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A First Grade Teacher's Exploration of her Students' Literacy Development

Janel M. Butlin

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A First Grade Teacher’s Exploration of her Students’ Literacy Development

By

Janel M. Butlin

August 2011

A thesis or project submitted to the
Department of Education and Human Development of
The College at Brockport, State University of New York
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Master of Science in Education
A First Grade Teacher's Exploration of her Students' Literacy Development

by

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Chapter One: Introduction

I have realized that as a teacher I have the power to influence the lives of my students on a daily basis. I taught twenty first graders, ten girls and ten boys, and I have strived to positively inspire their lives day after day, not only through teaching the curriculum, but also by teaching life lessons and morals that students can apply well beyond their first grade year. For example, the use of words such as “please” and “thank you” are expected in our room therefore promoting respect. Within my classroom I have taught curriculum using a concept-based approach so students can apply these concepts to their everyday life and understand the connectedness among content areas.

Teaching first grade was still very new to me. I taught first grade for sixteen weeks as a long term substitute during the 2009-2010 school year in the school in which I am currently teaching. I was hired back as a first grade long term substitute. Due to my limited experience with teaching in general but this grade level in particular, my curiosity and desire have driven me to be the most effective first grade teacher I can be.

For example, I have continually explored effective strategies that influence how I support my students’ emergent language and literacy abilities. I often found myself researching the work of Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell, Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis, Lucy Calkins, and Marie Clay. Although I do not limit myself to
their work, I found that it really motivated me to discover more about education, specifically literacy development.

In my studies as an undergraduate, graduate, and even through professional development opportunities, balanced literacy has been the approach that I have studied and it is the foundation in which I strive to teach my literacy instruction. A balanced approach is based on a comprehensive view of literacy that combines explicit instruction, guided practice, collaborative learning, and independent reading and writing (Tompkins, 2010). The characteristics of the balanced approach are reading, phonics, reading and writing strategies, vocabulary, comprehension, literature, content-area study, oral language, writing, and spelling (Tompkins, 2010). There is both teacher-centered and student-centered instruction, which focus on reading, writing, listening and speaking. It is fortunate for me that the school district’s philosophy encompasses a balanced literacy framework.

Each day, students in my classroom were immersed in literacy activities. Beginning the moment students entered the classroom until dismissal, literacy was in everything that we did. Upon entering our classroom students would begin their day by completing the morning routine, which involves lunch count, changing their independent reading books, giving notes or papers to me, and putting their green homework folder in their cubby. After morning routine had been completed they began morning work, which consisted of handwriting or a quick meaningful activity, such as math skills or word sorts, that reinforced what was previously learned a day or two before. Our handwriting followed the Preventing Academic Failure (PAF)
Handwriting Program. The kids loved tracing the new letters in the air and saying the lines that they need to hit. When we practiced the lower case letter d, you could hear echoing around the room of “starting point, up to the belt line, around and down to the writing line, all the way up to the hat line, straight down.” Shawn (all names are pseudonyms) remembers best by saying “you make a c to make a d.” This is his way of avoiding reversals or writing a “b.” Students began to put away their morning work in the finished basket, find a book, and grab a seat over in our library corner. When I took a look around and saw kids upon bean bags and comfy cushions, it was my signal that everyone was ready to being morning meeting.

Morning meeting is when we all gather as a group on the carpet area. Jason grabs the purple step stool to reach the month of September and move over the green highlighter sheet to cover up the 28th.

Jason: “Today is Tuesday.”
Class: “Today is Tuesday.”

Jason: “September 28th, 2010.”
Class: “September 28th, 2010.”

(Jason, moving the purple step stool aside, goes over to our days of the week pocket chart and moves around the “today,” “tomorrow,” and “yesterday” cards.)

Jason: “Yesterday was Monday.”
Class: “Yesterday was Monday.” (Some students whisper, others make high pitch
voices.)

Jason: “Today is Thursday.”

Kate: “No, no, no...check that again Jason.”

Ally: “It starts with the same letter as Thursday, but it isn’t Thursday.”

Jason: “Oh, I did say Thursday and it is not. Today is Tuesday!”

Class: “Today is Tuesday.”

Jason: “Tomorrow will be Wednesday.”

Class: “Tomorrow will be Wednesday.”

As the class claps for Jason, whose job for the week is calendar, Sophie takes to her weather job and Megan does her counting job with the help of classmates. When they finish the class turns their attention to the right of the calendar space where our whiteboard easel sits. Every morning, I write a “morning message” where words or parts of words are missing. The message is an overview of the day. As we read the message aloud, students volunteer to come up to the front, grab the marker, and fill in the blanks.

“Blue...pink...black...” I began calling out colors of our shared reading/poetry binders. Shared reading is the reading of a text by both the teacher and group of students, where the teacher models while the students observe reading strategies and behaviors in action (Tompkins, 2010). When a student’s color is called they know it is their turn to go grab their binder that is kept on a shelf in our classroom library. When students return to the carpet, they put a new poem or song in their binder. As they put their personal copy in their binder, I put a large copy of the
poem on chart paper. The song is entitled “The Addams Family Days of the Week.” Students began exploring the new song independently as they get it into their binder. There is a class conversation about the days of the week, the order in which they fall, and where they are in our song. I demonstrated the entire song aloud while pointing to the big copy on chart paper. I then scaffold the students by reading two lines followed by them reading the two lines with me. I then asked Brett to walk over to our CD player and put on song number 8. The students begin singing and snapping to the “Days of the Week” song.

Story time is anticipated daily by all students. Our author study of Kevin Henkes means that I would be reading *Chrysanthemum* (Henkes, 1996). “I read this story last year in kindergarten” says Caitlin “and I loved it!” Students then began telling me or their classmates whether or not they have read the story and their connections to it. Luke exclaimed, “This book has more mouses in it!” Roy pipes up, “they are mice, when there is more then one it is not mouses.” We read the book, stopping often for questions, connections, or comments. Following the story, we made text to text connections, connecting one book to another book, with *Chrysanthemum* and other Kevin Henkes’ books we have read such as *Owen* (1993), *Lily’s Purple Plastic Purse* (1996), and *Chester’s Way* (1997), just to name a few.

Following *Chrysanthemum*, the class directed their attention towards the literacy centers rotation which is located in a pocket chart. The heterogeneous groups rotate from computers, listening/library, ABC, guided reading, and word study, which we call red folder star center. “Yes! I can’t wait to play chicken stackers at
computer," says Jason. At computer center, students are able to pick from 10 websites listed on a Word document. As I walk towards the listening center in our classroom library I comment, “Today, at listening you will be reading *Make a Worm Farm* (McDougall, 2001) and when you finish you are reading with a buddy or independently in the library.” Luke’s hand goes up in the air. I called on him. He asked, “Do we get to touch our earthworms today during science inquiry?” I replied, “We will be discussing properties of earthworms and will be putting them into our observation chambers, but we will talk about that later Luke.” I walked over to the ABC center, located next to our word wall and magnetic letters on the white board. “You get to stamp word wall words today and if you finish early you can practice writing your spelling words on the gel bags,” I said. There are alphabet stamps available and two inks pads, red and blue. Students challenge themselves by stamping vowels red and consonants blue. Gel bags are Ziploc’s filled with hair gel so students can write, smooth, and write again with their fingers in the colored hair gel. They love the kinesthetic and sensory stimulation at ABC center. Then, I made my way over to explain red folder star center. “Since it is Tuesday, you will do partner sort and Look, Say, Cover, Write, Check with your word ring words.” At this center, the students’ focus was always around their differentiated word study and high frequency words. Word study is an alternative to traditional spelling (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnson, 2008). The focus is on learning word patterns and the relationships that exists between reading and writing (Bear et al., 2008).
Throughout the twenty minute center rotation, I met with guided reading groups, and instructed students in small groups of three to five students, with a book that presented a challenge. The book was above the students’ independent reading level and could be read with teacher guidance. I introduced reading strategies and tailored instruction to meet the needs of the students who were in the group. I have given the guided reading groups colors and when we rotated centers I called out the color group I would meet with at the rainbow shaped table. Because the guided reading activity caused students to miss a center, we had a make-up center after the four rotations. During make-up center, students were not in their typical heterogeneous groups, they were all working at the center they missed while they were doing guided reading with me. I met with a fifth guided reading group during this make up center time.

Providing heterogeneous grouping during centers allowed students to learn from one another. With a range of abilities present among the group, students could answer each other’s questions, work together, and help guide each other. Guided reading groups were catered around students’ strengths and specific areas of instructional needs. No two students learn exactly the same. It was my job as their teacher to decipher what pathways work best for what students and deliver instruction that catered to each individual’s strengths and needs.
Significance of the Problem

It is essential that I supported my first graders’ literacy development so they could achieve success, not only in school, but in life. The instruction my students received in order for them to develop as a learner would vary largely when thinking in terms of literacy. Government and politics has influenced education throughout history by implementing policies on the education system. For example, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and Reading First are policies that have had an influence on the services students receive (Allington, 2005; “IRA constant,” 2007). The full subtitle of NCLB is “An act to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind” (www.ed.gov, 2010). The Act was signed into law by President George W. Bush in January of 2002, and supports a standards-based education reform, believing that setting higher standards and measurable goals can improve educational outcomes of individuals. If a state is to receive federal funding, the state is required to develop assessments in basic skills to be given to all students in certain grades.

Reading First is the federal education program mandated under the No Child Left Behind Act and administered by the federal Department of Education. Reading first is a program that focuses on putting proven methods of early reading instruction in classrooms. According to the US Department of Education, “Through reading first, states and districts receive support to apply scientifically based reading research—and the proven instructional and assessment tools consistent with this research—to ensure that all children learn to read well by the end of third grade” (“Reading Recovery:
Basic Facts”, 2010). The International Reading Association (IRA) joined with more than two dozen other education, civil rights, children’s, disability, and citizens’ organizations in October 2004 (“Joint Organizational Statement on the No Child Left Behind Act”) in recommending changes to NCLB that included using nationally recognized evidence-based criteria to evaluate professional development programs, instructional programs, and student assessments (“IRA constant,” 2007).

With government implemented programs, results are expected to be seen eventually over time but not immediately. When the years begin to pass and no results are being seen, valuable time in a child’s education has been lost. According to Allington (2005),

NCLB and Reading First would be improved if there were less focus on programs and packages and more emphasis on the individual child who struggles with learning to read. There should be more emphasis on ensuring that such children have access to expert reading teachers who can evaluate literacy development, note the strengths and weaknesses of individuals, and then plan expert and intensive interventions that effectively address both (p. 18).

According to the National Reading Research Center (1997), characteristics of highly effective first-grade literacy teachers consist of instructional balance, instructional density, effective use of scaffolding, encouragement of self-regulation, thorough integration of reading and writing activities, masterful classroom
management, high expectations for all students, and awareness of purpose. These are characteristics that I strive to incorporate into my everyday literacy instruction.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to explore how my teaching of literacy, which I define as reading, writing, listening, and speaking, through a balanced literacy framework impacted my students' development. I wanted to further develop and enhance my understanding of what is possible using literacy instruction grounded in a balanced literacy framework. Specifically, I would address the research question: How does my work as a first grade teacher influence my students’ literacy development?

To answer the question, I recorded my daily reflections and observations in a research journal. In a separate journal, I documented my students’ reactions to and interactions with the various balanced literacy activities. The journals allowed me to see and track what I did on a daily basis and how my teaching and decisions impacted my students’ development. I completed journal entries at the end of each school day for six consecutive weeks. I gathered a collection of artifacts, anecdotal records, and observations across the six week timeframe.

During the six week study, I implemented new strategies and activities in order to document both my students’ and my own reactions to the strategies and activities. Strategies and activities that I integrated into my instruction include daily
singing and writing of songs, new and improved literacy centers based on best practices and input from veteran teachers, a new approach on shared reading, and the use of graphic organizers and post it notes to enrich understanding of non-fiction books.

**Rationale of the Study**

My first graders learned literacy in different ways. It was my job to determine how to best meet the individual needs of my students in teaching literacy. Capitalizing on each student’s strengths allowed me to accelerate his or her learning. By documenting and then exploring the daily decisions that I made and the effects they had on my students, I would be able to better understand what instructional approaches have positive impacts and are worthwhile for students’ literacy development.

**Summary**

A balanced approach in literacy instruction is based on a comprehensive view of literacy that combines explicit instruction, guided practice, collaborative learning, and independent reading and writing (Tompkins, 2010). Bitter et al. (2009) state, “literacy is the foundation for success in school and, in today’s society, for success in life” (p. 17). As a first grade teacher, I wanted to provide the best learning environment for my students and I was motivated to explore effective strategies that would enhance how I helped my students develop their literacy abilities.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Reading, writing, listening, and speaking are an integral part of a child’s literacy development. Teachers may approach literacy instruction using multiple components, approaches, groups, and environments. Providing students with opportunities to connect reading and writing across the curriculum gives real world meaning to the processes. In this chapter, I explored the components of a balanced literacy framework, ways for teachers to promote independence, other effective literacy strategies, and ways to formally and informally assess literacy.

Balanced Literacy

The term balanced literacy instruction has numerous definitions; it is often characterized in a comprehensive and complex way. For example, Duffy (2010) defines balanced literacy instruction as an “eclectic, modifiable, research-based approach to language arts instruction that is designed to address students' needs and strengths through the teacher's principled provision of explicit instruction in conjunction with predominantly uncontrived reading and writing experiences” (p. 69). Common among definitions of balanced literacy is the idea that reading and writing achievement is developed through instruction and support in multiple environments and in numerous approaches, all varied in teacher support and student control (Bitter, Gubbins, ODay, & Socias, 2009; Duffy, 2010; Frey, Lee, Tollefson, Pass, & Massengill, 2005). According to Harvey and Goudvis (2005), an active
literacy classroom bursts with joyful, enthusiastic learning. Reading, writing, listening, and investigating are the cornerstones of active literacy. Active literacy is the means to deeper understanding and diverse, flexible thinking in a teacher’s approach to teaching and learning (Harvey & Goudvis, 2005).

**Components of Balanced Literacy**

Literacy components within a balanced program often consist of guided reading, interactive read-alouds, shared reading, shared and interactive writing, independent reading and writing, and literacy centers (Bitter et al., 2009; Dorn & Soffos, 2001; Duffy, 2010; Fountas & Pinnell, 2007; Frey et al., 2005).

**Guided Reading**

Guided reading allows teachers to meet the diverse needs of students in a more intimate setting, providing explicit modeling, prompting, and instruction (Ferguson & Wilson, 2009; Fisher, 2008; Ford & Opitz, 2008; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). During guided reading, the teacher works with a small group of children to help them develop effective reading strategies. Through Fountas and Pinnell’s (2005) continued efforts, guided reading continues to be considered a best practice in general education classrooms (Ferguson & Wilson, 2009). The goal of this important best practice associated with today’s balanced literacy instruction is to “develop a self-extending system of reading that enables the reader to discover more about the process of reading while reading” (Iaquinta, 2006, p.414).
According to Fountas and Pinnell (2005), there are six basic components to guided reading: (1) introducing the text, (2) supporting effective reading, (3) discussing and revisiting the text, (4) teaching for processing strategies, (5) extending the meaning of the text (optional), and (6) working with words (optional). All of these components should encompass one purpose or focal point during a guided reading lesson (Opitz & Ford, 2001).

**Shared Reading and Interactive Read-alouds**

Shared reading usually refers to students’ reading from a common enlarged text, such as a large-print book, a chart, or a projected text (Fountas & Pinnell, 2007). Individuals may have their own copies. The teacher is the leader, pointing to the words or phrases for students to follow. This experience provides for a range of guided experiences that promote children’s problem-solving strategies at both the text and word levels (Dorn & Soffos, 2001). Teachers draw students’ attention to concepts about print, comprehension, and interesting words and sentences during the next couple of shared reading experiences (Tompkins, 2010). Another way to share books with students is through interactive read-alouds. The focus is put on enhancing students’ comprehension by engaging them in the reading process before, during, and after reading (Tompkins, 2010). According to Fountas and Pinnell (2007), the listener is freed from decoding and is supported by the oral reader’s fluency, phrasing, and stress—all elements of what we call expression. The scene is set for a high level of comprehending or thinking together through a text. More opportunities are provided
during interactive read-alouds for individuals to engage in more talk than would otherwise be possible in a whole-group discussion.

**Shared and Interactive Writing**

Just as shared and interactive reading occurs in a balanced program, shared and interactive writing also occurs. In shared writing, the teacher and students compose a text together with the teacher as the scribe (Fountas & Pinnell, 2007). As students contribute each word of the composition, it is reread many times. Creating the writing becomes a model, example, or reference for student writing and discussion. In comparison, interactive writing is identical to and proceeds the same way as shared writing, with the exception that the students come to the easel and contribute a letter, word, or part of a word (Fountas & Pinnell, 2007).

**Independent Reading and Writing**

Students must be provided the opportunity to apply what they have learned through shared and interactive experiences of reading and writing at an independent level. They apply the strategies and skills they’ve learned in authentic literacy activities during their independent work time (Tompkins, 2010). During independent reading, students may choose their own books and work at their own pace as they read and respond to the book. Similarly, during independent writing, students choose their own topics and move at their own pace as they develop and refine their writing
Providing independent work time strives to develop lifelong readers and writers.

**Promoting Independence**

*Gradual Release of Responsibility*

Within the balanced literacy model, high levels of scaffolded instruction are designed to foster the gradual release of responsibility from teachers to students, moving from structured modeling, through read-alouds, shared reading and writing, to scaffolded support, through guided reading and interactive writing, to independence of individual work (Bitter et al., 2009). Harvey and Goudvis (2005) describe the gradual release of responsibility as explicit instruction in which the teacher does modeling and guided practice, and then students are invited to try the technique on their own through collaborative practice, independent practice, and application. Therefore, instruction gradually moves from teacher-centered to student-centered where students apply what they have learned independently.

*Responsive Teaching*

Researchers have found that within a balanced approach, a teacher’s implementation of responsive teaching can be beneficial (Duffy, 2010; Harvey & Goudvis, 2005). Responsive teachers, according to Harvey and Goudvis (2005), are ones who continuously watch, listen, keep track of, and document students’ learning,
stepping in with additional support when deemed necessary; pulling back and letting students take the lead when they show they know how to. According to Duffy (2010), responsive teaching is scaffolded instruction in which the teacher is constantly adapting the attempts to improve, based on the ongoing assessments and observations of the needs and development of his or her students. Scaffolding occurs when the expert provides supports that are constantly adjusted to accommodate the learner’s acquired skills (Dorn & Soffos, 2001). For example, Dorn and Soffos (2001) discuss scaffolding first grade students in the revision process. The teacher begins by introducing the task and involving the children in the goal: how to revise a story by adding detail. Immediately following the goal setting, the teacher reads a strong example written by another student. The teacher then keeps the interaction focused on the task of learning how to revise. Questions and details are clarified and teacher prompts direct the students’ line of thinking. The teacher keeps the children involved and praises for appropriate responses and motivates them to add interesting details in revisiting the story. At this point in time, the teacher marks critical discrepancies between what the children have produced and the ideal situation. The teacher uses explicit and responsive language to control frustration and risk in problem solving to ensure that students understand the task of revision. At last, the teacher demonstrates an ideal version of the act to be performed by rereading the finished version of the revised text. The teacher acknowledges the students’ work as a good model that can be used to show others how to revise a text (Dorn & Soffos, 2001).
Duffy (2010) found that responsive teaching goes beyond simply meeting students' cognitive needs, it requires the emotional needs be met, which in turn supports academic progress in reading. Educators can use shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, and read alouds daily. However, if students do not have their emotional needs met, they may not grow academically as students. As Triplett (1999) concluded: "Students are more apt to take risks in literacy learning when they feel safe and valued.... Being responsive to young literacy learners requires that we know and value students as unique individuals" (as cited in Duffy, 2010, p. 23). Therefore, responsive teachers adjust their instruction based on the individual signals— emotional, social, behavioral, or academic, from their students.

**Higher Order Thinking**

McDonald-Connor, Morrison, and Petrella (2004) found there was significant variability among classrooms in the total amount of language arts instruction provided, varying from 15 to more than 160 minutes per day. Seventy-three third-grade children participated in McDonald-Connor et al. (2004) study. The third graders were between eight and nine years old at the beginning of their third grade school year. Forty-six percent of the participants were girls. The parental educational level ranged from three years to twenty-three years, and twenty five percent belonged to ethnic minorities, primarily African American. Overall, African American student participants entered third grade with lower vocabulary, word recognition, and reading comprehension scores than did the European American students. Moreover, African
American students’ parents had fewer years of education (12.19 years) compared with parents of European American students (17.43 years).

McDonald-Conner et al. (2004) showed on average that teachers provided 90 to 100 minutes of total language arts instruction per day, with the type of instruction varying significantly. In general, classroom instruction was dominated by child-managed higher order language arts activities. The researchers defined child-managed activities as sustained silent reading, independent writing, and completing worksheets. Higher order instruction was defined as instruction with meaning based for example, reading comprehension and vocabulary. Explicit reading comprehension instructional activities are those activities that focus the child’s attention explicitly on the extraction and construction of meaning from text. Implicit reading comprehension activities are reading activities that do not focus openly on components of reading comprehension. On average, teachers provided approximately 50 minutes per day of child-managed implicit higher order instructional activities (McDonald-Conner et al., 2004).

According to Bitter, Gubbins, ODay, and Socias (2009), teachers’ instructional goals within a balanced program are most often focused on higher-level comprehension skills such as identifying major themes in the text, understanding points of view within a text, or understanding character. Bitter et al. (2009) conducted an intensive longitudinal classroom observation study of kindergarten through grade five across two years in order to measure elementary literacy instruction in San Diego public schools. The researchers developed nine intensive case studies within the
schools. The case studies included primarily high poverty schools and had relatively large percentages of English Language Learners. The higher-level comprehension skills were found to be beneficial because the results of the study showed that questioning and discussions related to higher-level meaning of text were positively associated with student reading achievement (Bitter et al., 2009). Teachers who asked students to engage in higher-level interpretations and applications of text, to use evidence from the text to support their ideas and respond to one another, and to create their own meaningful text through writing, showed higher levels of reading comprehension on average than students where these practices were less common (Bitter et al., 2009). Teachers’ use of higher-level questioning and discussions, which requires that students to go beyond what the author has explicitly written to interpret or apply the text’s meaning, during reading instruction is positively associated with student reading achievement (Bitter et al. 2009).

**Student Grouping and Teacher Decisions**

Teachers face the challenges of meeting the diverse needs of students. Deciding how to form groups for reading instruction is often a puzzle for teachers in the elementary grades (Frey et al., 2005; Wolsey et al., 2010). Teachers must rely on different grouping approaches to meet such varied needs. Primarily, teachers use three grouping patterns: sometimes students work together as a whole class, and at other times, they work in small groups or individually (Tompkins, 2010). Wolsey, Lapp, and Dow (2010) found teachers often use groups and various reading
modalities such as independent reading and guided reading to meet the needs of students with differing needs. In their study, they described current reading practices of teachers in a large, western metropolitan area. Survey research was used to determine how teachers report their use of oral reading, reading in groups, reading as homework, and reading silently in elementary classes at the primary and upper-grade levels. Literacy task formats used in elementary classrooms consist of shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, buddy reading, reading in small groups, and reading aloud to students (Wolsey et al., 2010). These were combined with small-group, large-group, whole-class, and independent reading formats (Wolsey et al., 2010). Wolsey et al. (2010) found that primary grade teachers preferred to assign students to read with small groups of students, whereas upper elementary grade teachers preferred students read with a partner. Primary grade teachers were least likely to assign reading of text as homework. In relation to read-alouds, Wosley et al. (2010) also found that the most common approach among primary teachers was to read with the student following along, as opposed to taking turns, listen but not follow along, or using audio with students to follow. Teachers in this study recognized the value of small groups and partner work as well as the value of working on literacy tasks in class (Wosley et al., 2010).

Guided reading allows teachers to meet the diverse needs of students in a more intimate setting, providing explicit modeling, prompting, and instruction (Ferguson & Wilson, 2009; Fisher, 2008; Ford & Opitz, 2008). Ford and Opitz (2008) found that on average, teachers used four small groups to conduct guided
reading with a predominantly homogenous grouping. The small groups consisted of three to six children. Teacher participants were asked which of the following best described how they would define the primary purpose of guided reading: (1) provide demonstrations of skills, strategies, responses, and/or procedures; (2) provide interventions around scaffolded instruction for students; (3) facilitate a group response between students around a shared text; or (4) facilitate a group response between students around multiple texts. Ford and Opitz (2008) survey results revealed two-thirds of the teachers identified demonstrations as the primary focus of guided reading. Eighteen percent of the teachers identified scaffolded instruction as the key purpose of guided reading. The remaining teachers saw facilitation of response to a shared text (12%) and across multiple texts (3%) as the primary focus.

According to Ferguson and Wilson (2009), primary teachers (K-2) practice guided reading more frequently than upper elementary teachers (3-5). Reasons that teachers in upper grades gave for not implementing guided reading were the lack of time in the school day, students not being self-directed during centers, and teachers simply cannot fit the large block of time into the schedule (Ferguson & Wilson, 2009). Teachers’ exposure to and training in guided reading, may impact their decision to use the approach with their students (Ferguson & Wilson, 2009; Fisher, 2008). Ferguson and Wilson (2009) found that of the 40 teacher participants in their study, 21 had received guided reading training of some kind at the college level. Thirty three had participated in staff development sessions, and eight teachers indicated that they had completed a self-study on guided reading while reading
different professional books. Due to a lack of knowledge, as opposed to pedagogy, teachers were not aware of strategies such as reciprocal teaching for developing comprehension, and thus failed to capitalize on the opportunity offered by guided reading instruction (Fisher, 2008).

The purpose of guided reading can vary from teacher to teacher. Ford and Opitz (2008) conducted a national survey to answer their research question “What do we really know about what teachers’ understand and do in their efforts to implement guided reading?” After identifying a list of nine common understandings of guided reading they compiled a questionnaire. The survey was created and sent to a list of three thousand teachers randomly selected from two sources: 1500 names from a customer list of a publishing company which markets guided reading materials and 1500 names from a list of educators from an educational data firm. Both matched lists had equal representation by grade level (kindergarten through second). Ford and Opitz’s (2008) survey results found demonstrations of skills, strategies, responses and/or procedures to be the number one focus for guided reading groups. The second largest identified reason Ford and Opitz (2008) found was to provide interventions around scaffolded instruction for students. Fisher (2008) conducted a study done on a radically smaller scale compared to Ford and Optiz (2008) because it consisted of three case studies of teachers in grades two, four, and six. In contrast to the findings of Ford and Optiz (2008), Fisher (2008) found that teachers sought guided reading as an opportunity to hear children read, particularly the children with more reading needs. Rather than analyzing how meaning was created by students, teaching
appropriate strategies to enhance personal, analytical and critical response, teachers in the study spent three-quarters of their teaching time listening to students read (Fisher, 2008). Hobsbaum, Gamble, and Reedy (as cited in Fisher, 2008, p. 25) state that “hearing children read individually is necessary when recording their behaviors and analyzing their skills, but it is not a way of teaching”. During guided reading, teachers should take advantage of the actual act of guiding student instruction.

**Reciprocal Teaching**

Reciprocal teaching is a complex cognitive and metacognitive strategy. Sporer, Brunstein, and Kieschle (2008) explain the instructional procedure for reciprocal teaching as consisting of scaffolded instruction composed of four comprehension-fostering and comprehension-monitoring strategies. The four strategies consist of: (1) generating one’s own questions (2) summarizing parts of the text (3) clarifying word meanings and confusing text passages (4) predicting what might come next in the text (Sporer et al., 2008). The study describes reciprocal teaching as a teacher or student who models the use of the strategies, provides conditional knowledge about strategy use, and helps students to apply a strategy to a passage. As the students in the group become more familiar with the strategies and the procedure, dialogue leaders fade their involvement and other students take turns as discussion leaders (Sporer et al., 2008). By applying the strategies in a group process, especially less able
students can learn from their more knowledgeable peers. Sporer, Brunstein and Kiechle found that students who practiced reading strategies such as summarizing, questioning, and predicting, in reciprocal small group activities benefited the most in, both, the short and long run. Data collected from the study showed reciprocal teaching, where a student was acting as teacher, for summarizing had a pre-test mean score of 1.45, a post test mean score 2.40, and a follow up test mean score of 2.52. Whereas, the instructor-guided reading pre test mean score was 1.63, the post test mean score was 2.62, and the follow up test mean score was 2.48. Sporer et al. (2008) found that teachers, who know and use the strategy of reciprocal teaching and apply it within small groups, maximize the reading comprehension and growth of their students.

**Differentiated Instruction**

Just as students need a variety of ways to represent their understandings and make meaning, teachers need to have variations on differentiated instruction. Tomlinson (2000) defines differentiated instruction as the efforts of teachers to respond to variance among learners in the classroom. Whenever a teacher reaches out to an individual or small group to vary their teaching in order to create the best learning experience possible, then differentiation has occurred (Tomlinson, 2000). According to Fountas and Pinnell (2005), one size does not fit all. Teachers need to consider how instruction, materials, and assessments can be adapted to students with varying reading proficiencies, learning styles, and language backgrounds (Fountas &
Pinnell, 2005). Differentiated instruction has been shown to help students understand and apply concepts and processes to their literacy learning (Tobin & McInnes, 2008).

Differentiated instruction is not a grouping technique in itself, but a means of supporting students in addition to grouping. According to Tobin and McInnes (2008), teachers who apply differentiated instruction within any grouping format are acting as responsive teachers. Ten teachers participated in their study, all of which were initiating differentiated instruction taught within grade 2/3 mixed classrooms. The researchers provided two, three hour workshops to ensure that all participants had some level of common involvement with key principals and practices of working with academic diversity. Tobin and McInnes (2008) gathered their data via observational field notes, video recordings, and audio recordings of interviews with the teachers, and collections of student assignments, and literacy center materials, whenever possible. There were three forty-five minute visits to each classroom and two of the visits were followed by an interview with the teacher. Each interview ran for approximately thirty minutes and was guided by a semi-structured interview protocol. Tobin and McInnes (2008) found that struggling students who were provided additional scaffolding through options of tiered work products, expert tutoring, and additional supports benefited compared to those students who were not. Teachers’ use of differentiated instruction provides opportunities for students to work independently and with others on authentic literacy tasks, and provides explicit instruction for students on reading and writing strategies, and creating a motivating and supportive literacy environment.
Other Effective Literacy Strategies

Think Alouds

When teachers model how they read themselves, they share their struggles as well as their successes, peeling back the layers of their thinking and showing students how they approach text and how understanding happens (Harvey & Goudvis, 2005). According to Davey (1983) the detailed process of making in the head thinking public is referred to as a “think aloud” (as cited in Harvey & Goudvis, 2005). Think alouds “remove the cloak of mystery surrounding the comprehension process” (Harvey & Goudvis, 2005, p. 13), allowing for the verbalized thoughts teachers have as they read, making the process concrete for students (Harvey & Goudvis, 2005). When teachers make their thinking explicit, their demonstrating what capable readers do implicitly (Keene & Zimmerman, 2007). As students learn to think aloud, they respond to the text, identify big ideas, ask self-questions, make connections, figure out how to solve problems that arise, and reflect on their own use of strategies (Harvey & Goudvis, 2005; Tompkins, 2010). Once students know how to think aloud, teacher can use this procedure as an assessment tool (Tompkins, 2010).

Text Coding

Codes can be used as a shorthand way to capture essential information (Harvey & Goudvis, 2005). Tracking thinking can be done directly on the text, a Post-it, or in a notebook. Students can record their questions, confusions, or thoughts,
highlight or underline important information, circle unfamiliar words, or star something they want to remember (Harvey & Goudvis, 2005). Codes can be created as a class or individual students can create their own. Examples that Harvey & Goudvis (2005) use, but are not limited to; R= it reminds me of, T-S= text to self connection, T-T= text to text connection, and BK= background knowledge. The written codes and responses record student thinking, allowing for readers to remember what was going on in their minds for later discussion and application. Students can place their sticky notes in their reading notebooks, even by sorting them into categories (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). Such strategies are useful for assessment and planning purposes.

**Anchor Charts**

Anchor charts record student thinking about a text, lesson, or strategy so that they can return to it to remember the process (Harvey & Goudvis, 2005). Such charts allow students to revisit processes and connect past teaching and learning to future teaching and learning. According to Harvey and Goudvis (2005) there are four different kinds of anchor charts: strategy charts, process charts, content charts, and genre charts. Strategy charts record students’ questions, inferences, and connections. Process charts allow students to share their insights about particular strategies. Content charts record the interesting and important content-based information that students discover during a content-area study. Genre charts allow students to weigh in
on the ways they read and understand different genres, allowing the teacher to capture
their thoughts in writing (Harvey & Goudvis, 2005).

**Word Study**

According to Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, and Johnston (2008),
becoming fully literate is absolutely dependent on fast, accurate
recognition of words and their meanings in texts, and fast, accurate
production of words in writing so that readers and writers can focus
their attention on making meaning. (p. 3)

The most effective instruction in phonics, spelling, and vocabulary links word study
to the texts being read, provides a systematic scope and sequence of word-level skills,
and provides multiple opportunities for hands-on practice and application (Bear et al.,
2008). Bear et al. (2009) believes word study is well worth ten to fifteen minutes of
instruction and practice daily. Using word and picture sorts allows students to focus
on the conceptual and phonological features of words and identify reoccurring
patterns (Tompkins, 2010). The teacher chooses categories for words sorts, depending
on the instructional goals or students’ developmental level.

**Literacy Assessments**

According to Harvey and Goudvis (2005), “assessment is a continuous
operation that is at the heart of teaching and learning” (p. 43). Teachers must be able
to assess literacy behaviors as they relate to developmental changes over time and
across literacy tasks (Dorn & Soffos, 2001). Fountas and Pinnell (2007) recognize that assessments are a means for gathering information or data that reveals what learners control, partially control, or do not yet control. Literacy assessments can be classified into two categories: formal and informal.

**Formal Assessments**

Formal assessments for reading and writing occur at significant intervals in a child’s literacy instruction. Often times, formal assessments are used to determine appropriate placement, during parent teacher conferences, and literacy team meetings to illustrate a students’ progress over time (Dorn & Soffos, 2001).

**Running Records**

Running records, a tool created by Marie Clay, are used by educators to document a child’s reading of a text (Johnson, 2006). It allows the teacher insight into students phrasing and fluency, comprehension, and use of effective strategies. According to Mere (2005), running records over time trace progress and patterns that lead to responsive teaching decisions. Analyzing the accuracy rates indicate whether the chosen text was appropriate for the child. Self correction rates show the proportion of errors the child corrected in relation to the total number of errors the child made. Although accuracy and self correction rates give teachers some insight, further analysis is necessary. Scores alone do not tell the whole story (Johnson, 2006). In further analysis teachers breakdown the three sources of information which,
according to Marie Clay (2005), are semantic, syntactic, and graphophonemic. Goodman has labeled his approach to error interpretation as “miscue analysis”. This is a particularly apt term because every error, or miscue, uses some set of cues and ignores others (Schwartz, 2005). All three curing systems are necessary to become a skilled reader (Iaquinta, 2006). Schwarts (2005) found that focusing on the strengths reflected in the student’s errors lets educators build on what the student can do and focus our teaching decisions to extend that processing system. Another formal way for teachers to analyze the visual strategies used by emergent and early readers as they problem solve on continuous text is with reading checklists (Dorn & Soffos, 2001). Retelling guides and comprehension prompts provide teachers with reliable measures for assessing students’ comprehension (Dorn & Soffos, 2001).

**Checklists**

Checklists are not only used to assess reading, but also used in assessing writing. The standard tool allows for analyzing students’ writing samples based on a processing continuum, including analysis of print-sound control and the writing process (Dorn & Soffos, 2001). Rubrics are scoring guides that teachers use to assess student’s independent use of strategies while writing (Dorn & Soffos, 2001; Spandel, 2005). Rubric guides usually have 4, 5, or 6 levels, ranging from high to low, and assessment criteria are described at each level (Tompkins, 2010). Specific behaviors are listed within a rubric which demonstrates proficiency along a writing continuum.
Students receive rubrics as they begin their writing so they understand what is expected and how they will be assessed.

**Informal Assessments**

Informal literacy assessments occur daily throughout literacy lessons and activities. In general, informal assessments are used to inform the teacher’s daily decisions regarding student’s reading and writing processes (Dorn & Soffos, 2001). Teachers’ notes are written in logs or journals to reference. Reading observation logs provide teachers with ongoing documentation of students processing on a variety of tasks. Such tasks include running records, comprehension questions, discussions about books, and reading conferences (Dorn & Soffos, 2001). Other informal assessments include, but are not limited to, reader response notebooks, snippets of conversation, books chosen for reading, and conversations with peers because they all provide important insight into the students’ literate strategies, behaviors, and decisions (Mere, 2005). Students’ writing portfolios and writing notebooks provide teachers with ongoing documentation of writing development (Dorn & Soffos, 2001). Other informal assessments include snippets of conversation, books chosen for reading, and conversations with peers because they all provide important insight (Mere, 2005). The teacher’s observations also play a valuable role in assessing students throughout literacy activities. Observations also help teachers make powerful teaching points after lessons and prepare for the next lesson (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).
Summary

Balanced literacy is a way to meet the various needs of learners. Bitter et al. (2009) states “literacy is the foundation for success in school and, in today’s society, for success in life” (p. 17). Students do not fall under a “one size fits all” approach to teaching or learning. There are several components to a balanced literacy instructional framework. Multiple approaches and environments benefit students with varying needs. Balanced literacy does not look the same within every classroom; it varies based on the instructional approach/beliefs of the teacher and/or school district. Through continual assessment of literacy, whether formal or informal, teachers are able to make decisions to guide their future instruction. Teachers, who are responsive to their students’ abilities, gradually release responsibility, and differentiate across the curriculum in a balanced way, can provide students with a solid literacy foundation.
Chapter Three: Methods

I designed this study to explore how my teaching impacts my first grade students’ literacy development. The methods I describe in this chapter are based on the research question: How do the instructional choices and decisions I make influence my first grade students’ literacy development?

Participants and Research Environment

This study took place in my first grade classroom in a suburban, middle class, public elementary school located in western New York. The school district services pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade. There are 4,560 students currently enrolled in the school district, and of those 1,059 are enrolled in the elementary school in which the study will take place.

During the study, there were twenty students (ten females and ten males) in my class. All of the twenty students were White. All of the participants were from low to middle-income families. Of the twenty students, two received reduced lunch and one received free lunch. English was the first language of all students in the entire class. Two students received Reading Recovery, a highly effective short-term intervention of one-to-one tutoring for low-achieving first graders. The intervention is most effective when it is available to all students who need it and is used as a supplement to good classroom teaching. Individual students received a half-hour lesson each school day for 12 to 20 weeks with a specially trained Reading Recovery
teacher. As soon as students could meet grade-level expectations and demonstrate that they could continue to work independently in the classroom, their lessons were discontinued, and new students began individual instruction (Reading Recovery Council of North America). One student received speech articulation two times a week for thirty minutes each. The same student also had thirty minutes per week of occupational therapy. Two students received counseling group, one for changing families (divorce, death, etc.) and the other for making friends. There was a literacy specialist who came into my classroom three times a week for thirty minutes to help students with writing support. This teacher worked with five students specifically. The majority of the students, fifteen out of twenty, were on grade level cognitively. The students who were below grade level received the services I discussed above—Reading Recovery, speech—in order to help them develop.

Each day, participants were emerged in authentic literacy activities in the classroom. Guided reading, as defined by Fountas and Pinnell (1996), is a small group, student centered instructional approach that targets individual development of effective strategies for processing texts. In our classroom, guided reading took place during reader’s workshop. Reader’s workshop is an approach in which students read self-selected texts independently, this occurs within a centers approach. During guided reading, I observed individual students as they read aloud and I recorded information to analyze their reading on a running record (Clay, 2000). From this running record I could calculate the percentage of words the student read correctly and then analyze the miscues or errors. Centers included small groups of students
working together at the computers, listening to a book on tape, making words with
magnetic letters, sand, shaving cream, or hair gel, reading around the room, word wall
games, or reading independently or with a buddy in the classroom library with self
selected texts. In shared reading, children participated in reading, learned critical
concepts of how print works, got the feel of learning and began to perceive
themselves as readers (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Teachers read the book aloud,
modeling fluent reading, and then they read the book or poem again and again for
several days. The first reading is focused on student enjoyment. Attention is directed
to concepts about print, comprehension, and interesting words and sentences during
the next couple of readings. Students focused on decoding particular words during the
last reading or two. Teachers use shared reading to read authentic literature—stories,
informational books, and poems—with students who couldn’t read those books
independently (Holdaway, 1979). Word study is part of student centers. Students used
word sorts to examine and categorize words according to their meanings, sound-
symbol correspondence, or spelling patterns (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, &
Johnston, 2008). The purpose of word sorts was to help the students focus on
conceptual and phonological features of words and identify recurring patterns.

My Positionality as the Researcher

I am currently enrolled in my second year of graduate studies for a master’s
degree in childhood literacy at The College at Brockport, State University of New
York. Prior to beginning my graduate work, I received two New York State initial
teaching certificates from my undergraduate studies: elementary education grades 1-6 and students with disabilities grades 1-6. I completed two successful student teaching experiences, one in a culturally diverse urban area and the other in a rural school district. Prior to becoming a first grade teacher, I was a substitute teacher for approximately five months in three school districts in western New York. I held a long term substitute position from February 2010 until June 2010 in first grade. I was hired back at the same district as a long term substitute in first grade and have been with the study participants since September 2010. I grew up and attended school at the same district I am currently employed.

Procedures of Study

I conducted this study during the 2010-2011 school year. The study began on December 6, 2010 and concluded February 18, 2011. I began my research by asking the twenty participants and their parents/guardians for informed consent (see Appendix A & B). Once the permission was received, I performed a pre-assessment for reading, based on the Developmental Reading Assessment, second edition (DRA2), (Beaver, 2006). The DRA2 is designed to measure accuracy, fluency, and comprehension (see Appendix C). Using the DRA2 as a pre-test allowed me to determine my students’ instructional needs with the completed continuum. Based on those needs, I created a plan documenting what each student needs to learn next with
the focus for instruction section. The continuum used to determine the focus for instruction was part of the DRA2. The DRA2 is a district wide assessment tool.

Once I completed the pre-test assessment for all students, I used the information to differentiate instruction and create instructional groups. I conducted the differentiated instruction during shared reading, guided reading, read aloud, reader's workshop, writer's workshop, and word study. I taught students in multiple settings: small group, one on one, whole class, heterogeneous and homogeneous groups.

Throughout the six week study I explored the use of music in the classroom. I knew from introducing songs previously with my students, they responded really well and enjoyed the musical aspect. I wanted to see how incorporating songs and singing on a daily basis would affect students reading and writing. Some activities that I tried were reading songs together, making up new songs to familiar jingles, and writing completely new songs with a made up tune. I also used songs in correspondence to social studies and science curriculum to see if the concepts were better understood and could be carried across the curriculum. For example, singing previously made songs about earthworms or making up our own as a class.

Another area I investigated was the genre of non-fiction. It was used within my guided reading groups and students were familiar with the layout and features. However, I wanted students to become more able to use non-fiction books as a resource more independently. I established this through the use of graphic organizers, post-it notes, and discussions.
I completed daily logs in my observation and reflection journal on the students’ reactions to and experiences with the day’s literacy activities. I completed running records of students reading throughout the study in order to track student’s growth and drive my teaching. I regularly looked throughout my teacher journal to analyze my data. I also continually analyzed student’s work samples throughout the six weeks to notice change or patterns over time. At the end of the six weeks I administered the post-test to each student. Throughout the six-week study, I analyzed all of the various data sources to learn more about how the students were reacting and responding to the choices I was making.

**Data Collection**

I utilized several data collection techniques to determine how teaching literacy instruction impacts my students’ literacy development. I gathered input based on my observations, running records, student work samples, Developmental Reading Assessments, second edition (pre and post assessment), and teacher research journal.

**Pre and Post Test**

I administered a pre-assessment and post-assessment to students to assess the effectiveness of my literacy instruction. I administered the Developmental Reading Assessment 2 (DRA2) to students prior to the start of the study. The pre-assessment (DRA2) assessed each child’s independent, instructional and frustration level for
reading. I individually assessed each student, through the use of running records on the selected passage, marking miscues (reading a word different from what is on the page) and recording their comprehension questions and answers, along with charting the fluency rubric (from a scale of 1-4 students are rated on their intonation, inflection, phrasing and pacing). I did not give students feedback whether positive or negative due to their miscues. Using the same assessment tool at the end of the study allowed me to compare the results of the pre-assessment with the post assessment.

**Whole/small/individual Reflection**

Throughout the study, I asked participants to voice their thoughts and opinions about the strategies and activities I implemented. Participants were asked to reflect either whole group, small group, or individually. Due to the writing ability of a first grader, I allowed the participant to choose if they would like to write their reflection or orally tell me and I would script what they said. Gaining insight into the participants’ reflections gave me a richer picture of what was happening during the study.

**Student Work Samples**

I collected samples of student work throughout the research study. Samples included word study sorts, spelling tests, writing samples, reading responses, and any other pieces of work that were valuable. Through the collection of such work, I was
able to compare student work across the three month time period in order to notice any changes and/or patterns.

**Teacher Research Journal**

I kept a teacher journal where I recorded my daily observations and reflections. This tool allowed me to capture moments in time in a nonjudgmental or bias way. I captured key understandings of the day and reflected on instruction and assessments that worked, while also reflecting on what needed improvement. The teacher research journal allowed for constant data collection which provided information that I could reflect back on viewing patterns if any and whether or not the study has successful moments. In addition to my teacher journal, I kept a separate log for students. The journals focused on reactions to the strategies and activities that were implemented across the three month study.

**Data Analysis**

First, I administered the pre-test to all twenty students. I scored them and kept them to compare to the post test. After determining students’ strengths and needs, I set instructional teaching points for students. For example, I would ask myself if they need to strengthen their fluency, comprehension, writing, etc. I picked instructional strategies and activities to implement based on students’ needs. In my teacher research journal I recorded how the lessons went, what observations I saw, and students’ learning/behaviors. Documenting reactions to the implemented strategies
and activities allowed me to read and re-read my teacher journal. With all of the documented information written in my journal on a daily basis, I needed a systematic way to analyze all of the data. I determined themes or patterns with a color coding system. Different colored post-it flags were assigned to categories, themes and/or patterns as they emerged. This allowed me to visually locate information based on the coding system I have created quickly. I also collected student work samples. The student work samples were viewed in comparison with the corresponding journal entries. I then compared what patterns or themes arose among student work samples with the observations and reactions recorded in my teacher journal.

**Criteria for Trustworthiness**

My study procedure entailed multiple uses of data collection, such as observations, anecdotal records, running records, work samples, and a teacher research journal which allowed for triangulation of data to ensure validity. In addition, I made many daily observations which allowed for patterns to be analyzed through the data collection process. Persistent observations occurred over the three month study. I made observations multiple times per day and interview participants at least three times per week. The participants and research context are included, allowing for transferability. I took every precaution to list the facts in a nonjudgmental way and to not let my personal and professional connections influence the data collection and analysis.
Limitations

Portions of this research study were dependent on my own observations made within the classroom environment. Knowing I was conducting research, I was as observant as possible. However, I was limited by what I witnessed first hand with my participants. This study is limited by the demographics of the participants. Another limitation is the number of participants in the study. Also, the study is three months long, providing a limited amount of data to be collected and analyzed. Conducting research over the three month period is a limitation due to the dependence on the students’ cooperation, attendance and behavioral situations. Whereas a research study performed over a longer time period would allow for more patterns and results. These are the limitations that need to be taken into account when viewing the findings of this study.
Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of my study was to determine how the choices and decisions I made, in terms of my literacy instruction, influenced my first grade students’ literacy development. Throughout the course of the six-week study, I implemented assessments, reflections, and instruction based on balanced literacy research (Bitter, Gubbins, ODay, & Socias, 2009; Diller, 2003; Dorn & Soffos, 2001; Duffy, 2010; Fountas & Pinnell, 2007; Frey, Lee, Tollefson, Pass, & Massengill, 2005; Richardson, 2009). Literacy components within a balanced literacy program often consist of guided reading, interactive read-alouds, shared reading, shared and interactive writing, independent reading and writing, and literacy centers (Bitter et al., 2009; Diller, 2003; Dorn & Soffos, 2001; Duffy, 2010; Fountas & Pinnell, 2007; Frey et al., 2005, Richardson, 2009). Balanced literacy is a way to meet the various needs of learners (Duffy, 2010; Fountas & Pinnell, 2007).

In this chapter, I provide results of the pre and post assessment that I conducted as part of the study. I used the Developmental Reading Assessment, Second Edition (DRA 2) (Beaver, 2006), as the pre and post test to gather a baseline and to monitor the students’ growth over the period of the study. I also provide excerpts from observations, informal interviews, and reflections of other balanced literacy components that were incorporated into daily literacy centers. More specifically, I detail the changes made to the old literacy centers and how students
responded to such changes. I also detail how I conducted shared reading in my classroom before and during the research study.

Results of the Developmental Reading Assessment, Second Edition

The DRA2 (Beaver, 2006) tests the students’ abilities in three different areas: reading engagement, reading fluency, and reading comprehension. All three areas are assessed through my use of a rubric continuum (see Appendix C). Students completed the reading engagement section first. I asked the students questions based on their favorite book, who they would rather read with: alone, a buddy, a group, and why, and also who they read with at home. I completed two rows on the continuum rubric: (1) students ability to pick appropriate books and give the name and overview of a favorite book/author and (2) ability to sustain independent reading, ranging from zero to fifteen or more minutes.

After the reading engagement questions, students previewed the book and explained to me what was happening in the story based on the pictures. To assess fluency, I asked students to read the book while recording any repeats, omissions, and insertions of words. This is called a Reading Record (Beaver, 2006). After the fluency section of the test, I assessed the students’ comprehension by rating the students’ abilities to preview the book, a retell, and make connections to the text.
The results of the two DRA2 assessments demonstrate how the students’ literacy abilities developed throughout the study. I gave each student a number from 1-20, which I used to ensure confidentiality. The purpose of the DRA2 is to identify students’ reading level, defined as a text on which students meet specific criteria in terms of accuracy, fluency, and comprehension (Beaver, 2006). The DRA2 levels, range from 0 to 30, and are based on different books for the grades. A DRA2 level of 2 represents a book for a student reading at a kindergarten level. A DRA2 level between 6 to 16 is equivalent to a book for a first grader. The DRA2 can be used to assess the independent and instructional level of a student.

Figure 4.1 displays the pre and post Developmental Reading Assessment, Second Edition (DRA2) scores of my first grade students. I conducted the pre-test in December 2010 and the post-test in February 2011. The school district in which I work requires me to test my students’ independent level. Therefore, the data presented in Figure 4.1 represents each student’s independent reading level, not their instructional level.
According to data in Table 4.1, 16 students (2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17 and 18) of 20 (80 percent) were at or above grade level at the beginning of the study (12/6/2011). Students 1 and 3 received intensive reading instruction through the Reading Recovery program during the study. At the end of the study (2/16/11), four students (students 1, 18, 19, and 20) (80 percent) did not yet meet the grade level reading requirements for the February first grade benchmark. Although all students did not meet the district benchmark of a DRA2 level 12 at the end of the study in February, all students did improve their reading level and show growth.
Table 4.2: DRA2 Results

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>December</th>
<th>February</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RE (8)</td>
<td>RF (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
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Table 4.2 displays the level of reading engagement (RE), reading fluency (RF), and comprehension (C) of the DRA2 assessment for each first grade student. The students were distinguished by the numbers 1-20. The data provided is represented by adding the points earned by students in a given group for each category (RE, RF, C). It is then compared to the total possible points that could have been earned.

Based on the data in Table 4.2, 16 students (2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17 and 18) were reading at or above grade level at the December benchmark of a DRA2 level 6. For these students, the reading engagement total for December was 106 points out of 144 points. In February, the reading engagement total was 122 points out of a possible 144 points. The students reading engagement improved a total of 16 points.

At the beginning of the study, four students (1, 3, 19, and 20) were reading below benchmark because they scored below a DRA2 level 6. Their level of reading engagement in December was 24 points out of a possible 32 points. In February, the students scored 27 points out of 32 points. The students reading engagement improved a total of three points.

For reading fluency, the 16 students (2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17 and 18) at or above grade level scored 208 points out of 256 points in December. At the end of the study the same students scored 225 points out of 256.
points. Students 6, 7, and 15 did not increase their fluency scores between the first and second tests, and students 4, 13, and 17 remained the same.

The students reading below grade level at the start of the study (1, 3, 19, and 20) scored 42 points out of 64 points in December for reading fluency. In February, they scored a total of 55 points out of 64 points. These students increased a total of 13 points over the course of this study for reading fluency.

For reading comprehension, the students at (10, 11, and 18) or above grade level (2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, and 17) scored points out of 324 points at the start of the study out of a possible 448 points (28 possible comprehension points x 16 students). In February, these target students scored 365 points out of a possible 448 points. The students at or above benchmark (2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17 and 18) improved their reading comprehension a total of 41 points during the course of this study.

Students 1, 3, 19, and 20 scored 67 points (18+9+19+21) out of a possible 112 points (28 x 4) in December for reading comprehension. Their total score increased to 81 points out of 112 points in February, showing an improvement of 14 points over the course of the study.

Students 2, 4, 6, 8, 16, and 20 did not improve their comprehension scores over the course of the study. This is possible because the students may not have done as well retelling with detail, connecting, and/or interpreting the author’s message. The students also have to comprehend more difficult texts because they have increased in
DRA2 level. The pre-assessment results allowed me to target specific areas of need for students individually. Therefore, the post-assessment showed where the students grew throughout the length of the study.

**Literacy Centers**

**Old Centers**

Prior to the start of the study, I had students work in groups of three, four, or five and rotate to five centers per day (see Table 4.3). Table 4.3 outlines the schedule for the centers prior to the start of the study. Each group would go to all of the same centers per day. The groups rotated in their guided reading groups, making them homogenously mixed. I would change the centers completed each day.
During guided reading, students would meet with me to receive individualized, focused reading instruction. We would work on reading strategies and incorporate word work as needed.

Computer center allowed students to explore different websites like BrainPop Jr., author websites that correlated with our author study, and other exploratory educational websites. Students would also be able to play a math software program that correlates with the district curriculum, meeting state and local standards.

Book bin is a center that provided students with the opportunity to read books at their independent level. Each student, or group of students, would have several...
books to browse and read at their leisure. Their bin was labeled with their name so they knew where to get their books from. I would pick books that incorporated student interests and hobbies that were at their reading level. This center focused on providing an enjoyable reading experience that was non-threatening.

The star center involved word study/spelling. This center had a daily routine that students followed week to week. On Tuesday’s students would complete their individual word or picture sort (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2008) and the Look, Say, Cover, Write, Check worksheet (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996). On Wednesday students would complete a partner sort with their word study pictures or words working cooperatively (Bear et al., 2008). Thursday’s were for completing the Spelling Tree and Take 3. Both worksheets provided practice spelling the words on the weekly list and practice using them in a sentence. On Friday’s, students would give their partner(s) a “buddy quiz.” They would read each spelling word to their classmate(s) and then students would review and analyze their own list. I found this step of the “buddy quiz” to be the most beneficial. When students were drawing their own attention to any letters/sounds they missed in a word it was more meaningful than when I just wrote the correct spelling next to the misspelled word.

The word study and spelling weekly routine was originally created and implemented by the teacher I was in for who was on maternity leave. She used the work of Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, and Johnston (2008), Fountas and Pinnell (1996), and Diller (2003). I realized the value of the activities and the impact they had on students when I used them for the remainder of the 2009-2010 school year and
decided to continue using them for my own class during the entire 2010-2011 school year.

ABC center involved exploring and working with letters, words, and sounds (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Students would use their alphabet linking chart, read alphabet books, create individual letter books, match and sort letters, make words, sort words, and/or build word ladders.

New Centers

After researching best practices for literacy centers/workstations in a balanced literacy classroom (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2008; Diller, 2003; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Richardson, 2009; Tompkins, 2010), I used my professional judgment and decided it would be most beneficial for my students if I revised our literacy centers.

The centers I created and implemented as part of the study had students working in groups of two or three. Students would not complete all the same centers each day. Rather, it would take the entire week for them to complete all of the different centers. This arrangement had students spread out throughout the room, which caused students to be much quieter and on task.
Table 4.4 represents the centers that students completed Tuesday through Friday. The student groups shown at the top of the table would move to the right across the top at the start of each day. The blue groups would stay on the blue side and the red would stay on the red side. Each half of the work board contained the same centers, just in a different order.

At the beginning of the study I could tell that the students were skeptical of the change to the new centers, “Well, how come I don’t get to go to computers today
but Taylor does?” asked Brain. “You will go to them on Wednesday (as I pointed to the new workstation board that has clear visuals for each center and shows who goes where) it is going to take you the whole week to go to all of the different centers, today you will only go to five of them” I said.

I could see the students’ excitement towards new centers. “That is so awesome we get to use all those craft things to make a plant!” Amy said to her classmate Rachel. Amy was referring to the new “Artist Alley” center that entailed constructing an educational craft each week. The “plant” she referred to incorporated science content and curriculum in the craft center. Students had to create, using pipe cleaners, construction paper, yarn, seeds, paper baking cups, glue, and label each part. This allowed students to create work that provided me with an assessment of their knowledge of the parts of a plant (01/04/11).

Through daily observations, I began to notice that students were taking more control and ownership over their own learning. Students were no longer relying on other classmates to help them along since there were not four or five other classmates nearby doing the same center. “Hey, I didn’t know roots helped keeped the plant in the ground on a really windy day! I thought they just helped the plant drink” said Stacy to her partner Shawn, after watching a short video on BrainPop Jr. at the computer center. Shawn replied “Me neither! How did you get that? Can you get me there?” Stacy very eagerly directed Shawn around the website, proudly navigating him to the “parts of a plant” video clip (01/13/11). Another instance where this I
observed this proud ownership was during a word study sort. Luke, pointing to his neighbor’s paper, said “I put that one (pointing to the cake picture) under long a, like rain, because you can hear the a. Listen caaaaake. Did you hear it?” Rachel, imitating Luke, said “caaaaaake. You’re right. Hopefully I can still peel it off and move it over.” “Or you can just draw an arrow” suggested Luke (01/18/11).

The new centers also enabled the students to become much more independent once they got the new routine down. Instead of students coming to interrupt my guided reading groups, they would seek out their partner or find a friend to ask their question. “Where is the squiggle story?” asked Taylor. “It is over at the hexagon table (points at table) where Mrs. Budin always puts it” replied Derek. Setting up a structured and routine center schedule where the centers remained the same but the content within the center changed weekly allowed the students to answer their own questions and each others’. Billy said to me one day during our guided reading “Mrs. Butlin, did you notice that not a one student came overs here to ask you a question?” I replied, “Yes, I did notice. I am so proud of how well everyone is answering their own questions!” When it was time to switch centers, I shared what Billy said with the whole class and I praised all of their new found independence. I also noted multiple times in my teacher research journal the high level of engagement I noticed on a daily basis at the centers due to the decrease in disrupting behaviors and distractions.

The new centers approach incorporated more reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing than the old centers previously offered students. This was vital
because my school district used a balanced literacy approach. I decided to incorporate centers based on students’ needs and interests. For example, after I incorporated music into shared reading I knew how much students enjoyed the time spent singing.

Poetry binder became a huge success as a new center because students did not view it as just reading, but rather it was a fun way to sing along with classmates while practicing fluency.

Squiggle story became part of our new centers routine because it was a non-threatening way of writing on a daily basis. It allowed for imagination and creativity which was very motivating for some of my most reluctant writers.

Non-fiction news was included because there is so much first graders need to learn and are expected to become familiar with non-fiction text features. Not only did they become more familiar with text features, they were also learning about content in a differentiated way.

The centers listed with a red star involved word study/spelling, the students knew and associated with the symbol from the old centers. The weekly routine of activities was the same as the old centers.

Artist alley allowed students to get crafty and use creativity to connect with content. Crafts would often tie in with the holidays and themes we were exploring in the classroom. There were always guidelines provided to students but still allowed for flexibility to allow for individuality.
Read around the room allowed the students to explore their environmental print. Often times, students would “hunt” for words that fit their weekly word study pattern or spelling rule. At other times, they would just read around the room for enjoyment. Students were always engaged using the “Mr. Pointer” hand to locate words around the room. The students viewed “Mr. Pointer” as a teacher tool, as I used it during morning message and shared reading, which allowed them to step into the teacher role by using it.

Word search was another center that correlated with holidays and themes we were learning about in our classroom. The word searches would have content vocabulary to look for in an engaging and authentic context.

Scrabble was a center with letter tiles that had point values. For example, S was worth 4, A was worth 1, N was worth 2, and D was worth 4. At this center students would create words and then calculate the value of the word. So SAND would be 4+1+2+4= 11 points.

Stamping words allowed students to practice their weekly word study/spelling words. They were provided alphabet stamps and an ink pad to create their words. They were challenged to do consonants in one color (blue) and vowels in another (red).

Library was a time when students could travel to the school library to exchange their books. They could also just browse books in the library or read with
an older student. At times, the Librarian would even set students up with using an I-Pad.

Make-up center was always the last center during the rotation. This was a time where students would go to the center they missed while they were at guided reading with me. Since students were pulled for guided reading at different times, they were not at the make-up center with their typical group.

The centers I incorporated were ones that I came across talking with veteran teachers, learned about in my graduate studies, or read about in best-practices research.

**Shared Reading**

Prior to the study, I would incorporate shared reading every morning through use of a big book. The class would gather on the carpet and sit in close proximity to the easel that held the big book. I would use each big book for at least two days, sometimes three. On the first day of a new book I would introduce the book, and lead a discussion to activate the students’ prior background knowledge of the book’s topic. We would make predictions using the title and cover of what the book may be about. I would then read the book to the class using a pointer to track the text. After I read the book for the first time I would answer any questions students had and we would discuss what the book was about. We would then read the book a second time and students who felt comfortable would join in. The second day of reading the book is
when a majority, if not all, of the class participated. I would continue to point and read while the students read with me. The big books were always displayed after we read them so students could read the familiar stories over and over again whenever they would like. Students would also take turns pointing to the story being the “leader.”

During the study, daily shared reading consisted of songs and poems provided for students to put into their “poetry/song binder.” The poems and songs coincided with themes, holidays, and content that the students were learning. I would create a large poster of the poem/song to use in front of the entire class during the introduction and teaching of the song/poem. Each student would have their “poetry/song binder” in their lap during our shared reading. This allowed the student to track the text in their lap or follow along on the large poster with me. The student’s individual binder was then used as a literacy center to build fluency and confidence with familiar reading/singing in small groups or with a buddy. Songs sung to familiar tunes were easiest for students to memorize and students referenced their repertoire of songs whenever necessary. For example, when labeling the parts of a plant at “Artist Alley” center, Mallory began to sing to the tune of The Wheels on the Bus: “The leaves on the plant are making food, making food, making food. The leaves on the plant are making food. Leaves are part of a plant.” (01/14/11) Mallory’s example demonstrates how she connected the content that was reinforced through shared reading to her independent work during centers.
Students really enjoyed using their songs/poems to practice phonemic awareness. One example of where students practiced phoneme isolation was with the song “Winter First Sounds,” (Jordana & Callella, 1998), which was sung to the tune of “Someone’s in the Kitchen with Dinah.” The first few lines went like this: “What’s the first sound you hear in snowman? What’s the first sound you hear in snow? What’s the first sound you hear in sleet? The first sound we hear is /s/. So we sing Se, si, siddley-i-o, se, si, siddley-i-o-o-o-o-o. Se, si, siddley-i-o, the first sound was /s/.” Students could then change the words so that they all start with another letter. My observations showed that they really enjoyed manipulating the main chorus. One example Shawn created was with the words “freeze, frost, and fog.” The class then sang “Fe, Fi, Fiddley-i-o, fe, fi, fiddley-i-o-o-o-o-o. Fe, fi, fiddley-i-o, the first sound was /f/.” For differentiation purposes, I challenged students to create a verse that went like this: “What’s the last sound you hear in cold? What’s the last sound you hear in sled? What’s the last sound you hear in snowed? The last sound we hear is /d/.” They would then apply the /d/ sound to the chorus. I used this differentiation extension with students during their literacy centers at the poetry binder center (01/26/11).

When analyzing the data from my research journal I noticed that students were most engaged during songs or poems that they would manipulate themselves. Rhyming was one of their particular interests. “When It’s Cold Outside” (Jordana & Callella, 1998) was sung to the tune of “Down by the Bay” which is very familiar to first graders. The chorus, “When it’s cold outside, and you want to play, what can you
do for fun that day? “Let’s make a rhyme.” My teacher would say. Did you ever see a snowflake pushing a rake on a cold winter’s day?” We would sing the chorus together as a class and any student who wanted to sing their rhyming verse would raise their hand and when they were passed the “singing ball” they would take a turn. Rachel sang “Did you ever see a sled lying in bed on a cold winter’s day?” While Luke contributed “Did you ever see a snowman kissing a pan on a cold winter’s day?” (02/03/11).

My observations of shared reading of songs and poems reveal that the students could not wait until their turn rolled around. I would often have to let them turn and talk to a buddy about their own ideas because we would often run past our shared reading timeframe or run well into the next activity.

Summary

First graders are absorbent like sponges; they soak up new routine and information willingly. Reevaluating the literacy centers I was using in my classroom, and reflecting on how I could better meet the individual needs of my students, allowed me to meet such needs by taking a fresh, new approach. Grounding literacy in my classroom within a balanced literacy framework allowed students to explore authentic and rich activities that will provide lifelong skills.
Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations

Throughout this six week study, I explored the impact that my balanced literacy instruction had on the literacy development of my first graders. I sought to answer the research question: How does my work as a first grade teacher influence my students’ literacy development? Through my analysis of the observations, assessments, interviews, and anecdotal notes, I have been able to draw several conclusions regarding the impact my teaching decisions had on students’ literacy development grounded in a balanced literacy framework.

Below, I offer several conclusions, discuss possible implications for student learning and my future work as a teacher, and offer several recommendations for future research related to balance literacy instruction.

Conclusions

Conducting this research has helped me determine how my decisions related to literacy instruction have positively influenced my students’ reading achievement, independence, engagement, and ownership of work.

Students Improved Their Reading Abilities
After analyzing all of the Developmental Reading Assessment, 2nd Edition (DRA2) (Beaver, 2006) scores, I determined that every student improved his or her reading level over the course of the study. I tested students on their reading engagement, fluency, and comprehension. In order to increase a reading level, a student must be able to read a text fluently and with comprehension. Since every student increased their reading level over the course of the study, they improved in their ability to retell with details, read with phrasing and expression, and self-monitor their reading. Although every student did not yet meet the district benchmark, every student made progress and showed growth. Using the DRA2 as the pre-test benefitted my instructional decisions because the results indicated each individual student’s strengths and needs. I used the results of the pre-test to determine my instructional choices and the experiences I created for students based on their strengths and needs. Had I not differentiated my instruction for individual students and made sound teaching decisions through the use of graphic organizers, scaffolding instruction, and individualizing word study my students may not have shown such growth.

**Students Increased Their Level of Independence**

I made observation notes every single day throughout the course of the study. In my notes, I commented upon the students’ improved level of independence with the exception of two days (Research Journal, 01/21/2011 & 01/18/2011). The
students were very willing to answer their classmates' questions, which allowed the interruptions to guided reading groups to dramatically decrease.

The students were able to independently retrieve the materials needed to complete each center because they knew the materials' location. For example, if students needed liquid glue for the Artist Alley Center, they would just go and grab it off of the pink shelf where the craft supplies were located. Or, if there were no more papers at the Nonfiction News Center, students knew where I kept the extra copies so that they could grab them right away without interrupting guided reading groups.

*Students’ Engagement Increased During Centers and Shared Reading*

According to the findings, students showed improved on-task engagement in relation to the new literacy centers and shared reading. Students shared their excitement about the new literacy centers through conversation with each other. There were also times that students did not want to rotate to a new center because they were so engrossed in the center at which they were working.

Implementing new literacy centers based on best-practices and veteran teacher input allowed me to decrease the student size at each center. I noticed that students were less distracted when there were fewer students in their group. Also, the newness of the centers created excitement and enthusiasm for learning. Incorporating songs into the shared reading activities really motivated students to participate. Tapping into
the students’ musical side through use of familiar tunes and jingles provided them with the confidence to join into the activity. Often times they would beg me to sing “just one more!”

**Students’ Ownership Improved**

Throughout the study, I observed that the students were very willing to share and “show off” their work. When it came time to clean up before rotating, oftentimes the students would eagerly rush over their completed work to show me before placing it in the “finished” basket. Tim exclaimed, “Mrs. Butlin, check out the time machine I made for my squiggle story! You are gonna loooove reading this one!” (Research Journal, 02/28/2011). I often noted how students were beaming with pride when they finished their Squiggle Story or discovered new information when watching an educational video clip online. I actually had to give students post-it notes at the Nonfiction News Centers because they would make so many wonderful connections between the content in their book and what we have learned in class that they would interrupt everyone with excitement. I loved that the students were contributing members of our learning community. Providing them the post-it notes enabled them to share their new information at the conclusion of our literacy centers. They were no longer just going through the motions, I perceived that they felt responsible for the work and learning they did.
Implications for Student Learning

Predictable Structure and Routine Provided During Literacy Centers

Students in first grade thrive on a predictable structure and routine in the classroom, more specifically during literacy centers. Once students learned the new structure of the literacy centers, they were able to then focus all of their attention on the content and learning process. They did not need to waste time worrying about where to go in the classroom for their center or what materials they would need to complete the task. The routine of centers went hand in hand with the structure. Students knew when to clean up (clap-clap-clap, clap, clap) and when to rotate (clap-clap-clap). There was very little transitional time, which allowed for maximized instructional time.

The old centers provided structure and routine in a different way. We used the same clapping system to clean up and rotate. However, students would always move from one table to the next—just a few steps. The new centers created a lot more opportunity for students to move during the rotation process because it was not just a circular pattern. Allowing for more movement during the rotation to the new centers gave the students the kinesthetic movement that so many of them needed.

Incorporated Socialization with Learning

Amanda stated, “Awwww, I don’t want to switch already! I was just getting to the good part” (Research Journal, 01/25/2011) while referring to her BrainPopJr
Video Clip on Floating and Sinking at the computer center. This is just one of the many examples that supported the amount of student engagement I witnessed throughout the study. I gave students many opportunities to complete their work while collaborating with a partner or two. For example, every week they completed a partner sort activity, which created time for rich discussion about word study sorts. The Read Around the Room Center was another center where students enjoyed the social aspect because they went “hunting” for words with their group. They would thrive on finding words to share with one another. Students also enjoyed singing the songs from their poetry/song binder with a classmate. Buddy reading was also popular during Library Center because students could help out one another with decoding unknown words and asking clarifying comprehension questions. The social aspect of the literacy centers may not have been as positive had the students not created and sustained a strong sense of classroom community.

I believe that the students were so engaged at their centers because their partners valued their input. In the small groups of two or three students, each student played an important role in the learning process. As opposed to having four of five students and some would just sit back and let the others do the work. I recognize that providing students with the opportunity to move through their centers with a partner or two kept them engaged and on-task because it is hard to “goof off” when there are one or two other friends they don’t want to let down. Also, it made some centers more accessible for each individual student. Rachel stated, “I love that I get to spend all the time at the computer” (Research Journal, 02/08/2011). In the old centers, there were
four or five students and only three computers, which meant that students had to share and take turns. While sharing is a wonderful characteristic to develop, having smaller groups enabled each student to participate the entire time at centers where resources were limited.

The new centers were very hands-on and centered on content, which got the students excited because they were able to learn new facts that they could contribute to the class or making connections to prior background knowledge.

**Offered Students Choice and Set a Purpose**

In order for students to feel pride in the work that they are doing, they need to see the purpose and benefit of such work. There would be no effort or drive to complete something that was of no value. The first grade students took ownership of their work when they knew why they were doing it. Choice is another motivating factor that created the sense of ownership.

**Teaching Literacy through Cross-Curricular Content Areas**

Incorporating different content areas such as math, science, and social studies into the new literacy centers submerged students in a rich, authentic learning environment. I created the Nonfiction News Center with the goal of exposing students to nonfiction text on a daily basis. Students became more familiar with text features
such as the table of contents, captions, index, and glossary. “Mrs. Butlin, I found a table of contents...this is a nonfiction book!” exclaimed Luke (Research Journal, 02/17/2011). I created a nonfiction bin in the classroom for nonfiction books that students independently found in their book bins. Incorporating content areas into centers allowed students to “teach” one another at their center when facing questions or discovering new information. Shared reading was another area into which I infused content.

Implications for My Teaching

Being an observant and reflective teacher throughout this study has allowed me to see the impact my teaching decisions have on my students’ success in literacy development.

Provide a Predictable, Structured Learning Environment

I know now how well first grade students respond to classroom structure and routine and the importance it plays in creating a successful day in school. During the study I changed our old literacy centers to new, more hands-on centers. Initially, I was hesitant about such a drastic change and how the students would adapt to such changes. However, the student really blew me away. They were able to take on a new learning environment and adjust to the new routine and structure very willingly. This
is not to say that some students didn’t take longer a bit longer to adjust than others, there were definitely some who did. Supporting a predictable learning environment really benefited my first grade students.

**Integrate Choice and Socialization**

I noticed an increase in the students’ independence, engagement, and ownership over the course of the study. I think all three characteristics had played some influence on the other. If students were not independent they would most likely not have been engaged. If they did not find the center activities worthwhile would they have felt ownership for what they were doing? When reviewing and analyzing my notes in my teacher research journal all three, independence, engagement, and ownership were themes that I saw over and over again. From observing and talking with my students, I was responsive enough to see that these characteristics were presenting themselves because of the decisions I had made as their teacher.

**Use Assessment Data to Drive Instruction**

The new literacy centers and shared reading approach would not have been a success if I did not know each individual student so thoroughly. Using the DRA2 enabled me to pin-point specific learning goals for each student. Using assessments to drive instruction is imperative in any classroom. Teachers cannot be teaching “in the
dark.” Even though there are 10 months out of the year that a student attends a grade, every day should be differentiated and individualized in order to make the most gains. Every decision I made as the teacher had an impact on my students. If there was a day I did not challenge a student enough, than that was a day I let them down. When I truly know a student, I’m able to take that student to new learning.

**Ground Instruction within a Balanced Literacy Framework**

Common among definitions of balanced literacy is the idea that reading and writing achievement is developed through instruction and support in multiple environments and in numerous approaches, all varied in teacher support and student control (Bitter, Gubbins, ODay, & Socias, 2009; Duffy, 2010; Frey, Lee, Tollefson, Pass, & Massengill, 2005). I incorporated different learning environments and tapped into different learning styles among students in order to optimize their learning. Literacy components within a balanced program often consist of guided reading, interactive read-alouds, shared reading, shared and interactive writing, independent reading and writing, and literacy centers (Bitter et al., 2009; Dorn & Soffos, 2001; Duffy, 2010; Fountas & Pinnell, 2007; Frey et al., 2005). Knowing each student’s ability allowed me to individualize instruction within the instructional components of balanced literacy. I will continue to explore best-practices within the balanced literacy approach.
Recommendations for Future Research

Explore Other Best Practices of Literacy Instruction and Professional Development

Based on the findings from this study I hope to eventually be able to explore and implement other best practices within a balanced literacy approach to literacy instruction. I encourage teachers to research other approaches to literacy instruction within a first grade classroom. The time students spend learning in school is valuable, I believe teachers should use instructional time that benefits the whole child.

In addition, I believe that school districts should provide professional development opportunities, especially for new teachers, to better understand and carry out a balanced literacy approach. So much more can be explored within the topic of teacher decisions and the effect they have within the classroom learning environment.

Discover Individual Students' Strengths and Needs

The findings from my research will benefit my work with first grade students in that, by discovering each students’ strengths and needs, I will better be able to individualize instruction and meet their learning needs across content areas through a balanced literacy approach. Determining how a student learns is up to the teacher to discover. The literacy center approach and shared reading experience that I
implemented throughout the course of this study may not be as beneficial to other
first graders at another school.

Final Thoughts

Teachers hold the power to change the lives of their students. I hope to inspire
teachers to take on the challenge of reflecting on their teaching decisions and the way
such decisions impact and influence their students learning. I have found through this
research study that it is essential I observe, reflect, and analyze my students’ work in
order to form the most effective future teaching decisions. My use of a teacher
research journal allowed me to thoroughly analyze the benefits and drawbacks of the
lessons that I taught and the decisions I made. I look forward to continually
monitoring my teaching decisions and the affect they have on each individual student
so that I maximize my instruction with my future students. It is essential that I
supported my first graders’ literacy development so they could achieve success, not
only in school, but in life. I have learned that literacy instruction is a comprehensive
process that combines explicit instruction, guided practice, collaborative learning, and
independent reading and writing. Each student has his/her own interests, his/her own
ways of knowing, and his/her own experiences that make him/her who they are.
When we discover these unique attributes we are able to tailor instruction to our
individual student’s learning needs and affective influences.
References


Appendix A

STATEMENT OF ASSENT

To Be Read to First Grade Students

Dear Students,

In addition to being your teacher, I am also a graduate student at The College at Brockport, SUNY. In my work at Brockport, I have learned a lot about reading and writing and how to teach young students how to read and write. During our time together, I want to help you develop the necessary strategies and skills to become great readers and writers.

For the next six weeks, I would like to keep track of our work together. To do so I will keep a research journal and write down my observations of you. I will collect your written work to help me learn more about you. If you decide to let me use the information I am learning about you and your reading and writing abilities, in my research study I will only say what you and your peers did during literacy instruction. I will not use your name.

Your parent or guardian has given permission for me to use my notes about you, but it’s also up to you to decide if I may use the information. If you would like to have your information included in my research study, but change your mind later on, you can tell me that you have changed your mind. It is okay to change your mind at any time.

If it is okay with you for me to use my observations during our small group reading instruction and collect your work samples, please write your name on the first line below. Under your name you can write today’s date which is ________.

Thank you very much,

Janel Butlin (Kierecki)

Participant Name: ___________________________  Date: ___________________________.

Participant Signature: ________________________  Witness ________________________

Date ___________________________
Appendix B

CONSENT FOR USE OF STUDENT DATA

Dear Parent or Guardian,

I am currently a graduate student at The College at Brockport, SUNY completing a master’s thesis for the Department of Education and Human Development. As part of the requirements for the thesis, I am conducting a research study to explore how my work as a first grade teacher influences my students’ literacy development.

If you agree to have your child participate in this research study, I will include your child’s interactions with, discussions about, and reactions to the strategies and/or activities implemented during the study. During the data collection phase of the study, I will take notes, record students’ comments and review student work. My observation will focus on specific reading or writing skills that your child exhibits. I will also collect data from reading assessments to determine the most effective ways to support and develop your child’s reading abilities.

All students will take part in all literacy activities and assessments as they are part of our day-to-day work. However, I will only use my observations of your child and his or her work if you grant consent for me to do so. You are being asked to make a decision whether or not to allow me to use the data I collect on your child to be included in the study. If you would like me to use your child’s data, and agree with the statements below, please sign your name in the space provided at the end. You may change your mind at any time and your child may leave the study without penalty, even after the study has begun.

I understand that:

a. My child’s participation is voluntary and s/he has the right to refuse to have his/her data and work samples used in the study.

b. My child’s confidentiality is guaranteed. Her/his name will not be recorded in observational notes. There will be no way to connect my child to the observation. If any publication results from this research, s/he would not be identified by name. Results will be given through the use of pseudonyms, so neither the participants nor the school can be identified.

c. There will be no anticipated personal risks or benefits because of participation in this project.

d. My child’s participation involves participating in regularly scheduled literacy activities.
e. The researcher will be observing my child’s reading and writing abilities for a minimum of 45 minutes to a maximum of 90 minutes daily for a period of six weeks.

f. The results will be used for the completion of a thesis paper by the researcher.

g. Data from the observations will be kept in a locked filing cabinet by the researcher. Data and any corresponding materials including the consent forms will be destroyed by shredding when the research has been completed.

I understand the information provided in this form and agree to allow my child’s data to be used in this study.

I am 18 years of age or older. I have read and understand the above statements. All my questions about my participation in this study have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this study realizing I may withdraw without penalty at any time during the survey process.

Signature of Parent_________________________ Date: _______________________

Child’s Name_________________________________________________________

If you have any questions, you may contact:

Primary Researcher: Janel Butlin
Graduate Student, The College at Brockport
(585)752-2428

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Don Halquist
The College at Brockport
dhalquis@brockport.edu
(585)395-5550
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Appendix C