s working well! On the other hand, if your data shows that your students—or a consistent percentage of your students—are not achieving at high levels or could be doing better, the guidance below has been designed for you. Review the “Install This Research-Based Practice Instead” column below to see how you might disrupt practices to demonstrably boost your students’ achievement and allow more of your students to become strong and eager readers. Each characteristic described in the left-hand column presents an opportunity to redesign, adjust, or even radically alter instruction, and replace it with a new practice in the right-hand column that is research-proven.

| If This Is a Characteristic of Your Balanced Literacy Program... | Install This Research-Based Practice Instead... |
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| Text Complexity | |
| <p>K-2 texts read aloud to students are too easy, so students do not have the opportunity to build their knowledge and vocabularies.</p> <p><i>Here’s the issue:</i> An important reason to be concerned about the inclusion of complex texts among the materials used in an early literacy program is because that’s how children can become familiar early on with the ways language is used in the more advanced texts they will eventually be reading. That language can be learned in no other way—it is only in complex written texts that students are likely to encounter the many words, expressions, grammatical constructions, and conventions of various academic discourse genres.</p> | <p>Select read-alouds that are content-rich, high-quality texts worthy of reading and rereading that are well above grade level.</p> <p>Read-alouds provide children with models of the elaborated language of formal written discourse which they must acquire for themselves over the course of their K-12 schooling.</p> <p>Texts used for read-aloud in K-2 should be at least two years above what students can read on their own (within or above the grades 2-3 band). Qualitative and quantitative tools to determine text complexity can be found here.</p> |
| <p>Grades 3-5 anchor texts that are read aloud are appropriately complex for the grade, but students do not have opportunities to read these texts on their own.</p> <p><i>Here’s the issue:</i> As wonderful as such reading can be, it should in no way be seen as an adequate replacement for having students do such reading themselves.</p> | <p>Project, photocopy, or otherwise share rich passages, chapters, or sections of the texts read aloud so that students can actively participate in the shared reading of complex texts.</p> <p>There is no substitute for students having regular practice working together to comprehend complex texts with teacher support. A wide body of research shows providing readers—all readers—with lessons organized around complex texts improves achievement (Burns 2007, Hall et al. 2005, Walpole et al. 2014). See Supporting All Learners With Complex Text.</p> |
| <p>Students determine which books to read each day and are limited to an assigned “just-right” level. Consequently, there is no assurance that every student is provided regular access to complex texts.</p> <p><i>Here’s the issue:</i> This instructional theory, first espoused more than 70 years ago—and one of the pillars of most balanced literacy approaches—has been shown repeatedly to not provide</p> | <p>Rework the “independent reading” portion of the reading workshop to allow students to regularly read beyond their level, depending on their interest and knowledge base.</p> <p>To avoid long periods of time where students are reading below level texts, provide more opportunities for all students to read texts of their own choosing when reading independently.</p> |

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| <p>students with any learning advantage. In fact, some of the studies show that it can actually harm students by limiting their opportunities to confront complex content and sophisticated language. As Alfred Tatum has described it, “Leveled books lead to leveled lives.”</p> | <p><i>When you are working with students in small groups, consider the following adjustments to increase regular access to complex texts:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement supported fluency practice with grade-level text (teacher guided or partner work with echo/choral reading). • Re-read the class anchor text as a shared text. • Use a grade-level complex text. |
| <p>The program proposes a regimen of frequent testing to make sure students are matched to books “at their level” from a library of books classified by this same flawed system.</p> <p><i>Here’s the issue:</i> A student doesn’t have one reading level; each student has many levels depending on the topic and knowledge of the text at hand. The research showing that knowledge of the topic has a much bigger impact than generalized reading ability (Recht & Leslie, 1988) is in direct opposition to current instructional practice of identifying a reader by a reading level, e.g. a Fountas and Pinnell level. That is, if you are a level J, then you read only level J books. But a level J reader on the Mayan civilization may be a level T reader on dinosaurs, if they have knowledge about that topic.</p> <p>By requiring students to read only level J texts we deny them access to more complex text that they could access and learn from on a topic on which they have knowledge.</p> | <p>As above, allow students to regularly read texts at a range of levels, guided by their interests, knowledge base, and connections to areas of study.</p> <p>With sufficient prior knowledge, students defined as having lower generalized reading abilities will be able to perform similarly with texts to those with higher generalized reading abilities. To support the growth of knowledge for all students, reorganize your classroom library by topic instead of level.</p> |
| <p>The program includes no student texts, only text recommendations, which means there is no guarantee that children will be exposed to sufficiently challenging texts.</p> <p><i>Here’s the issue:</i> When programs depend on use of classroom libraries, the experience of students will vary based on the richness of texts on each classroom’s bookshelves. The problem is exacerbated in schools that lack funding and have less rich libraries for the additional materials suggested but not required.</p> | <p>Construct classroom libraries that house texts at the appropriate levels of challenge.</p> <p>Here are some ideas to provide students with greater access to sufficiently complex texts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supplement your libraries with bins or folders of high-quality and/or content rich-texts that students can read independently, with partners, or in small groups with or without teacher support. This may include printable resources. Where possible, connect to knowledge and vocabulary found in anchor texts or areas of study from science, art, social studies, and/or physical education. • Use an economical text set approach for a volume of reading (which can be teacher assigned or student choice) to scaffold students from less to more complex text. To learn more, check out this guidance on creating text sets as well as sample resources. |

| If This Is a Characteristic of Your Balanced Literacy Program... | Install This Research-Based Practice Instead... |
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| Foundational Skills and Fluency | |
| <p>The fast-paced introduction of foundational skills means too many students are not getting the exposure they need to become proficient readers.</p> <p><i>Here's the issue:</i> Many students who do not follow a smooth learning-to-read trajectory may have difficulty keeping up. For those who cannot keep pace, this is extremely concerning.</p> | <p>Increase time—ideally at least 45 minutes per day—dedicated to foundational skills instruction and practice (print concepts, phonological awareness, phonics and word recognition, and fluency).</p> <p>Foundational skills instruction does not need to be in one sitting. Include practice times such as targeted small group instruction, literacy centers (that are research-based and clearly connected to taught skills) or partner work, transition activities, and rug time.</p> <p>If you do not have materials for foundational skills, consider using an open source, high-quality foundational skills program such as Core Knowledge Language Arts or EL Education.</p> |
| <p>Practice opportunities are optional or not plentiful enough for all students to master taught foundational skills.</p> <p><i>Here's the issue:</i> Some students need more or far more supported practice and targeted feedback as they are working to master foundational skills. This is not in indication of their intelligence but is necessary in order to support the varied needs of your students.</p> | <p>Ensure targeted practice opportunities for every student and additional time for those students who need more or far more practice.</p> <p>The amount and type of practice can vary based on the individual needs of the students in your room, but the content should be available for all. See this list of open-source practice activities organized by foundational skills topic. Be sure to target the specific skills needed by students when using supplemental resources.</p> |
| <p>The debunked three-cueing system is integrated into reading instruction.</p> <p><i>Here's the issue:</i> The best and overwhelming body of research (Stanovich, 2000; Rayner & Pollatsek 1986; Lonigan, et al., 2018) strongly supports that letter-to-sound decoding is the primary system used by proficient readers to read text, rather than guessing at words through other cues (meaning or syntax).</p> | <p>Reorient your instruction and support students to focus on using sound-spelling patterns to decode.</p> <p>Here are some ideas to focus on phonics and decoding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stop coaching students to guess which word would make sense or sound right without attending to all of the letters in a word. • If students get stuck on a word, help them determine which sounds in the word match the phonics they have already learned and where you might need to provide assistance (e.g., be: "You're right b sounds like we would expect /b/, but in this word the e represents /ee/ not /e/ — we haven't learned that yet"). • Reevaluate your use of running records. What can you learn about students' phonics and word recognition knowledge from their reading errors? • Coach students to use these strategies independently. When students are reading independently and come across words they are unsure of, teach them to try to sound out those words. <i>After trying</i>, if they are still uncertain, teach them to confirm the word based on its syntax and context, then reread the word aloud and pay attention to all of its sound and spelling patterns. <p>Click here to learn more.</p> |
| <p>Limited or no guidance is provided for diagnosing students' instructional needs and providing necessary differentiation.</p> <p><i>Here's the issue:</i> Without concrete and frequent information about how students are progressing with taught foundational skills, it is likely challenging to intervene swiftly for students who need additional support.</p> | <p>Adopt a three-tiered assessment system to assess students' mastery of current and previously taught foundational reading skills.</p> <p>A three-tiered assessment system includes*:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A daily checklist: Use a daily checklist of student work or oral responses to track formative data of student progress. • Weekly dictation: Dictate a group of words each week, based on your scope and sequence and any sounds |

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| | <p>your class may need to review, and respond during whole group, small group, or individual check-ins.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monthly cumulative assessment: Use a cumulative assessment from your foundational skills program or create your own based on taught sound and spelling patterns using an expanded dictation and additional practice tasks. <p>Click here for more information about establishing these assessment structures in your classroom.</p> <p>*Pacing is suggested: Practitioners may want to adjust based on systematic assessment guidance that comes from their instructional materials.</p> |
| <p>Insufficient opportunities for building fluency with grade-level texts.</p> <p><i>Here's the issue:</i> Research has consistently shown a moderate to strong correlation between measures of reading fluency, from the primary through the secondary grades, and measures of oral and silent reading comprehension and overall reading proficiency (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003; National Reading Panel, 2000; Rasinski, Reutzel, Chard, & Linan-Thompson, 2011) and especially for struggling readers (Stevens, Walker, & Vaughn, 2017; Zimmerman et al., 2019). Moreover, studies have found that instruction in fluency leads to improvements in comprehension and overall reading proficiency (e.g., Stahl & Heubach, 2005; Stevens, Walker, & Vaughn, 2017).</p> | <p>Make fluency practice opportunities part of your regular routine with students.</p> <p>Ask dysfluent students to engage in multiple reads of a grade-level text and they will improve quickly. Research and scholarly inquiry into reading fluency have identified key instructional strategies for fluency (Rasinski et al., 2011). These include: 1) modeling fluent reading by the teacher or other proficient reader; 2) assisted reading in the form of a less fluent reader reading orally and simultaneously with a more fluent reader through choral reading, paired reading, and audio-assisted reading, in all cases with feedback; 3) wide reading; 4) repeated reading practice of grade-level text; 5) phrasing instruction; and 6) combinations of the above elements into synergistic instruction. Because text increase in complexity across grades and genres, being fluent in one grade does not guarantee fluency in succeeding grades.</p> <p>Free fluency resources from Achieve the Core can be found here.</p> |
| <p>There is no systematic guidance or direction provided on how to nurture, assess, and monitor fluency development.</p> <p><i>Here's the issue:</i> 50% of the variance in reading comprehension can be accounted for by fluency measures (Paige 2011). Students who are not fluent read less, comprehend less, and acquire less vocabulary and less knowledge when they read (Kuhn & Stahl 2003; Klauda & Guthrie 2008; Chall 2002).</p> | <p>Add a reading rate component to the program's ongoing assessment sequence to determine students' levels of automaticity in recognizing words in context. Include a rubric for guiding teacher assessment of prosody in oral reading.</p> <p>Provide an intervention template such as the Fluency Development Lesson (Young & Rasinski, 2016)</p> <p>Learn more about reading fluency here.</p> |

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| Knowledge Building and Vocabulary | |
| <p>Whole class read-alouds in K-5 focus on reading strategies and skills without consistent attention to the words and language authors use. Vocabulary supports rely heavily on implicit vocabulary acquisition by readers.</p> <p><i>Here's the issue:</i> Because of the large proportion of instructional time dedicated to student-selected “just-right books,” students don’t have the teacher supports required for in-depth study of vocabulary.</p> | <p>Identify key Tier 2 (academic vocabulary) and Tier 3 (domain specific) words found in anchor texts. Tweak lessons so that there is less inferring from context. Provide opportunities for more:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attention to core meanings • Focus on high leverage words likely to be encountered in other texts • Instruction on word parts/ morphology <p>For support with identifying academic vocabulary worth of time and attention, use the Academic Word Finder and consider how you will attend to selected words during instruction.</p> <p>Add time to study this language, such as making use of Lily Wong Filmore’s juicy sentence guidance.</p> |
| <p>Most reading is done silently, so students may skip hard words and not comprehend as much as they would if asked to read-aloud.</p> <p><i>Here's the issue:</i> When students frequently read different books than their classroom peers—self-selected and individually-leveled texts—silently during reading time, independent reading is rarely an opportunity for students to build knowledge and vocabulary. Even when students are expected to discuss what they read with a partner, it’s easy to imagine that the discussions can be minimally productive given that they are reading different books and guessing the meanings of different words.</p> | <p>Adopt a buddy system when students are reading. Ask partners to read and discuss the same book.</p> <p>For younger and weaker readers, silent reading is not as productive as reading aloud to a listener. Reading aloud pressures the reader not to skip or gloss over the hard parts. Reading aloud with a partner, e.g., turn-taking, is socially fun and educative when readers are asked to help each other read and think as they move through the text. That can’t happen when students are reading different texts.</p> |
| <p>Knowledge building isn’t supported through independent reading because choices are guided by a student’s reading level rather than books that teach (and reinforce new knowledge and vocabulary).</p> <p><i>Here's the issue:</i> Where students read books that are different from their partners and chosen without regard for the theme of the mentor texts or foci of the lessons provided by the teacher, the promise of independent reading opportunity for building knowledge and vocabulary is variable and weak. While all students are short-changed when knowledge-building opportunities are missed, students who enter school having had fewer opportunities to grow academic knowledge and vocabulary depend critically on such opportunities to catch up and move forward. The problem is worse for students who are restricted to reading books far below grade level while their peers are allowed to choose rich grade-level or above books.</p> | <p>Organize classroom libraries by topic rather than by level and encourage students to start at a comfortable reading level and encourage them to read more complex texts on the topic over time.</p> <p>To the extent possible, organize options for independent reading by topic—including topics of anchor texts. Find information on creating knowledge-building book baskets here. This provides opportunities for students to learn both content and language on topics they might find fascinating.</p> |
| <p>Most anchor texts are literary texts with insufficient time allocated to building knowledge through reading non-fiction.</p> <p><i>Here's the issue:</i> Units are not designed to include multiple texts (anchor and independent reading) that reinforce new knowledge and vocabulary through reading on the same topic.</p> <p>Content-rich nonfiction books are the most important ways students learn about the world and how things work, both of which are sources of deep pleasure for children. College- and career-ready standards call for a 50-50 balance of literary and informational texts in K-5.</p> | <p>Add non-fiction resources that connect to an anchor text read aloud to support students’ understanding of key content knowledge and vocabulary.</p> <p>Resources to assist you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading to Learn: Strategies to build a love of reading through content-rich nonfiction • Supplementing Your Curriculum with Knowledge-Building Text Sets: Discover why text sets work and how to use them to build student knowledge. <p>Consider how you can organize your anchor texts and/or independent or small group reading options around similar topics (e.g., pair a few anchor texts about weather or the Navajo together) to maximize knowledge-building.</p> |

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| | <p>To support this work, access these free text set collections:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieve the Core Text Sets • Achieve the Core K-2 Read Aloud Lessons with Companion Text Sets • Readworks “Article a Day” for grades K-12 • CommonLit’s premade text sets for grades 4-12 • NewsELA’s premade text sets for grades 2-12 |
| <p>Mini-lessons are designed around the teaching of reading strategies and behaviors failing to also focus on content or specific topics.</p> <p><i>Here’s the issue:</i> What is lost then are focus, continuity, and coherence in reading—all of which allow children to read materials they might not otherwise be ready for. While cultivating the strategies, behaviors, and practices of a reader are worthwhile and desirable, choosing texts to facilitate practice on learning those strategies and behaviors can result in an eclectic (at best) or random collection of materials.</p> | <p>Direct students to answer questions about portions of the text used for shared reading (3-8) or read aloud (K-2) to maximize opportunities for students to authentically integrate the reading strategy into the text reading itself.</p> <p>Doing so will require meaningful use of the strategy because it is related to the content of the text itself, rather than asking them to practice with leveled independent reading books.</p> <p>For samples of lessons focused on the content of the texts themselves see:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sample K-2 Read Aloud lessons • Sample 3-5 Close Reading Lessons |
| <p>Students read different books of their own choosing and are limited to their current comfort level, so teachers can only be expected to have superficial knowledge of the content they contain.</p> <p>Some balanced literacy programs counsel teachers that they don’t even need to know the contents of the books themselves to guide students to such deep readings.</p> <p><i>Here’s the issue:</i> Understandably teachers will often not know the books the students are reading because students in a class could be reading many, many different texts! Discussions are unlikely to identify problems or to provide explanations that would help kids to improve their reading. Necessarily, questions are limited to generic surface-level questions, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “What are you working on as a reader?” • “Can you walk me through what you’ve been trying to do?” • “Say more?” • “How has reading been going for you lately?” <p>Even when teachers might have such knowledge of the books, only brief conferences are recommended that are not likely to guide students to deeper reflection and understanding.</p> | <p>Promote student choice in a manner that leads to groups of students reading the same texts. That way teachers can deepen their understanding of the content and challenge of each text.</p> <p>Incisive and insightful questioning, group discussions, extended writings about the ideas presented in text will greatly increase students’ knowledge and language development and improve their reading comprehension too.</p> |

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