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Balanced Literacy in the Classroom: Teacher Perception and Implementation of the Balanced Literacy Framework

Nicole Froniear
St. John Fisher College

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Balanced Literacy in the Classroom: Teacher Perception and Implementation of the Balanced Literacy Framework

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Balanced Literacy in the Classroom:

Teacher Perception and Implementation of the Balanced Literacy Framework

By

Nicole Froniear

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Dr. Joellen Maples

School of Arts and Sciences

St. John Fisher College

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Abstract

This study was completed to determine how teachers define balanced literacy and how they implement it into their classroom. The study was conducted in three first-grade classrooms, and data was collected through teacher interviews, classroom observations, and environmental checklists. The data shows that teachers implement balanced literacy in different ways yet still meet the necessary components. Through the review of literature and the findings from this study, three themes developed: the individualization of balanced literacy, a variety of ways of implemented balanced literacy, and a need for professional development for teachers.

Teacher Perceptions of and Implementation of Balanced Literacy

The education field is currently in what is called the methods fetish (Bartolome, 1994). This methods fetish is the infatuation with, or the debate, over finding which way is the right way or the best way to teach reading, writing, and other aspects of literacy. A few of the commonly known methods are balanced literacy, the whole language approach, phonics approach, and the Lucy Calkins writing program, etc. It is important for teachers and administrators to research the many possible different programs and approaches towards teaching literacy. Many schools attempt to find the best fit for their students, which is important. However, Gallant (2009) and Troia and Maddox (2004) argue that the need to consider any program, including the balanced literacy programs, starts as early as kindergarten and continues on throughout higher grade levels.

With all of the reading programs and series to be looked through, teachers must decide what the best fit for their teaching style is and what will be a successful program for their students. The decision is not always solely up to the teacher, as often the school board, principal, or literacy committee makes the literacy decisions for the curriculum. However, when the choice is made by the teacher, he or she will have a variety of options. One option to consider is the Balanced Literacy program that includes different components to build successful readers and writers.

What exactly is a balanced literacy program? What does it look like in different classrooms? What *should* it look like in a classroom? These questions are ones that teachers should be considering when determining their literacy philosophy and that teachers should be answering when planning their literacy blocks. Balanced Literacy is the practice of teaching a variety of literacy skills through an approach that includes equal amounts of reading and writing

activities with a strong focus on scaffolding. Many activities are teacher-directed, and then responsibility is released to the students throughout the activity (Frey, Lee, Tollefson, Pass, & Massengill, 2005). The purpose of this research study is to see what teachers' perceptions of balanced literacy are and how they implement the components of balanced literacy within their classroom.

The purpose of this research was to determine how different teachers define balanced literacy and how these teachers implement balanced literacy into their classrooms. Upon completion of my research and reviewing the literature on balanced literacy within classrooms, teachers tend to believe in the use of balanced literacy. Each teacher had a varying definition of balanced literacy, yet each definition related somehow to the use of different reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities to help develop literacy skills. Each teacher also implemented components of balanced literacy, evidenced by classroom observations and environmental observations of their classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

In order to begin answering my research question, it was necessary to define what literacy means and how it is acquired. Since my research took place in a lower primary grade, it is important to provide an understanding of the acquisition of literacy and literacy skills that are being developed at this age. Considering appropriate theories that relate to the use of balanced literacy also helped to explain my research purposes. The sociocultural theory relates to the use of balanced literacy in the classroom.

Gee (1989) defined literacy as "control of secondary uses of language (i.e., uses of language in secondary discourses" (p. 542) meaning that we all can speak our primary discourse at home, but when you can speak academically or to someone in public, that is using literacy (or

being literate). Using secondary discourse is something that students as young as kindergarten must learn. They might interact with a text at home one way, but depending on how the teacher introduces the text, students interact with it in a different way, requiring different thoughts and responses. Children in the primary and elementary grades are expected to respond to literature, interact with other students and teachers, learn the conventions of spelling, and use them correctly when writing as well as other balanced literacy events and activities. With the idea of literacy being that a child is in control of his or her secondary use of language, teachers must help guide students to *develop* their secondary use of language. Through the balanced literacy program, teachers are helping students develop those uses of language.

Literacy is also defined as a social practice; Barton and Hamilton (1998) provide a standard definition of literacy in this context:

> Literacy is primarily something people do; it is an activity, located in the space
> between thought and text. Literacy does not just reside in people's heads as a set
> of skills to be learned, and it does not just reside on paper, captured as texts to
> be analyzed. Like all human activity, literacy is essentially social, and it is
> located in the interaction between people (p.3).

Barton and Hamilton discuss a definition of literacy in which literacy is everywhere-- in public, in school, and even in the home between family members. They suggest that literacy is more than just a set of skills to be learned. Children learn to be literate through interaction with others. When determining the use of a balanced literacy program, many components require students' interactions with one another. As will be discussed later, current literacy practices promote social interaction by group work, class discussions, and other projects.

The definition of sociocultural theory focuses on the child being an active member of a constantly changing community of learners in which knowledge constructs and is constructed by

larger cultural systems (Cole, 1996; Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000; Rogoff, 2003). Through the

components of a balanced literacy program, students are constantly participating in different

literacy activities with students of different levels and varying reactions to texts or literacy

activities. These differing student levels and reactions to text or activities equate to the larger

cultural systems mentioned in the definition of sociocultural theory. The knowledge is

constructed by larger cultural systems, placing a large emphasis on collaborative learning and

inquiry based learning. This theory emphasizes participation in the real world, or everyday life,

both formally and informally (Larson & Marsh, 2005). Many strategies taught and implemented

in a balanced literacy program involve real life connections and students participating in group

work or partner work (Bitter, O'Day, Gubbins, & Socias, 2009). As such, the sociocultural

theory is appropriate when it comes to aligning with balanced literacy.

       As mentioned, looking into how literacy is acquired will help in demonstrating how

balanced literacy should be implemented in a classroom First, Goodman (1984) explains that the

acquisition of literacy for a child begins early in life; as children participate within society, they

begin to discover and become literate. A child's literacy acquisition is influenced by how often

they see literacy as functional (how meaningful and purposeful literacy is), how their family or

friends value or express their opinions about literacy, their awareness of language as a symbolic

nature, and of course their own oral language. The implementation of balanced literacy allows

for these functional uses of literacy by participating within the classroom society and through

students expressing their own opinions of literacy events within the classroom.

       According to Kucer (2005), there are four developmental patterns in the acquisition of

literacy. Each principle relates in its own way to the implementation of balanced literacy. These

four developmental patterns are the following: (1) the learner acting as a scientist and

construction worker; (2) the adult as a demonstrator, mediator, and guide; (3) development as a recursive process; and (4) negotiating meaning (p.252-277).

For the first learning principle, the child is compared to a scientist or construction worker because of his or her hypothesizing and language building skills. The child learns language by hypothesizing about the rules and generalizations of language; children attempt to speak and write based on what they've seen and heard. The scientist facet is considered because children generate rules, collect data, test rules, and modify findings just like a scientist might. They are compared to construction workers for the same reasons; they use their resources and observations to build meaning from what they are learning much like constructing a building takes resources and construction efforts (Kucer, 2005). These comparisons, scientist and construction worker, relate to the responsibilities that students will have throughout the activities in a balanced literacy classroom. Students will be asked to become "scientists" in learning phonics rules and how to read throughout reader's workshop and guided reading groups. They will become "construction workers" and make meaning out of the texts and projects they complete through independent work and literacy centers.

The second principle of literacy acquisition according to Kucer (2005) is development as a recursive process, meaning that a child does not simply develop a literacy skill and continue on to the next skill. It is a process that improves as it goes, through practice and repetition. Throughout a child's acquisition of literacy, they experience a "refinement" (p. 263) of their hypotheses as they continue to learn new skills and test previously learned ones. At times they may revert back to earlier understandings of literacy depending on new skills they have learned. Students' attempts at developing literacy become more conventional as they've practiced and worked with it longer. An example of development as a recursive process in a balanced literacy

classroom is students using invented spelling during writer's workshop and shared writing experiences.

A large part of literacy acquisition, and the third developmental pattern according to Kucer (2005), is the fact that children use adults as mediators and guides to develop their language and literacy skills. From birth, children are immersed in their parents' use of language and parents are very involved in helping guide their child through his/her development of literacy. They not only use their parents' language as a model but their parents facilitate their children's language development by offering corrections and guidance during the child's attempts to speak. Once students enter school, they begin using their teacher as a guide. The balanced literacy program within a classroom calls for a lot of teacher guidance. As mentioned, teachers begin their instruction by teaching students in whole group or small group lessons and then gradually release responsibility to the students (Frey et al, 2005). Students use their teacher's instruction as a guide for their independent practice in literacy skills.

The final developmental pattern that Kucer (2005) discusses is negotiating meaning. When acquiring language, children are also learning that language has meaning. They begin using cues to determine the meaning. Cues can be anything from body language/actions, previously established routines, and intonation. They also use cues to understand what print is being used for on certain objects. Cues in print may be on games, products, and signs, to name a few. For example, a child sees a fast food drink cup often and they notice the print on it. They begin to realize a connection between the cup, the print, what is in the cup, etc. Eventually they are able to identify the object based on the environmental cues that they had recognized (2005). A large part of the balanced literacy framework is how the environment is designed. The classroom environment should include literacy displays, posters to remind students about reading

strategies or phonics skills, learning centers are also improved by having signs identifying what students should be doing at this point. All of these environmental cues help students acquire literacy through components of a balanced literacy program.

Research Question

When considering the many different literacy programs that exist, finding one that balances all of the necessary components for students to be successful can be challenging. My research question focuses on the importance of including all components of a balanced literacy program. What are teachers' perceptions of balanced literacy and how do they implement balanced literacy in the classroom?

Literature Review

Through review of many studies of balanced literacy, the results have demonstrated how teachers implement balanced literacy into their classrooms. Many findings of these studies revealed that teachers struggle to properly implement balanced literacy into their classrooms because of a lack of understanding of the framework. Other findings reveal that a lack of materials, time, and professional development are detrimental to implementing balanced literacy. The review of research has presented the following topics to be discussed: a detailed description of the components of balanced literacy, how teachers have implemented balanced literacy in the classroom, teacher perceptions and opinions of balanced literacy, and the necessary professional development that can assist teachers in implementing the framework into their classrooms.

Definitions and Components of Balanced Literacy

The overall goal of a balanced literacy program is to develop an independent and motivated reader (Stein & D'Amico, 2002) while increasing the amount of complex texts read by

the students (O'Day, 2009). Teachers and administrators need to decide what they want for their learners in the classroom and implementing a balanced literacy program is one option. (Siegel, Kontovourki, Schmier, & Enriquez, 2008). It is appropriate to know the desired outcome of balanced literacy before beginning to define balanced literacy and the components within it. With the main purpose of this research being about how teachers implement balanced literacy, narrowing down a definition and becoming familiar with the necessary components of balanced literacy is crucial. Balanced literacy is "a philosophical orientation that assumes that reading and writing achievement are developed through instruction and support in multiple environments in which teachers use various approaches that differ by level of teacher support and child control" (Frey et al., 2005, p. 272). These multiple environments mentioned include different locations in the child's school, home, and community involvement (including library services) (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). O'Day (2009) explains that balanced literacy combines interactive strategies with explicit and direct teaching. Through modeling, students are taught skills including reading comprehension, word recognition, and word study, and strategies are taught of when to use the instructed skills. Balanced literacy is not a program where teachers are provided scripts to follow to teach lessons, this program requires teachers to creatively plan lessons based on student needs, make choices about the lessons, and reflect upon each lesson (Stein & D'Amico, 2002).

Balanced literacy is a fairly recent term, originating in California, as recently as 1996. California attempted to implement a new curriculum after receiving low national reading scores, through the creation of this term and new literacy program. However, since the creation of the term *balanced literacy*, questions have emerged about which portions of reading and writing must be balanced and which skills must be taught within this program (Frey et al., 2005). The following explains in depth the expected components of a balanced literacy program.

Research has proven that the most effective programs of instruction should be delivered with a multifaceted approach (McCutchen et al., 2002). The idea of balanced literacy is to be taught through combinations of different literacy activities and features (reading, writing, speaking, listening) (Barnett et al., 2008). Although Fountas and Pinnell (1996) point out that a balanced literacy program takes place over multiple locations, Bitter et al. (2009) say that the "heart of instruction takes place in the classroom and is situated in the interaction of teachers and students around content or instructional materials" (p. 18). They continue to present components of balanced literacy including a focus on comprehension and creating meaning when interacting with any text.

A strongly implemented balanced literacy framework should include "elements of community, authenticity, integration, optimism, modeling, and student control and connectedness" (Frey et al., 2005, p. 273). In order to successfully implement those required elements, teachers must have long and uninterrupted literacy blocks each day, emerge students in a positive and cooperative environment, have high expectations, and integrate literacy aspects (reading and writing) across all content areas (Frey et al., 2005).

A particular feature of balanced literacy is scaffolding; the idea of beginning with teacher controlled activities and slowly releasing control and practice to students as the students become more familiar with the content and skills being taught (Stein & D'Amico, 2002). Stein and D'Amico (2002) recommend a reading to/with/by model, meaning reading *to* the student first, then reading *with* the student, and finally reading being done *by* the student. A common program using the to/with/by pattern would begin with a teacher read aloud (*to*), followed by shared reading and guided reading components (*with*), and finally, independent reading (*by*).

Similar to the to/with/by model that Stein and D'Amico (2002) describe, Bitter et al.

(2009) also discuss scaffolding in the balanced literacy program. The entire program was designed for responsibility to progressively be given to the students. The balanced literacy program begins with "structured modeling (read aloud) to scaffolded support (shared and guided reading) to independence of individual work (independent reading and writing)" (p. 27).

Guided reading, shared reading, writer's workshop, and reader's workshop are all essential components to balanced literacy (Bitter et al., 2009; Siegel et al., 2008; Stein & D'Amico, 2002). Guided reading is the *with* part of the to/with/by model, in which the teacher and students share the responsibility of literacy learning. Guided reading puts the actual reading responsibility on the student while the teacher instructs and supports students with skills and strategies that they will be able to use to raise their independent reading level (Stein & D'Amico, 2002). The teacher generally predetermines a need that the specific group of students has and they focus on that specific skill during one or more group meetings (Bitter et al., 2009).

The teacher's role in balanced literacy is in two parts, encouraging the reading process and scaffolding the reading process (Bitter et al., 2009). Another way to scaffold the reading process is through shared reading. Shared reading is another factor in the *with* portion of the to/by/with model. Shared reading involves the teacher and students reading a text together at the same time. The text is generally a more challenging text considering the teacher is helping the students read it. Through shared reading, teachers are able to model and have students practice decoding strategies and comprehension (Stein & D'Amico, 2002).

Reader's and writer's workshops also are strongly related to the balanced literacy framework. Siegel et al. (2008) briefly examine what both workshops offer to the students and teachers in the classroom. Both workshops begin with a mini-lesson that is taught directly by the teacher. The teacher is focusing on a given skill or specific strategy that the students will need to

implement while independently working. After the mini-lesson, students are given time to practice what was taught. Workshops are supposed to end with a share time where children are asked to demonstrate how they have implemented the skill. Writer's workshop is made up of units of study that students will participate in and practice writing in the specific genres. Some of these genres include "personal narrative, how-to, nonfiction, poetry, and fiction" (Siegel et al., 2008, p. 91). Reader's workshop includes the same genre studies; however, mini-lessons are more focused on reading strategies. Some of the strategies taught in reader's workshop consist of "looking for chunks in words, using pictures to identify unknown words, and literary elements (e.g. character development)" (Siegel et al., 2008, p. 91). In Kennedy and Shiel's (2010) article, part of their classroom observations provided a schedule to see the breakdown of how to implement these workshops into a balanced literacy classroom. The classrooms that they observed spent forty minutes completing writer's workshop, forty minutes of reader's workshop, and ten minutes of word work.

During discussions or question and answer times, teachers must focus on are if they are "telling" or "coaching" their students. Studies show that coaching students is more beneficial than telling (Bitter et al., 2009; O'Day, 2009). Coaching takes place when a student is attempting to answer a question and the teacher gives prompts to the child to help him or her elaborate their thinking. On the other hand, telling is simply the teacher giving information or an answer to the child. Coaching is the desired method considering the focus on scaffolding throughout the balanced literacy program (Bitter, et al., 2009).

Implementation in the Classroom

Stein and D'Amico (2002) observed 100 classrooms in one school year. They observed each classroom for three days, from the time the students arrived to the end of the literacy block.

Most of these classrooms had scheduled two hour literacy blocks each day. They were looking for components of the balanced literacy program and what the teachers were doing to implement it. Generally they found that teachers began by teaching the "surface-level" (p. 1322) aspects of the program and many deepened their instruction as time went on. However, they did find that at times teachers were attempting to follow the framework but were not actually teaching it. Through teacher interviews, they were able to determine that some teachers did not completely understand certain components. Without understanding the components, the teachers struggled to effectively plan and teach within the balanced literacy framework. One important piece that Stein and D'Amico (2002) found is that the teachers in their study, who were highly aligned with the balanced literacy framework but had the lowest quality within the program, were in their first or second year of teaching. This finding speaks volumes about teachers wanting to follow the guidelines given to them yet needing further professional development and guidance to have quality instruction to match their understanding of the guidelines.

When attempting to implement a balanced literacy framework, teachers must recognize the effects of the program on all students, including English Language Learners and struggling readers and writers. Several studies have been conducted to see the effects of a balanced literacy program on English Language Learners, also referred to as English Learners (EL) (O'Day, 2009). Although it seems to drift away from the topic of teachers' opinions on implementing balanced literacy, it is interconnected due to the amount of EL students in schools currently increasing (Kamps et al., 2007; O'Day, 2009). While realizing that struggling readers and writers and EL students have different needs, both of these student populations benefit from a balanced literacy program and additional literacy activities. O'Day (2009) collected data from a three year study and from two years of interviewing teachers, administrators, and literacy coaches. The

school district observed had over 24,000 EL students and a focus on using the balanced literacy

approach in the classrooms. O'Day (2009) argued that specific components of the balanced

literacy program are even more beneficial for EL students compared to other classroom literacy

programs. The focus on making meaning through interactions with texts matches the necessary

cognitive engagement of developing language skills. The conversations that students and

teachers have regarding texts already read help to increase EL students' oral fluency,

conversational skills, and vocabulary development. The explicit instruction that teachers are

expected to implement through teacher modeling and scaffolded activities also benefits EL

learners.

Another component of balanced literacy that EL students are assisted by is the

differentiation aspect. Teachers must differentiate based on student needs while teaching in a

balanced literacy framework, therefore benefitting struggling reader and writer needs and EL

students' needs (O'Day, 2009). Kamps, et al. (2007) completed a research study including EL

students in which the balanced literacy program was the control group while researching a direct

instruction program to determine which was more suitable for EL learners. The researchers

obtained results from multiple sources to determine that the direct instruction approach

benefitted students better than the balanced literacy framework. However, in the limitations of

their study, Kamps et al. (2007) discussed that many of the students in the balanced literacy

group received instruction that was similar to direct instruction. These results demonstrate that

many of the literacy programs mirror each other, having similar qualities yet different

approaches. Despite the differences in O'Day (2009) and Kamps' et al. (2007) studies, both

determine that EL students benefitted from additional assistance in the classroom to develop

their language abilities. O'Day's (2009) study broke down the components of a balanced literacy

program that can successfully help EL students in developing literacy and language skills. These successful components also benefit struggling readers and writers with differentiation, classroom conversations, and focuses on making meaning through text interactions.

Beyond studies demonstrating the effectiveness of balanced literacy programs on English Language Learners, multiple studies have been conducted determining the "how" and the "what" of balanced literacy in general education classrooms. These studies looked into how teachers implemented the components of balanced literacy and what the students were learning from the implementation of balanced literacy. Bitter et al. (2009) collected data from 101 classrooms in elementary schools in high-poverty areas over three years. Their research focus was on what works in classrooms following the balanced literacy framework in order to improve student achievement. Classroom observations were a main portion of the data collection in this study. However, Bitter et al. (2009) also interviewed teachers asking their beliefs about their school policies and professional development policies. Their findings show that the main focus in these classrooms was reading. Writing and grammar took a smaller portion of time than expected. Timing of observation may have been the factor in why reading was so prevalent over writing and other skills. Often times in a balanced literacy program, literacy is not taught in one solid block of time and then ignored the rest of the day; literacy instruction and implementation is present throughout the day, therefore the observers may have missed certain instruction. The researchers also found a lack of phonics instruction and word study. However, they found that vocabulary and word study were a little more apparent than phonics instruction. Word study is one component that teachers will need to add into their guided reading and shared reading sessions in order to have a more complete balanced literacy program (Buckland & Fraser, 2008; Morgan, Vanayan, White, & French, 2000). Bitter et al. (2009) did find high levels of

scaffolding and an alignment of the teachers' instruction with the schools' focus. The amount of

increased higher-level student thinking was apparent in their findings as well. Their overall

findings demonstrated that approaching literacy instruction in a multifaceted manner was

beneficial (Bitter et al., 2009).

Frey et al. (2005) completed a study that included triangulated data; they collected data

from classroom observations, taking inventories of the environments in the classroom, and

teacher surveys and study interviews. Their research questions focused on how much time within

the given literacy block was designated for each component, how a balanced literacy classroom

should look, and how a balanced literacy school should look. They studied 32 high-poverty

elementary schools in grades kindergarten through fifth. The district in this study mandated that

the teachers must implement a balanced literacy program. They were told to have a 90 minute

block each morning to instruct in reading and writing. They were allowed to create literacy

centers and other literacy activities throughout the day as well. The researchers used classroom

observation to obtain data about how teachers designated their literacy blocks. Frey et al. (2005)

also used environmental checklists to assist in answering their research questions about what

classrooms and schools should look like.

Frey et al. (2005) found that independent writing was the activity that the most time was

spent on in these classrooms (20%). Read alouds occurred 18% of the time, while independent

reading occurred 17% of the time. Other balanced literacy strategies including conferencing and

accountable talk. Shared reading and guided reading did not happen daily; these programs were

presented on a weekly schedule, but these components were completed within the literacy block.

Frey et al. (2005) found a few flaws in the implementation of balanced literacy within these

schools. There was a lack of teacher-directed instruction, which is a main focus of balanced

literacy. They found that instead of teacher-directed instruction, independent reading or writing took place. These are components of balanced literacy but they must be implemented after teaching of specific skills. They also discussed that the frequency of shared reading and guided reading needed to be increased.

The results of the environmental checklists found these components of a balanced literacy classroom: "classroom libraries, books grouped by reading level, literacy centers, literacy displays, a large group area for read alouds and other activities" (Frey et al., 2005, p. 278). They also observed instructions on how to find a leveled book, reading areas, and student work posted in many classrooms, but these features were not as prominent as the aforementioned components. With the entire school being a balanced literacy school, the building itself must present itself in that way. The researchers noticed different literacy displays, presentations of student work, and different areas to read. A professional development library for teachers was included in 81% of the schools, whereas 91% of school libraries had books for teacher's use (Frey et al, 2005).

Teacher's Opinions of Balanced Literacy

When reviewing what the research on balanced literacy offers, many findings include teacher opinions on the policies and their opinions on what professional development they desire or have found beneficial previously. This section summarizes some of the opinions offered by teachers through interviews and surveys. Many of them suggest professional development workshops, which will be discussed in the next section.

Gilrane, Roberts, and Russell (2008) discuss building a community where teachers not only have a "rich deep knowledge base about language and literacy but also a disposition to see themselves as professional decision makers" (p. 333). Many of the researchers gathered data

through classroom observations but also they interview teachers. Teachers are very used to

following the direction of their administrators (Frey et al, 2005; Gilrane et al., 2008). However

teachers, knowing their students the best, often have great ideas about improving the school

community and classroom learning, yet they do not get to share in the decision making. These

interviews gave teachers a chance to share their knowledge and opinions about implementing

balanced literacy.

Cunningham, Zibulsky, Stanovich, and Stanovich (2009) focused their entire study on

teachers' perceptions. They surveyed 121 first grade teachers. The researchers wanted to create a

different way to obtain precise data from teachers without the teachers thinking that they had to

add what their district says they *must* do during their literacy block. The researchers avoided this

by giving the teachers an open ended question "how would you choose to spend your

instructional time if given the opportunity to independently structure that time?" (Cunningham et

al., 2009, p. 420). By presenting an open-ended question, the researchers were able to get the

clear and uninfluenced opinion from each teacher. Although it created more work for the

researchers in analyzing the data, the results would be as representative of the teacher opinion as

possible. When analyzing their data, they found that the biggest portion of the two hour block

would be spent completing teacher managed activities, then independent writing and reading,

followed by phonics instruction. The other activities mentioned by teachers were mentioned

often less than these components (Cunningham et al, 2009). A positive reaction to their results

demonstrates that many teachers see the need for balancing teacher controlled and independent

student work, balancing reading and writing activities with an inclusion of phonics. Cunningham

et al. (2009) found that some teachers mentioned one activity that took up almost 60% of their

allotted literacy time. Those teachers do not choose to participate in or follow a balanced literacy

environment.

Gallant (2009) took on a similar approach when asking kindergarten teachers about their students' literacy experiences. The main focus of the study was the continuous debate between developmentally appropriate activities (including play, exploration) or using teacher-centered activities to teach kindergarteners. Gallant (2009) read the findings from a survey that was used in a previous study in 1994, asking kindergarten teachers about formalized reading instruction. The researcher used the same idea from the original survey in this study. The survey was updated to meet the current issues of the educational field and mailed it to teachers and see how the opinions of formalized literacy instruction may or may not have changed. The study completed in 1994 revealed that less than 14% of the teachers surveyed felt that all children should be involved in some sort of formal reading instruction. The results have drastically changed since the first survey results. In Gallant's (2009) results, at least 75% mentioned that they have books in their classroom that they use for explicit teaching. 46% now have phonics work books whereas in 1994, less than 3% said they would do any sort of workbook activities. The surveyed teachers reported using shared and guided reading, shared writing, read alouds, journals, and centers (Gallant, 2009). The academic times have clearly changed into an environment surrounding reading instruction. However, the teachers' opinions were not as welcoming to this change. One teacher responded with "too much, too soon, too fast" (Gallant, 2009, p.214). One positive change that the teachers did welcome was professional development. Their requests were made to help them better understand what they are supposed to teach and why it needs to be taught to kindergartners (Gallant, 2009).

Concerns similar to the kindergarten and first grade teachers' concerns occur in the middle grades as well. Troia and Maddox (2004) researched concerns of special and general

education teachers in middle schools. Considering the link between reading comprehension and writing (Bitter et al., 2009), teachers in this study supported having a balanced literacy program but were unsure of how to use it with lower level students in their writing. One of the goals in this study was to find out the beliefs and attitudes (particularly in writing) of the participating teachers. Again, the teachers were asked open-ended questions and held discussions in focus groups. The results of the study demonstrated what many studies of teacher opinion has shown; the district is in charge of most instructional decisions, there is a lack of materials and specific curriculum (in this case in writing curriculum), and the teachers expressed frustration in the struggle to integrate writing into the content areas (Troia & Maddox, 2004). Some of these issues seem vastly different than the results from the studies about balanced literacy in the younger grades, however the teachers in the middle school study place blame on the elementary teachers for the students being unable to write in the content areas. Through these results, new ideas for professional development arise.

Professional Development

Using professional development opportunities, teachers can increase their knowledge about reading and writing instruction. The goal of professional development is to "increase teachers' abilities to improve student learning" (Gilrane et al., 2008, p. 341). Gilrane et al. argue that one of the most beneficial aspects of predicting students' reading abilities depends on the quality and knowledge of the teacher. Similarly, Troia and Maddox (2004), Cunningham et al. (2009), and Pressley, Rankin, and Yokoi (1996) agree, stating that teacher beliefs and practices are strong indicators of student success in the classroom.

Through successful studies on professional development, professional development is proving to be much more than just an hour or two hour session here and there (Gilrane et al.,

2008; Kennedy & Shiel 2010; Stein & D'Amico, 2002). Professional development (PD) takes on

many forms as many case studies and researchers have shown. Professional development has

itself developed and changed to fit the needs of teachers and administrators alike. Stein and

D'Amico (2002) wrote of a very involved professional development plan from a school district

in New York City. They found that teachers had an average of 8 hours of professional

development a year, and those 8 hours were never as focused to the classroom topics as they

should be. The professional development plans implemented in this NYC school district were

focused on successfully leading a balanced literacy program in the classroom. The PD plans for

instructing the teachers compare to the way students are taught in a balanced literacy program;

start out being taught the skills and then gradually release control (scaffolding), also referring to

the to/with/by model. Teachers were taught the basics of the balanced literacy program and then

moved to furthering their understanding of each component after they had practiced the

framework in their classrooms. The administration taught *to* the teachers by providing the

theories of the program and the strategies necessary for successful implementation. Teachers

were also to observe experienced teachers. The teachers were in the *with* phase when they would

have an experienced teacher or PD staff member to observe their classroom two to three times a

week. They also might participate in the professional development lab where new teachers were

encouraged to observe a veteran teacher for three full weeks. Finally, the *by* stage of the

to/with/by model required the teachers to use the balanced literacy program in their classrooms

every day and at this point further their understanding and practice. The school district that Stein

and D'Amico (2002) completed their research in offered a variety of professional development

opportunities. They did not believe that PD should be in workshop form, they wanted the

development to occur in classrooms. This explains the large amount of time being spent in

classrooms when teachers are learning how to implement the balanced literacy program.

Kennedy and Shiel (2010) observed a professional development plan in a school that required staff to attend workshops every two weeks for two hours, for two years. Staff members also had full days and half days throughout the school year for further development. Teachers were asked to read texts provided prior to these workshops to provide background knowledge before meeting as a group. The facilitators of these professional development workshops also visited the classrooms to observe the teachers using the skills that were taught. The results in this school district after the implemented PD plans were positive. Teachers' motivation increased after feeling more confident in teaching, and therefore, the students' achievement increased. Teachers also felt that their literacy knowledge increased significantly, they felt more open to challenges, they wanted to continue learning more about the balanced literacy program, and they raised their expectations for their students, no longer accepting simple acquisition of basic skills. O'Day (2009) found similar results. Teachers in this study also felt an increased amount of knowledge in reading and writing. The teachers (new and veterans alike) appreciated the professional development plans and agreed with the need for further PD in implementing the balanced literacy program in their district.

Many findings and implications of these studies are similar. In order to develop a strong balanced literacy program, research must further be done in how teacher beliefs and practices affect student learning and achievement (Cunningham et al., 2009). The kindergarten teachers surveyed and interviewed in Gallant's (2009) research study provided specific types of professional development that they would appreciate in order to help them teach literacy skills better. The teachers wanted PD that would teach the overall components of the balanced literacy program including guided reading instruction, how to group students for instruction, shared

reading, writing strategies, writer's workshop, literacy centers, phonics and word study instruction, phonemic awareness, how to use children's literature successfully, and assessment techniques.

Frey et al. (2005) and Siegel et al. (2008) both discuss how to set up the classroom and school environment for a balanced literacy framework. Siegel et al. (2008) mentions that teaching literacy in different ways will benefit learners but in order for the students to grasp concepts, much more than just talk needs to happen. Frey et al. (2005) identify environmental factors that help aid a balanced literacy program in the classroom. Displaying student work, having reading nooks, literacy displays and posters, a leveled classroom library, and literacy centers are all components that should be in a balanced literacy framework. The school building should also encompass the appreciation for literacy by having literacy displays and displaying student work in the hallways.

Many of the surveys and teacher interviews revealed that teachers were frustrated with lack of materials, lack of extra staff support, state and school mandated routines, and lack of professional development as factors in their frustration of implementing balanced literacy programs (Gallant, 2009; Gilrane et al., 2008). Throughout the process of professional development in the schools, teachers and administrators must expect frustration and change (Gilrane et al., 2008). Having additional support, materials, and structures in place may help teachers feel less overwhelmed in the process of implementing balanced literacy into their classrooms. Kennedy and Shiel (2010) sum up the implementation of balanced literacy best by saying "the stakes are high; a multifaceted approach to raising achievement in literacy…holds much promise for the future" (p. 382).

Method

Context

Research for this study took place at a small rural school district in Western New York. The New York State District Report Card for the 2008-2009 school year indicates that 12% of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch and the student population is 91% Caucasian, with 3% African American population, 2% Hispanic and 2% Asian or Native Hawaiian. The school district had 1,148 students enrolled from grades Kindergarten through 12th in the 2008-2009 school year. The research was completed in the elementary school which had 526 students enrolled in the 2008-2009 school year. The average class size in the elementary school is 19 students, with approximately 5 sections in each grade. This study occurred in three of the first grade classrooms, which is comprised of five sections. The school district met Annual Yearly Progress on all assessed content areas, those areas being English Language Arts, Math, and Science. Eighty three percent of third grade students scored at a level three or above on the New York State English Language Arts exam, and 80% of fourth graders and 92% of fifth grade students scored a three or above as well (New York State District Report Card, 2010).

The research took place in three first grade classrooms within this district. The classrooms each have between 18 and 20 students. Each classroom is a general education classroom with students of mixed abilities and cultures. Two of the three classes have additional support of an ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher that pushes in at certain points during the day. Each classroom has between two and four students that are pulled out during the morning literacy block for "intensive" reading instruction provided by the reading teacher and certified teacher assistants. These students receive modified reading instruction, differentiated spelling lists, and additional practice in developing their sight word and decoding skills. All

students in the first grade take a reading comprehension test and spelling test on Fridays, while the students in the intensive groups also complete a cloze activity as a weekly assessment. The entire grade level is benchmarked using the DIBELS assessment and any students that are in the intensive reading instruction group are progress monitored every two weeks using DIBELS. Teachers also use running records and DRA assessments to determine reading levels and individual reading needs.

Participants

The first grade teachers in this study are all new to the district. Miss Flash and Mrs. Bentley (pseudonyms) have taught a variety of grade levels at different schools for eight years; however, this school year was their first year in this district. Miss Maggie is in her second year of teaching at this school district; however, she has had eight years teaching experience in other schools as well. All three teachers have completed their Masters degrees and are certified in early childhood and childhood education. Mrs. Bentley has a Masters degree in Human Development and Miss Maggie is additionally certified in special education and literacy. All three teachers have had experience teaching in urban, suburban, and rural areas.

Researcher Stance

I am currently a graduate student at St. John Fisher College working towards a Masters Degree in Literacy Education, Birth-12th grade. I have a Bachelors degree in Childhood Education and am also certified in Early Childhood Education and Special Education. As a researcher in these classrooms, I was a passive observer, meaning that I had relinquished all teaching responsibilities and focused solely on my purpose of collecting data (Mills, 2011). Upon entering each classroom, the teacher let the students know that I was there simply to

observe what they were doing during their literacy instruction and would take notes and possibly walk around to observe them during independent work time.

Method

My study focused on teachers' perception of balanced literacy and how teachers implement it into the classroom. To collect data in this research study, I observed three classrooms, completed teacher interviews with the three teachers that I observed, and completed environmental checklists in each of the three classrooms. The observations took place during the morning literacy block in three classrooms over two days. I split the time between the three classrooms and spend equal amounts of time (45 minutes) in each classroom. I observed each classroom at a different time each day to observe as much of the literacy block in each classroom as possible. These observations serve as one method of determining how these teachers implement a balanced literacy program. As I observed, I followed the schedule that the teacher has set for the literacy block. I focused on how the teachers lead the literacy block, how they gave directions and scaffolded, and what was expected of the students during whole group, small group, and independent work time.

During my observations in each classroom, I completed an environmental checklist (Appendix A). This checklist was used to determine how each teacher designs and sets up their classroom to meet the components of the balanced literacy program. The checklist was created using the findings from Frey et al. (2005). These researchers in their study completed similar checklists to determine successful balanced literacy environments. I took their findings of what makes up a successful balanced literacy environment and made a checklist from those results. The checklist includes looking for reading nooks, posters around the room, literacy displays, student work, small group and whole group areas, literacy centers, and classroom libraries,

among other items.

After observing the classrooms over two days, I then completed interviews (Appendix B) with each teacher that I observed. I asked them to define balanced literacy, what they felt are the easier and harder components to implement, and what professional development they would appreciate to help further their understanding of the balanced literacy framework. The teachers were given the opportunity to look over and approve the information provided in their interviews. The teachers were able to add or remove information from the interview. I provided them with the information that I obtained throughout my observations in their classroom as well as the results of the environmental checklist. I asked them to add anything that they thought I may have missed during my observation. Due to the timing of my observations, I may have missed specific instruction or items from the checklist that I was unclear of the location in the room.

Quality and Credibility of Research

It is important to guarantee the credibility and quality of my research. Mills (2011) describes four objectives for researchers to follow to ensure the quality and credibility of research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is "the researcher's ability to take into account the complexities that present themselves in a study and to deal with patterns that are not easily explained" (p.104). To ensure credibility of my study, I took part in prolonged participation in the classrooms. Although I only observed over two days at two different sections of the literacy block, I have worked in this school for the entirety of the school year, including three months as a first grade teacher. I was able to work on the same team with the teachers I interviewed, discussing literacy instruction together and planning literacy centers and assessments together. I participated in meetings with the reading teacher and teacher

assistants that provide the intensive reading instruction to the students. I also carried out member checks which are used to clarify given information and observed practices with the participants of my study. To further ensure credibility, I worked with a critical colleague to discuss my findings and consider their perceptions of and advice for my study. I also practiced triangulation, which means that I did not collect data from simply one source, but three or more. I completed classroom observations during a literacy block, completed interviews with the participating teachers, and third, I completed an environmental checklist to see if the classroom environment supports a balanced literacy framework.

Transferability means that the researcher must remember that everything studied is based on the context of the study and that the findings cannot be generalized for everyone (Mills, 2011). The results are results from the participants in my study, not for every teacher. To ensure transferability, I have explained my research site in depth to allow for understanding of the context of my research. I provided background information on my participating teachers and the school district my study took place in. I collected detailed data that allowed me to compare my findings with the findings of other research studies.

Dependability is required to show the stability of my data (Mills, 2011). In order to show dependability, I used triangulation when collecting data, by collecting data through three different sources, interviews, observations, and environmental checklists. I also kept an audit trail, having my critical colleague look over my findings, field notes, interview questions and answers, and environmental checklists. We discussed how I collected my data and what my findings showed.

Confirmability is "the neutrality or objectivity of the data that has been collected" (Mills, 2011, p. 105). By practicing triangulation, I ensured confirmability because I compared my

different methods of collecting data with one another to check my data. I also referred back to

my original research question and purposes to practice reflexivity. Based on research and my

own personal teaching experiences, I created my interview questions and environmental

checklists for my research.

Informed Consent and Protecting the Rights of the Participants

Prior to completing my research study, I had to obtain consent from my participating

teachers and the school's principal. The principal did not sign a form for consent because I

would not be interviewing her for the study; she merely gave permission for me to complete my

research study within the school. However, I provided consent forms to each of my participating

teachers. The consent form described the purpose of my study and what would be completed in

their classroom. The consent form mentioned the benefits for the teachers and that they were

allowed to withdraw at any time from the study without any consequences. They were told that

their names and school district would be changed to pseudonyms to protect their identities and

any identifying factors that may reveal their identities would be removed.

Data Collection

As mentioned, I practiced triangulation of data collection for my study. I observed the

literacy block within three first grade classrooms over two days. I observed in the classroom as a

passive observer and took field notes on how the teacher implements balanced literacy in the

classroom. I observed teacher instruction, student work, group work, and independent work. I

also completed an environmental checklist for each classroom. This checklist contained many

(but not all) items that a balanced literacy classroom might contain. The checklist required

looking at posters, centers, displays, classroom libraries and other environmental aspects of a

balanced literacy classroom. The results of the checklists helped me to identify what the teacher

uses to help implement balanced literacy. Lastly, I completed interviews with each of my three

participating teachers via e-mail. My interview questions included asking the teachers to identify

balanced literacy, explain how they implement it in their classroom, and what the easier and

harder components are to implement. I read over these interviews and responded with any

clarifying questions I may have had about an answer. Once the teachers had answered them, I

sent them a final copy of our interview for them to add or delete any information that they would

or would not like me to use in my data. This final member check was their approval for me to

use the interviews.

Data Analysis

Once I completed my data collection, I coded my data by typing out the topics from each

interview question. I put the first teacher's answer under the given interview question. When

another teacher answered the same way, I would put that teacher's initials with the first answer.

If the teacher had answered differently, I put her answer in a second line under the first answer. I

continued this to see which questions the teachers had the same answers for and which ones had

completely different answers. This began laying out what themes I would find among my

research. I also used what I found from the classroom observations and the environmental

checklists to determine which components of balanced literacy the three teachers used and which

components they did not use.

Findings and Discussion

As I coded and reviewed my collected data, the following three themes emerged from my

data: interviews, classroom observations, and classroom environmental checklists. The three

themes were the individualizing of balanced literacy, the importance of implementation in the

classroom, and the necessity of professional development. The themes that emerged from my collected data were similar to the themes I found supported by the literature.

Individualizing of Balanced Literacy

My research question asks what teachers' perceptions of balanced literacy are and how do teachers implement balanced literacy in their classrooms. In their interviews, each teacher defined balanced literacy in a way that parallels the defined components in the literature review, but they answered in their own words and based on their own experiences, individualizing the definition of balanced literacy. Miss Flash covered all aspects of New York State literacy standards when providing her definition: "Balanced literacy is taking all components of literacy: reading, writing, listening, and speaking, and intertwining them in instruction" (personal interview, June 29, 2010). Mrs. Bentley defined balanced literacy from an instructional strategy standpoint: "It is a combination of reading and writing in all areas: modeled reading, shared reading, and shared writing" (personal interview, June 23, 2010). Miss Maggie defined balanced literacy in relation to the students: "It is a framework to help students read and write effectively…the students are expected to work at a level not frustrating to them" (personal interview, June 24, 2010). These findings indicate that balanced literacy is important to the classroom in many ways. One teacher answered what balanced literacy is based on instructional planning, one discussed the students, and another defined it based on the NYS standards. It appears to me that balanced literacy is included in the classroom to meet the requirements of many different aspects: standards, lesson planning, student needs. However, they tie in together once the implementation of balanced literacy occurs.

As I observed their classroom environments and their instruction, further evidence of their individualization of balanced literacy was observed. The school did not have a set list of

rules or standards toward following a balanced literacy curriculum so the teachers had more

freedom in the design of their literacy block. The freedom of instructional planning led me to

believe this is part of the variety in their definition of balanced literacy. Each teacher had minor

differences in their literacy block schedule and activities; those differences may be part of the

reason why they each had their individual definitions of balanced literacy instead of one identical

definition. The school did, however, require the use of the Scott Foresman Reading Street Series

which provided the teachers with a basis for their instruction. This reading series provided a

teacher manual and student story books with five to six stories per unit with a total of six units.

These stories were meant to be taught one per week, and the manual broke down the learning

objectives and activities into five days. In this reading series, many components were included:

read alouds, differentiated reading levels and supplemental texts, spelling, grammar, listening

activities, word study, writing and other literacy activities. Although the teachers must use this

reading series, they were allowed to put their own ideas and plans into play throughout the

literacy block and the rest of their school day.

When implementing small group work (i.e. guided reading, writing or reading

conferences), writer's workshop, and literacy centers, the teacher's individuality was apparent.

Although these three teachers had decided to plan literacy centers together this year, their writing

blocks and guided reading groups were different. I was unable to observe a guided reading group

during my two days of observation, but through knowledge of working with these teachers this

year, I was familiar with how their materials, grouping of students, and instructional strategies

were different from one another. The teachers also instructed writing differently. I observed Miss

Flash brainstorming a list with her students of first grade memories to write in their journals prior

to independent writing time. When Miss Maggie led Writer's Workshop, she told the students to

think of things they enjoyed doing in the summer and attempt to write them by themselves. Their ideas of independent writing were both common in their goals for the students, but were different in implementation. The findings that the teachers each implement balanced literacy components differently, yet still meet the requirements of balanced literacy means that there is a level of flexibility in implementing the framework. There is not a strict set of rules that a teacher must implement balanced literacy in one specific way; there is freedom in instructional planning. Having this freedom is truly beneficial because not every classroom is the same and some components of balanced literacy are best implemented in a different way. With strict guidelines, issues may arise. This flexibility in implementing the components can assist teachers to fit the needs of their learners.

The results of my data demonstrate that teachers implement balanced literacy in their own ways. They did not follow one solidified definition of balanced literacy. Over time, from their experiences and from their understanding of what balanced literacy is, they designed their classroom and teaching styles to fit their individual definition of balanced literacy. The theme of individualized balanced literacy matches results from other recent studies completed on balanced literacy. Bitter et al. (2009) and Frey et al. (2005) both completed studies that broke down the time spent on each component within a classroom. Both studies found that teachers have varying methods of implementing balanced literacy. The individualization of balanced literacy helps all teachers guide their student in developing their literacy skills because the teachers each have a common goal of helping students learn. With their differentiated definitions of balanced literacy, these teachers are catering to the needs of their students in their own classroom rather than following the strict guidelines of one overall balanced literacy checklist.

Importance of Implementation in the Classroom

Each of the three teachers in my study revealed that they value using a balanced literacy framework within their classrooms. These revelations came about from all three sources of data collection. The physical environment checklist (Appendix A) showed that the teachers had many of the characteristics that a classroom should have to promote balanced literacy. The teachers each had many different posters around the room detailing different literacy strategies, two out of the three had a designated reading nook, and all three classrooms had diverse classroom libraries. Each of the rooms also employed a separate space for small group work, whole group meetings, literacy centers, professional development libraries, and posted student work. According to Frey et al. (2005), instruction of the components is not the only successful portion of implementing balanced literacy. The classroom environment must present itself in a way that supports balanced literacy as well. The three classrooms I observed provided an environment that helps support balanced literacy. The classroom environment in turn allows the students to be emerged in literacy throughout the entire day. Having word walls, classroom libraries, and other environmental factors assist students in their literacy development.

The few factors that were not present in the classroom were similar among all three of the teachers' classrooms. Two of the classrooms did not have criterion charts posted and the one classroom that did only had one or two. None of the first grade classrooms had Concepts About Print posters up or a school-wide balanced literacy policy posted. The school did not have a solidified balanced literacy policy so the lack of a posted balanced literacy policy was nothing that the teachers could control. Another thing that was missing from all three classrooms was teacher praise posted on student work. However, it is important to mention that my research was done at the very end of the school year and most of the students' work had been sent home

already. I am unsure if the teachers had posted praise on the displayed work. Overall, the three teachers showed an implementation of balanced literacy through how they have organized their classrooms. The factors that were lacking can easily be implemented as well. If the school does not have a balanced literacy policy, the teacher can create one with the students for their own classroom. The teacher can post it to remind the students of what they are doing together to develop their literacy skills and abilities. The praise on student work can be set up on a bulletin board or in the hall way, students can also learn to post positive praise to their classmates. These factors that are missing can easily be implemented and will help students feel part of their classroom literacy environment.

A lot of what I observed in my observation fit into the checklist, so the field notes from my classroom observations were limited, considering most of the information was found around the classroom itself. However, through observation of the different literacy blocks I was able to view literacy centers and independent student work, writer's and reader's workshop, students sharing their writing journals in a whole group setting, read aloud, reading buddies, and mini-lessons. Each aspect that I was able to observe among the three classrooms fit into the definitions of balanced literacy. Overall, the teachers met most of the components on the checklist and from the components of balanced literacy that I had gathered. The teachers meeting all of the necessary components on the checklist is a testament of how teachers can set up differing classroom environments and instructional blocks, yet still implement the same factors.

Balanced literacy is ultimately implemented to increase student knowledge, however, teacher knowledge and teacher ability are important in the implementation of balanced literacy in the classroom. When interviewing each of the teachers, I asked them to share what they thought were the hardest and easiest components of balanced literacy to implement in their classrooms.

When asked to name the hardest components to implement, two of the three teachers answered writer's workshop and guided reading, which are two literacy activities that are commonly required in a literacy block. Miss Maggie mentioned that it is hard to implement writer's workshop due to "time restraint in the daily schedule" (personal interview, June 24, 2010) and Mrs. Bentley said it is hard to implement writer's workshop due to "a lack of supplies" (personal interview, June 23, 2010). Shadowing what Mrs. Bentley said, Miss Flash mentioned that the hardest component to implement is not an actual component but finding materials, she mentions that "finding a great story to focus on a strategy can be difficult if you are not able to have readily available resources (personal interview, June 29, 2010).

The teachers' answers align with the opinions of teachers in other research studies. Troia and Maddox (2004) surveyed teachers and found that teachers were unhappy with a lack of materials and specific writing curriculum. The lack of resources, time, and administrative support were mentioned numerous times throughout other articles (Gallant, 2009; Gilrane et al., 2008). Through the three sources of data, the teachers demonstrated the importance of implementing balanced literacy into the classroom. Creating a classroom that supports balanced literacy is not just about lesson planning, it is also in how the classroom environment is set up, what is displayed on the walls, and what is taught during whole group and small group lessons.

Necessity of Professional Development

As I began my research for the literature review, a need for professional development relating to balanced literacy continuously emerged. This was one aspect that I did not originally consider, but after researching previous studies and interviewing the teachers I observed, I began to see the need. Many research studies (Gallant, 2009; Gilrane et al., 2008; Stein & D'Amico, 2002) that asked for teachers' opinions found that teachers struggled to implement balanced

literacy due to a lack of resources, time, administrative support, and professional development in the desired areas. In doing my own research, I found this to be completely true in the district these teachers work in. All three teachers said that the school district has a strong emphasis on teaching literacy, but Mrs. Bentley reported that the school district does not have a strict balanced literacy plan, "my school supports a balanced literacy framework, although it is not implemented school-wide" (personal interview, June 23, 2010). Although there is not a school-wide policy, Miss Flash said that "we have recently met to ensure that a 90 minute literacy framework is being followed and what the essential components of that 90 minutes should be" (personal interview, June 29, 2010). Miss Maggie echoed this statement saying "I think they do support it however; we have not had enough professional development to implement all parts of balanced literacy. We also do not have a formal writing program which is another big part of balanced literacy" (personal interview, June 24, 2010).

Each teacher was asked in her interview which type of professional developments she has attended through the school and if she had her choice of professional development to attend, what PD topics would she prefer. Miss Maggie said "The district provides professional development through a center in the county. There are many different kinds of classes. I have only been to one class on literacy in the early classrooms" (personal interview, June 24, 2010). Miss Maggie also said that if she had her choice she would go to PDs on "guided reading and writer's workshop" (personal interview, June 24, 2010). When asked if she had attended professional development through the school district, Mrs. Bentley answered "not at this time." She also mentioned she would "like to attend a Lucy Caulkins or Debbie Miller workshop" (personal interview, June 23, 2010). Miss Flash answered "this was my first year in the district, so I did not attend any outside professional development." When asked what professional

development topics she would choose to attend she answered "I would like to see more provided in using read alouds and mini lessons in the classroom" (personal interview, June 29, 2010). Although my data determined that the teachers implemented the necessary components of balanced literacy, each teacher wanted to develop their knowledge and abilities further. Gilrane et al. (2008) argue that predicting student success in reading depends on the knowledge and quality of the teacher. Strategies and research results never end; there are always new ideas for teachers to learn. These teachers demonstrate their understanding that the better the teacher understands a topic, the better he or she can implement it. Providing teachers with professional development is a positive step in helping the most beneficial implementation of balanced literacy.

The teachers that participated in this research study were helpful and provided results that mirrored those of the previous research studies. The answers they provided demonstrated that they have a genuine understanding of balanced literacy and they are implementing it in the best way for their own teaching style and their students. Each teacher expressed somewhat of a frustration in needing more professional development, resources, and time to implement all that is required by the school district, the required reading series, and to implement what they would like to implement from the balanced literacy framework.

Implications

Upon completion of my research study, I believe I have learned what I had hoped to learn; these findings will be used when I am developing my own classroom literacy block. In general, my findings revealed that teachers can implement a balanced literacy framework whether the school district has employed an official balanced literacy curriculum or not. The three themes that emerged through my data analysis each led to different implications.

First, teachers individualize balanced literacy to meet their needs. I will take the definitions I have found through my review of the literature, the classroom designs, and the different literacy block activities I have observed, to help design my own balanced literacy framework that best suits my classroom and meets the needs of my students. Teachers see the value in a balanced literacy program and they use what they know to implement it. Cunningham et al. (2009) surveyed 121 teachers only asking which components they would implement in their literacy block. Their findings demonstrated that each teacher chose to implement what they felt most important, and not surprisingly, many teachers had a positive balance of reading and writing components. Few teachers had actually limited themselves to a few components. These results combined with my results demonstrate that teachers define and implement balanced literacy in their own ways; however, they are meeting most, if not all, of the necessary components. The teachers I interviewed all define balanced literacy a little differently and have been successful, which shows that no matter how teachers define balanced literacy, they can implement it in their own ways. All of the different components can be implemented however they choose – guided reading groups, the set up of the classroom, whole group lessons, literacy centers, and many other components of balanced literacy. Teachers, including myself, will need to combine the components to plan and promote a successful balanced literacy program.

Second, the importance of implementing balanced literacy in the classroom is something all teachers need to focus on when planning instruction. Balanced literacy requires the use of many different components (Barnett et al., 2008; McCutchen et al., 2002). The teachers that I observed and interviewed successfully included the necessary components. I was able to view three different classrooms that implement balanced literacy in slightly different ways. I can take all of these different approaches and combine them into the one approach that will best fit my

teaching style. For example, I enjoy planning learning centers and activities for guided reading groups; I may plan a way to implement these two aspects at the same time where as other teachers at times held small group meetings at other times during their day. Either way works as long as students are participating within all components of balanced literacy. The findings of my research have shown that it is important to implement all aspects of the balanced literacy framework both through instruction and through materials in the classroom environment. Students shall participate and learn from multiple reading and writing activities including small group and whole group work, and shall also learn from the components of balanced literacy simply being a part of their classroom environment, which should include materials that support balanced literacy. Planning for instruction is just as important as the design and set up of the classroom. Frey et al. (2005) not only observed teachers' instruction but they also observed the classroom environment. They found that balanced literacy classrooms had many materials posted and arranged around the classroom that demonstrated different components of the balanced literacy framework or that explained to students how to use materials that added to the balanced literacy classroom. Balanced literacy aspects can be implemented in the posters on the walls, the classroom directions, location of learning centers, the classroom library, and other components. These components are all listed on the Environmental Checklist (Appendix A).

 Lastly, the need for professional development for teachers to implement the components of balanced literacy is apparent. Teachers from the different studies in my review of literature as well as the teachers in my study stressed their interest in attending professional developments related to balanced literacy components. Teachers in the literature discussed that in order to successfully implement balanced literacy, they needed and desired further professional development opportunities to help further their knowledge and ability to implement these

components into the classroom (Gallant, 2009; Gilrane et al., 2008). Unfortunately, the school

district in my study did not always offer professional developments relating to implementing

balanced literacy, but that did not stop the teachers I interviewed from determining which

workshops they would like to attend in the future. In planning instruction for a classroom,

teachers will need to determine their strengths and needs in the areas of balanced literacy to

determine which professional developments would best help their instruction. For example, I am

very interested in learning more effective ways for students to write, so therefore, writing

workshop may be a beneficial professional development to attend in my future. I also noticed

issues with a lack of time, resources, and formal writing programs. These will guide me in the

future to learn which aspects of balanced literacy I can implement with a lack of materials and

which areas may suffer due to a lack of materials. The fact that a teacher pointed out a lack of a

formal writing program is something she deems as very important, and I agree. Becoming more

familiar with formal writing programs and also asking future school districts which program they

use can be helpful when planning for my own balanced literacy classroom.

Conclusion

The purpose of my research study was to determine how teachers perceive and

implement balanced literacy in the classroom. I wanted to narrow down a definition of balanced

literacy and observe the implementation of balanced literacy within a classroom. Through a

review of literature and my own research, I was able to determine that teachers have a common

understanding of balanced literacy, yet each teacher has his or her own definition and

implementation. In recent research on the topic and my own research study, I have also found

that every teacher appreciates a strong professional development plan (Kennedy & Shiel, 2010;

Stein & D'Amico, 2002). If beneficial professional development sessions are not planned by the

school district, teachers already know what sessions they would go to if given the chance.

As with every research study, there are certain limitations. The timing of the research study was at the end of the school year. Many of the teachers had begun to clean their rooms and put away posters and materials for the year. It was also end of the year benchmark assessment time as well as the fact that their reading series had been finished for a week now. I observed as much as I could in a short amount of time. Had this been a full year research study I would have been in the classrooms more often and for much longer periods of time. I would have observed more instruction and subsequently would have seen the growth of the students within a balanced literacy framework. I also would have seen more complete classroom environments. The amount of teachers I interviewed was not necessarily a limitation, however, I only interviewed three teachers and a future preference would be to increase the amount of teachers to observe and interview. In future research studies on this topic I would prefer to interview a wide range of teachers from different school districts; teachers with over ten or twenty years of experience, teachers within their first five years of teaching, and teachers in a range of grades from K-6. I would want to observe a wide variety of school districts and teacher characteristics to attempt to see any correlation to my findings of this research study.

Besides the limitations, this research study presented information that will help my future instruction within a classroom. Through the review of literature and my own research study, I found common themes relating to balanced literacy including the need for professional development, the individualization of balanced literacy, and why it is important to implement the balanced literacy framework. The teachers that I interviewed each had their own definition but had the same overall goal of student learning. Each teacher implemented the components in a different way but always tied the instruction back to the goal. I have determined that it is

important in classroom literacy instruction that balanced literacy should be implemented in some

way, for the benefit of all learners.

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Appendix A

Classroom Physical Environment Checklist

Item	**Observed?**	**Notes**
Literacy centers		
Classroom or student library		
Classroom library policies posted		
Reading nooks		
Books available in reading nook		
Posted instructions on selecting a level book		
Books grouped by level		
Large-group area		
Small group area		
Literacy displays		
Examples of student work		
Praise posted on student work		
Criterion charts posted		
Displays in the classroom that promote literacy behaviors		
Phonemic awareness		
Concepts of print		
Reading books		
School balanced literacy policy posted		
PD library		

List created from results listed by Frey, B.B., Lee, S.W., Tollefson, N., Pass, L., & Massengill, D. (2005). Balanced literacy in an urban school district. *The Journal of Educational Research, 98*(5). 272 -280. doi: 10.3200/JOER.98.5.272-280

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. How many years have you been teaching? What are your certifications? Is there anything particular you would like to share about your teaching experiences? (First year of teaching, other teaching experiences, etc.)

2. What is your definition of balanced literacy?

3. Do you feel that you implement a balanced literacy framework in your classroom? If you do, how do you feel that you implement balanced literacy into your classroom? If you don't, what framework do you feel you follow? Please explain.

4. Do you feel that your school follows and/or supports a balanced literacy framework? Why or why not?

5. What areas (components) do you feel are easier to implement in a balanced literacy framework?

6. In your opinion, which areas (components) are harder to implement within the framework?

7. Does your school provide professional development related to implementing ANY type of literacy within your classrooms? What types of literacy related workshops/PD programs have you attended through your district?

8. If given the chance to pick the professional development that your district would provide for balanced literacy components, which workshops/PD programs would you ask to be presented?

9. Attached is what I observed in your classroom over a two day period. Please read it over and make any comments you feel necessary to better help me understand something I observed. Please feel free to explain anything else that I did not observe that you think would better help me understand your implementation of balanced literacy.