

If it ain't broke, don't fix it

A "Birmingham Jail-esque" letter addressing the fallacies and inherent flaws of,
and exposing the evidence against, Balanced Literacy
at the elementary level

Dear fellow educators, educators-in-training, and curriculum developers,

While confined here in my study, I came across several articles encouraging the use of Balanced Literacy not only in higher education, but also at the elementary level. Seldom, if ever, do I take the time to formulate a written response to proposed educational systems rather than verbally retorting.

Since the implementation and standardization of the Standard English Learning Lessons (SELL) and the Phonics program several years ago, our children's statewide and national test scores have risen steadily. While these jumps in performance haven't been exponential, they have been equable. Just within the first year of exaction of the Balanced Literacy program, the nationwide test scores have declined slightly. While one could attribute this accessory abatement to several factors varying in each locale, one cannot deny the interesting coincidence with and correlation to the new program.

Balanced Literacy—assigning particular books, periodicals, and other reading materials to certain age groups and intelligence levels—also encompasses the idea of Holistic Language—learning entire words instead of the syllabic cluster idea of the Phonics system. The ideology behind these two systems can be illuminated with the age-old proverb of “catch a fish for a man and he'll have food for a day; teach him to fish and he'll have food for life.” Holistic Language shows particular sight-words to children and requires memorization of that vocabulary. While this may be effective for studying foreign language, it neglects the Phonics idea of learning roots and individual sounds in order to piece unknown words together.

You express your optimism in using the Balanced Literacy system (in accordance with the “No Child Left Behind” Act set forth by the Bush Administration) to categorize reading materials so that a child doesn't feel discouraged by accidentally choosing a book that might be too difficult for he or she to understand. While this is a noble concern, the methodology is idealistic and inherently

flawed. By typecasting books and mating those categories to proposed intelligence levels, you are eliminating a child's ability to surpass his or her potential. While IQ tests determine a proposed intelligence quotient for a given child, they don't pigeonhole that boy or girl into a certain aptitude echelon.

Imagine, if you will, that in a given second-grade classroom, there is a little boy named Tyler and a little girl named Claire. Tyler is at a fourth-grade reading level as far as comprehension and retention. Claire is struggling slightly to keep up with her classmates. She doesn't know many of the words in the books she's being told to read, nor does she retain the information for long periods of time. Now, without very detailed observation of each and every student, the teacher will not necessarily be able to assign a proper "balanced literacy" level. Tyler won't be meeting his full potential, become bored with school, and fall victim to educational indifference. He would, not by his own will, become another statistic about a lazy adolescent. As the saying goes, "when you're green you grow; when you're ripe, you rot." Claire, though, doesn't want to be laughed at by her classmates, so she never raises her hands and asks questions. She just wants to be on the same reading level as everyone else because that's the norm. She gets further and further behind in her school work, causing it to be incredibly difficult to catch up to her classmates. Neither Tyler nor Claire is getting the type of individualized attention that they deserve. What if you were Tyler's father or mother? Claire's? What would you think of your child's struggle? Would you not be worried about their academic success? I know that I would be questioning the school board, and demanding answers.

With the Phonics system, each of the children in the class is on the same level, but the system provides methods for children that are more advanced, and assistance for those that need help. With Balanced Literacy, the children are herded together like cattle, and neglected the individual attention that they each crave and need. The struggling child and the gifted child may

not be noticed until it is too late to help them efficiently. Isn't that our goal as educators—to help children learn through whatever medium is effective for them? If you believe that unsaid credo to help individual students, and you sincerely want to teach children maximize their potential you will, at the very least, step back and reexamine your position on Balanced Literacy at the Elementary level. I hope that this letter finds you in a decent open state of mind, and that you are willing to consider the potentially scarring results of Balanced Literacy in the classroom.

Yours for the cause of
Educating America's youthful and growing minds,

Zach