

Creating Collaborative Balanced Literacy Schools: A Framework for Implementation

Margaret Mary Policastro
*Roosevelt University
Chicago, Illinois*

Working in schools side by side with teachers, literacy coaches, and others, I am always keenly aware of the demands made on principals and other school leaders. Indeed, the increasing leadership roles and responsibilities that center on parent and community needs, high-stakes assessment, standards, and student progress have only intensified over the years. Most recently, Meidl and Lau (2017) state, “Typically educational leadership programs and professional development opportunities do not include the development regarding literacy knowledge and trends, literacy coaching, or literacy leadership” (p. 24). Yet, many schools today are striving to become communities where best practice in literacy pedagogy becomes a catalyst for transformative change.

School change happens on many levels, and providing ongoing and systematic professional development that forges a path forward in schools is not always easy to implement and often presents difficult challenges. Moreover, the leadership role demands that there is a schoolwide increase

in professional capacity of teachers, a laser-like focus on student learning to consistently raise student achievement, and strong teamwork through which goals are clear and agreed upon. Most importantly, creating a culture of collaboration to foster conditions for student engagement, achievement, and growth are paramount to the success of the school overall.

For the last seven years, a university team consisting of literacy coaches and the project director has worked on developing and implementing a model/plan for systemic and continuous improvement in balanced literacy and formative assessment practices within high need urban schools. From 2010 to 2017, this work was supported by an Improving Teacher Quality (ITQ) grant funded through No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE). This work is important as it has transformed schools into professional learning communities where teachers and administrators collaborate and implement continuous improvement cycles focusing on best practices in balanced literacy and formative assessment instruction.

This work has focused on the important question of what does it take for a school or district to plan for schoolwide continuous improvement and to execute change in literacy to advance student learning. The focus centered on what key components must be addressed and implemented for sustainable changes in literacy teaching and learning to happen. Eisenberg (2016) states that school transformation requires “undertaking job-embedded teacher professional development that is relevant, literacy focused, data driven, tied to teacher practices and standards driven” (p. 11). Furthermore, it has been an important goal to understand what Hattie (2015) describes as collaborative expertise in which everyone is working collectively to improve student achievement. Therefore, the purpose of this article is threefold:

1. To provide a brief history and background of balanced literacy instruction with differentiation as a natural outcome.

2. To provide a description of the balanced literacy systems of change which include the following: accessibility and organization, curriculum and instruction, standards, assessment, and parent and community.
3. To create a framework for the implementation in stages of the balanced literacy change systems over a three-year period.

History and Background of Balanced Literacy

Historically, balanced literacy is not a new concept but, rather, has evolved from ideas of balanced approaches and instruction (Policastro & McTague, 2015). For more than two decades, balanced literacy pedagogy has been taking place in classrooms and schools. However, in our work in schools, we have learned that oftentimes many teachers and administrators have an uncertain or fuzzy concept of what balanced literacy actually is and how it is delivered in classrooms schoolwide.

Balanced literacy is a philosophical orientation that assumes 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 (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Frey, Lee, Tollefson, Pass, & Massengill, 2005). This philosophical orientation or perspective means that there is not one right approach to teaching reading (Fitzgerald, 1999); rather, there is a balanced approach to literacy development.

Pearson (2002) discusses the balanced approach as utilizing authentic texts and tasks with a heavy emphasis on writing, comprehension, reader response, and literature while also including phonics, word identification, spelling, and writing. These notions inherent within balanced literacy make it a difficult concept as a pedagogy for teachers new to this type of instruction. An essential element within the balanced literacy pedagogy is that the teacher is making decisions moment by moment on

the best ways to proceed with the instruction (Policastro & McTague, 2015; Policastro, McTague, & Mazeski, 2016). This deliberate decision-making by the teacher forms the basis for daily instruction and is guided by a formative assessment process designed and refined to align with the tenets of balanced literacy.

There is a long history within the research base for formative assessment stemming from Bloom's (1977) identification of two essential elements of formative learning which have led to differentiated instruction: (1) feedback for students and (2) corrective conditions for all important components of learning. This feedback loop is essential to helping students become metacognitive of any gaps or missing information in their learning process.

Components of Balanced Literacy

Components of Balanced Literacy	Instruction Type
Interactive Read-Aloud	Whole/Small Group Instruction
Shared Reading	Whole/Small Group Instruction
Guided Reading	Small Group Instruction
Literacy Centers	Independent or Small Group
Independent Reading & Writing	Independent

Classroom instruction typically includes a daily literacy routine of interactive read-alouds/shared reading (teacher reads a text to whole or small groups), guided reading (small reading groups), language and literacy centers (students working independently or with peers on solving problems, research, and more), and independent reading and writing (students reading and writing independently). Another viewpoint surrounding balanced literacy is that it centers on best practices from all literacy avenues. That is, there are many independent aspects of literacy that must be simultaneously balanced (Madda, Griffo, Pearson, & Raphael, 2007). For example,

in a balanced literacy classroom, a teacher could be working with a small guided reading group and within the group could be differentiating instruction for each student. At the same time, the teacher is also keenly monitoring students working independently at centers and reading and writing independently (Policastro & McTague, 2015). Tompkins (2013) describes the balanced approach to instruction as a comprehensive view of literacy that combines explicit instruction, guided practice, collaborative learning, and independent reading and writing and is all developed through instruction and support in multiple environments.

Differentiation as a Natural Outcome in Balanced Literacy Classrooms

A critical dimension to balanced literacy instruction is the idea that the teacher is constantly making deliberate decisions regarding each child while teaching. Therefore, this deliberate decision-making approach provides the principles of differentiated support throughout instruction. In a balanced literacy classroom, the teacher is constantly adjusting and making decisions about the content, the process, and product in response to the students' readiness, learning profiles, and interests. Teaching and assessment are inseparable in the cycle of continuous improvement and feedback to the student. This formative assessment framework or design centers on providing formative feedback to students in both verbal and written forms. Verbal feedback is important during the moment-by-moment teaching—whether it is large group, small group, or one-on-one instruction. The power of verbal feedback as part of the discussion or conference allows students to receive information immediately. By providing this timely form of feedback, students receive the information within the context of the lesson, allowing for a continuous process and flow embedded in instruction.

Written feedback follows verbal feedback, providing reflections from the teacher with the

goal of moving/guiding the student further in the learning process. As students receive differentiated feedback, they begin to learn how to self-monitor their own learning processes. Inherent within the formative assessment design is the idea that students become owners of their own learning. This ownership requires students to reflect on and monitor their learning during instruction. Self-monitoring requires students to use self-questioning, self-observation, and self-coaching. This is the ultimate expression of differentiated instruction and support.

Balanced Literacy Schoolwide Systems of Change

Systems of Change	Attributes Implemented Schoolwide
System 1: Accessibility & Organizational	Access to resources/books for parents, students, teachers, and administrators Schoolwide teams: Literacy Team, Grade-Level Teams, and Professional Learning Communities
System 2: Curriculum & Instruction	Ongoing professional development on pedagogy/tenets of balanced literacy (e.g., read-aloud, guided reading, centers, and independent reading and writing) within the literacy block
System 3: Standards	Implementing the CCSS K-12 ELA with the instructional shifts necessary for success
System 4: Assessment	Formative assessment strategies: feedback and student self-monitoring to engage in cycles of continuous improvement
System 5: Parent & Community	Family literacy engagement

Accessibility and Organizational Change

The systems of change model above begins with accessibility and organizational change. These systems lay the crucial foundation in schools for everything else to follow and are fundamental in changing the literacy culture of the school. That is, without books and resources, teachers

cannot implement the tenets of balanced literacy and formative assessment (Policastro & McTague, 2015; Policastro et al., 2016). It is important to note that in many schools, there is not an organized or clearly defined manner in which to access books and resources. Without access to books, especially nonfiction and culturally relevant texts, the instructional systems or tenets of balanced literacy and differentiated instruction cannot be carried out effectively. The multiple in-school libraries, including the balanced literacy resource room, support all of the change systems (Figure 1): the parent library provides books for parents, children and caregivers (Figure 2); the guided reading library ensures that teachers have access to leveled books for differentiated small group instruction; the read-aloud library promotes daily reading to the students; and the professional development library encourages ongoing teacher professional development in best practice literacy instruction.

Figure 1. Balanced Literacy Resource Room

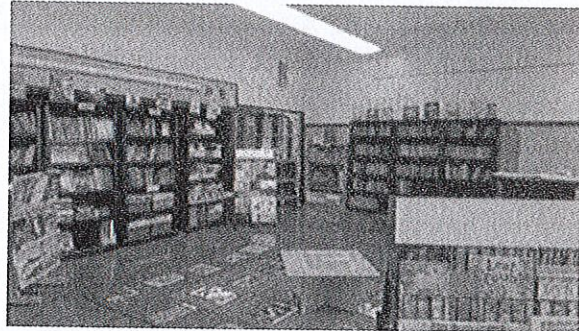
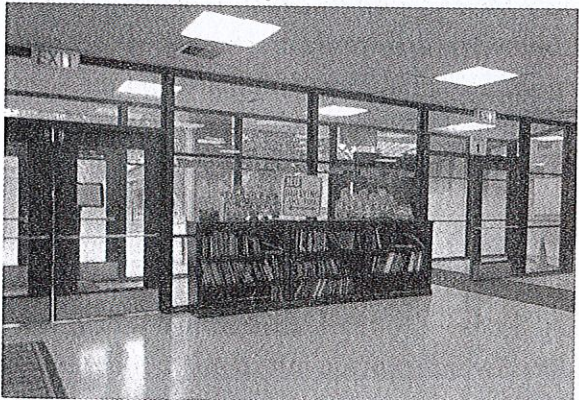


Figure 2. Parent Library



While the accessibility system is being planned and implemented, school leaders need to formulate the organizational system. It is through these two initial systems that the “trust” begins to develop schoolwide. As Hattie (2015) suggests, the idea is to have safe and trusting places to explore ideas, to make and learn from errors, and to use expertise to maximize successful learning. We have also learned while working with schools that it is the organizational framework that is key to the development of collaborative teacher expertise. School leaders understand the challenges that major changes and transitions bring about in a culture of a school. We have learned over the years that this kind of sustainable change within a culture of a school takes time and investment, and these wise leaders are patient and diligent in their efforts.

Included within this organizational framework category are the schoolwide teams that promote and encourage ongoing collaboration. The schoolwide literacy team is responsible for making literacy a high priority and mission within the school. To support the work of the literacy team, high-functioning grade-level teams are essential for creating cycles of planning that include implementing collaborative professional learning systems. We have made the formation of a schoolwide literacy team a top priority.

An important aspect of a literacy team is developing an infrastructure through shared decision-making which can support meaningful and lasting change (Blachowicz et al., 2010). A literacy team develops shared leadership, staff trust, and a feeling of personal responsibility (Lieberman, 2000). It also builds the democratic structures needed to sustain successful change (Booth & Rowsell, 2007; Fullan, 1999). The literacy team should have a teacher representative from each grade level. This representation allows for communication back to and from the grade-level teams.

Cobb (2005) states that there is no one model for the formation of a literacy leadership team. Regarding grade-level teams, we have attended

many grade-level meetings over the years and have been surprised to learn that the function of grade levels varies greatly by school and district. For example, in our work, we often learn that the function of grade-level team meetings is to conduct school business without a focus on student learning and, thus, should not be a part of grade-level planning time. A grade-level meeting should not be a time for planning field trips or class parties, or for discussing discipline issues. Although these are all important factors that perhaps enter into a school day, they belong outside of a grade-level team meeting which must focus on instructional capacity and include shared assessment of student learning evidence (Policastro & McTague, 2015). Members of schoolwide literacy teams are responsible for coordinating literacy practice and instruction within the school. Grade-level teams are responsible for monitoring student data to engage in cycles of continuous improvement through formative feedback provided in “real time.”

Curriculum and Instruction System of Change

The curriculum and instruction change systems are framed by the tenets of balanced literacy. Balanced literacy consists of a daily literacy block routine that covers interactive read-alouds, guided reading, language and literacy centers, and independent reading and writing. It is these tenets that form the foundation of differentiated instruction within balanced literacy classrooms. We have learned that balanced literacy can be a complex and overwhelming topic for beginning teachers and those who are new to its concepts and practices. For more information on balanced literacy pedagogy, please see <http://literacy.roosevelt.edu>.

Standards System of Change

The standards change system was added to our framework when the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were developed because we realized that the current model of balanced

literacy would need to be reconceptualized to meet the instructional demands brought forth by the new standards. These standards have influenced virtually everything we do in literacy and literacy instruction; therefore, we have refined our work over and over again based on the observational data we have collected.

Balanced Literacy: CCSS Instructional Shifts and Strategies

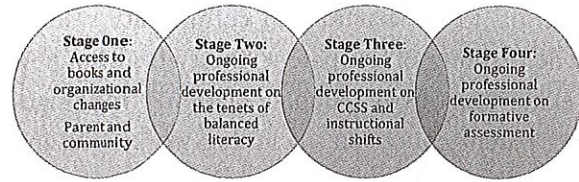
Balanced Literacy	Shift
Read-Alouds	Interactive read-alouds with at least 50% of informational and complex text. Teacher models close reading, and children respond using whiteboards.
Guided Reading	Guide students using language into text-based responses and habits of evidentiary argument through social discourse.
Literacy Centers	Team-based center projects include solving problems with partners while building argument and persuasion.

The instructional shifts necessary to implement the standards requires a different way of thinking and a different decision-making process on the part of the teacher. Consequently, the pedagogy has changed in all of the instructional tenets of balanced literacy due to the influence of the shifts.

Assessment System of Change

Out of all the five systems, the assessment system has been by far the most difficult to plan for and implement in schools. Yet, true improvement in student achievement depends on the changing classroom practices from summative to formative assessment (Figure 3). We have spent the most time on this system both with professional development and coaching. Black and Wiliam (1998) discuss formative assessment as encompassing all those activities undertaken by teachers and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as

Figure 3. Formative Assessment Framework



feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. Wiliam (2011) believes formative assessment practices have a much greater impact on educational achievement than most other reforms. The term *formative assessment* has built within it the merging of instruction with assessment, and it is this concept that is quite overwhelming for teachers to implement. Shepard, Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, and Rust (2005) discuss that the assessments are carried out during the teaching process for the purpose of informing and improving teaching or learning. Inherent in the word “formative” is formation—the forming of learning during instruction. An important event in the history of formative assessment occurred in 2006 when the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) (2008) made formative assessment an important emphasis in their adopted definition: “formative assessment is a process used by teachers and students during instruction that provides feedback to adjust ongoing teaching and learning to improve students’ achievement of intended instructional outcomes” (p. 3).

Parent and Community Change System

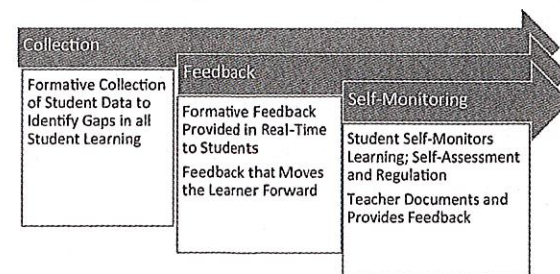
Finally, our parent and community change system grew out of the work in developing parent libraries within schools. This system is a dynamic process that includes schools, families, and communities working and collaborating together to increase student literacy. Family engagement is a necessary dimension and is critical to the ongoing literacy process for children and families. Therefore, this system provides

ongoing parent education around literacy and includes reaching out to community partners—in particular, to the local public libraries—to increase access to literacy resources.

A Three-Year Implementation Model

Implementing a professional development plan surrounding balanced literacy can be an overwhelming process. What we have learned is that each school will develop its own path that works best for the learning community. Schools have unique cultures and personalities that enter into the process (Policastro & McTague, 2015). The question of time and how long this will take to implement will depend on each school. This implementation model is developed as a four-stage process that covers a three-year period. These overlapping stages are fluid and are in a constant process of development. For some schools, this will take less time to complete; for others, it may take even a longer period of time. There is no exact or “right” schedule for this framework as it is very individual to each learning community. This model is flexible and can certainly be adapted and modified depending on where your school is with balanced literacy, formative assessment, and the other systems of change.

Figure 4. A Three-Year Implementation Model for Balanced Literacy



Year One	Year Two	Year Two & Year Three
Stage One: Accessibility and organizational change systems Also, begin the parent and community system.	Stage Three: Ongoing professional development on the standards system CCSS and instructional shifts	Stage Four: Ongoing professional development on formative assessment system
Stage Two: Ongoing professional development on the curriculum and instruction systems (tenets of balanced literacy)		

Stage One

Stage One of the model begins with changes in the school to bring about and promote access to books for children, teachers, parents, and administrators. Access to books is the primary function of a balanced literacy school. Book access is accomplished through the creation of multiple in-school libraries or a centralized “balanced literacy resource room” (see Figure 1). These libraries that transform schools include the following: parent library, read-aloud library, guided reading library, and a professional development library. Things to consider include where the spaces, the collections, and management will be for the multiple in-school libraries. This requires a good look into the management and space allocations schoolwide. All of these important shared decisions and more should be under the purview of the schoolwide literacy team.

Stage One also includes the creation of a schoolwide literacy team whose purpose is to promote professional learning communities (PLCs) with an emphasis on collaborative expertise. The success of a school requires enormous collaboration and capacity building through its literacy team. Decisions to be made include who will serve on the literacy team and how often the team will meet.

Stage One also begins an important connection to the parent and community system. The opening of the parent library begins a new relationship with parents. Planning for ongoing parent education, including workshops and partnerships for the local public libraries, begins in this stage and continues throughout all stages.

Stage Two

Stage Two introduces balanced literacy to the teachers and school leaders through ongoing professional development workshops and follow-up meetings. Workshops should cover all the tenets of balanced literacy, including interactive read-alouds, guided reading, centers, and independent reading and writing. Things to consider with Stage Two include planning for the professional development workshops, time required, and resources needed. Again, these considerations and planning should be addressed with the literacy team. Each of the workshops should be followed up with a timeline for implementation schoolwide. Allowing for peer observations and sharing of the implementation add to the collaborative expertise component.

Stage Three

Stage Three encompasses ongoing professional development on the CCSS and instructional shifts. Each of the tenets of balanced literacy needs to be examined for the impact each of the instructional shifts will have on the delivery of lessons. Time and resources will need to be determined by the literacy team for the workshop and more. Decisions on sharing and collaborating should be considered as well. Grade-level team meetings provide a good venue for collaborative expertise. Timelines for implementation should also be determined.

Stage Four

Stage Four intensifies ongoing professional development on formative assessment in the balanced literacy classroom. This is a stage that will begin in Year Two and will continue through Year Three. Each of the tenets of balanced literacy need to be examined to determine how to merge instructional tenets with formative assessment practices. Again, all the factors from the above stages need to be considered here as well.

Conclusion

Developing a collaborative balanced literacy school with the lens of formative assessment is indeed no easy task. However, there are established methods and practices for going about this important transformative work. Examining the five systems of change and looking carefully at where your individual school might be for each is a good place to start to self-assess the process. Once determined, you can begin to think about the three-year implementation model within the four overlapping stages. No doubt, there will be challenges that you will need to overcome; and I assure you that the rewards will outweigh any and all difficulties as student achievement will be the overall accomplishment.

For more information on balanced literacy and formative assessment, please visit <http://literacy.rosevelt.edu>.

If you are looking for more comprehensive information and material, please see the following books and articles:

Policastro, M. M., Mazeski, D., & McTague, B. (2011). Creating parent libraries: Enhancing family literacy through access to books. *Illinois Reading Council Journal*, 39(1), 60-64.

Policastro, M. M., & McTague, B. (2015). *The new balanced literacy school: Implementing Common Core*. North Mankato, MN: Maupin House by Capstone Professional.

Policastro, M. M., McTague, B., & Mazeski, D. (2016). *Formative assessment in the new balanced literacy school*. North Mankato, MN: Maupin House by Capstone Professional.

References

- Blachowicz, C. Z., Buhle, R., Ogle, D., Frost, S., Correa, A., & Kinner, J. (2010). Hit the ground running: Ten ideas for preparing and supporting urban literacy coaches. *The Reading Teacher*, 63(5), 348-359.
- Black, P., & William, D. (1998). Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 5(1), 7-73.
- Bloom, B. S. (1977). *Human characteristics and school learning*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Booth, D., & Rowsell, J. (2007). *The literacy principal: Leading, supporting and assessing reading and writing initiatives*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Cobb, C. (2005). Literacy teams: Sharing leadership to improve student learning. *The Reading Teacher*, 58(5), 472-474.
- Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). (2008). *Attributes of effective formative assessments* (A work product coordinated and led by Sarah McMannus, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, for the Formative Assessment for Students and Teachers [FAST] Collaborative). Washington, DC: CCSSO.
- Eisenberg, E. (2016). The path to progress: Instituting a culture of coaching this school year. *Literacy Today*, 34(1), 10-11.
- Fitzgerald, J. (1999). What is this thing called "balance"? *The Reading Teacher*, 53(2), 100-107.
- Fountas, I. C., & Pinnell, G. S. (1996). *Guided reading: Good first teaching for all children*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Frey, B. B., Lee, S. W., Tollefson, N., Pass, L., & Massengill, D. (2005). Balanced literacy in an urban school district. *Journal of Educational Research*, 98(5), 272-280.
- Fullan, M. (2007). *The new meaning of educational change* (4th ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hattie, J., (2015). *What works best in education: The politics of collaborative expertise*. London: Pearson.
- Lieberman, A. (2000). *Getting to excellent: How to create better schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Madda, C. L., Griffo, V. B., Pearson, P. D., & Raphael, T. E. (2007). Balance in comprehensive literacy instruction. In L. M. Marrow & L. Gambrell (Eds.), *Best practices in literacy instruction* (4th ed., pp. 37-67). New York: Guilford Press.

- Meidl, T., & Lau, J. (2017). Principles for elementary principals: Keys to remember when it comes to being a literacy leader. *Literacy Today*, 35(2), 24-25.
- Pearson, P. D. (2002). American reading instruction since 1967. In N. B. Smith (Ed.), *American reading instruction* (Special ed., pp. 419-486). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Policastro, M. M., Mazeski, D., & McTague, B. (2011). Creating parent libraries: Enhancing family literacy through access to books. *Illinois Reading Council Journal*, 39(1), 60-64.
- Policastro, M. M., & McTague, B. (2015). *The new balanced literacy school: Implementing Common Core*. North Mankato, MN: Maupin House by Capstone Professional.
- Policastro, M. M., McTague, B., & Mazeski, D. (2016). *Formative assessment in the new balanced literacy school*. North Mankato, MN: Maupin House by Capstone Professional.
- Shepard, L. A., Hammerness, K., Darling-Hammond, L., & Rust, F. (2005). Assessment. In L. Darling-Hammond & J. Bransford (Eds.), *Preparing teachers for a changing world: What teachers should learn and be able to do*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Tompkins, G. E. (2013). *Literacy for the 21st century: A balanced approach* (6th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- William, D. (2011). *Embedded formative assessment*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

About the Author

Margaret Mary Policastro is a professor of Language and Literacy at Roosevelt University where she directs the Language and Literacy program and is the founding director of the Summer Reading Clinic. Margaret teaches both undergraduate and graduate classes in Language and Literacy and Teaching and Learning. She has worked on grant-funded projects for more than ten years in the Chicago Public Schools and Archdiocese of Chicago.