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# Building an Effective 21st Century Literacy Program

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**Building an Effective 21<sup>st</sup> Century Literacy Program**

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EDCI 589 Applied Research

University of Mary Washington

Summer 2013

I pledge upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work.

~ Andrea Fossum

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## Introduction

In today's rapidly changing world, advanced literacy has become a qualification that individuals need to succeed in the adult world. Advanced literacy allows individuals to climb the social ladder, to increase their economic status, and to participate in a democracy (Murnane, Sawhill & Snow, 2012). According to Reardon, Valentino and Shores (2012), only one third of students are reading proficiently at each grade level. An individual's information base and metacognitive ability is incrementally built up over the course of a lifetime; and at the cornerstone of a good education is literacy. The way in which a person perceives his world and intakes information depends on his prior experiences, learning styles and interests. The experts have found that they can reduce reading failure in the primary grades to less than one percent of children with early intervention (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). The best intervention occurs before third grade through exceptional, research based instruction. Exceptional reading instruction is tailored to meet the needs of each student by picking and choosing the strategies, materials and environment that fit the students learning styles and needs (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). There is no one strategy or one program that will suffice for every child.

A balanced literacy approach allows educators to bring together more traditional methods of reading instruction with more modern strategies, blending student centered teaching models with the finest teacher centered models to create the best possible instruction for every child (Bogard & McMackin, 2012; Tompkins, 2011). Tompkins (2011) stated that all students should be reading and writing fluently by the time they enter fourth grade. Additionally, students who have not achieved fluency by the end of third grade are extremely unlikely to catch up with their age level peers (Xiang, Dahlin, Cronon, Theaker, & Durant, 2011). Early elementary educators are responsible for helping children to construct the solid literacy foundation that they will

require to be successful in upper elementary, middle and high school. Triumphant early elementary school teachers create balanced literacy programs that can be easily differentiated to meet the diverse needs of their students while weaving twenty first century literacy skills throughout the curriculum so that their students will achieve the advanced literacy that they will need in our rapidly changing world.

The following literature review will begin by exploring the current literacy of United States citizens together with the instructional strategies that educators are currently using and failing to incorporate in their literacy instruction. Next, the components of a balanced twenty-first century literacy program will be explored. Specifically, a balanced literacy program should include instruction in reading, phonemic awareness, literacy strategies, vocabulary, comprehension, literature, content-area study, oral language, writing and spelling (Tompkins, 2011). Then, instructional strategies for early elementary literacy educators like reading and writing workshop will be reviewed. The literature review will then explore the benefits of using a balanced literacy program that integrates twenty first century skills and literacy throughout the curriculum. Finally, strategies that educators can use to overcome time restraints and planning complexities will be reviewed. The content and structure of this literature review are arranged so that early educators can clearly see how to successfully configure and implement a complete and successful literacy program to meet all of the literacy needs of each child.

### **Problem Statement**

Children at the elementary school level should be exposed to a variety of literacy activities on a daily basis to ensure the development of their reading, writing and communication skills. Teachers should be prepared to engage their students in activities surrounding reading, phonemic awareness, phonics, reading strategies, vocabulary, comprehension, literature, content-

area study, oral language, writing and spelling on a daily basis. Using this balanced approach, early elementary educators will ensure that students move on to the next grade level with a solid foundation in literacy (Tompkins, 2011). However, many teachers are intimidated by the long list of components that are represented in a balanced literacy program even if they do agree with the program in theory (Ivy, Baumann & Jarrard, 2000). It has been proven time and time again that a balanced literacy approach is the most effective way to ensure the literacy of all students, low to high achievers (Duffy, 2001; Duke & Block, 2012; Ivy, Baumann & Jarrard, 2000). The consequences of not using best practices to teach literacy are evident. Many students pass through elementary and middle school never reaching their literary potential (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). The ultimate goal of educators is to ensure that students graduate from high school prepared to join the work force or to enter into higher education. According to college professors and employers, few graduating high school students possess the literacy skills that they need to flourish in the professional or the academic world (Alliance for Excellent Educators, 2007).

### **Research Questions**

- 1) What is missing from current literacy programs?
- 2) What components are included in an effective balanced literacy program?
- 3) What instructional strategies should elementary school teachers use to effectively implement a relevant balanced literacy program?
- 4) What are the benefits and limitations of incorporating a balanced literacy program into an early elementary school program?

## Literature Review

### Snapshot of U.S. Literacy

Literacy includes the ability to communicate clearly, write purposefully and read thoughtfully. Literate individuals can decode texts, summarize content, synthesize information, interpret meaning, evaluate the value of a passage and create new and innovative products based on their breadth of prior knowledge. Reardon, et al. (2012) defined literacy as, "the ability to access, evaluate, and integrate information from a wide range of textual sources" (p. 18). A child's literacy development starts in the womb when she hears what is happening in the world outside. When a child is born he immediately begins to hear the language of their culture. By four months of age, a baby can purposefully interact with others by smiling, cooing and crying. From six months to twelve months, babies learn to mimic sounds or phonemes and start using small words.

In the song "So Much to Say," Dave Matthews sings, "One year of crying and the words creep up inside; Creep into your mind yeah." From 12 months to 24 months, children start to combine words to make sentences; and they are beginning to use their words to converse and play with other human beings. Three and four year olds are ready to start using crayons and markers to pretend to write. By preschool, children should become aware that certain graphemes or letters represent different phonemes or sounds. Most children who are immersed into a literacy rich environment where parents read to them frequently and where they had access to books, crayons, paper and other academic toys are ready to start reading and writing when they enter kindergarten (Snow, et al., 1998).

It is notable that children enter kindergarten primarily with the vocabulary and syntactic structure of the language that they absorbed from their home environment (Hudley & Mallinson,



2011; Snow, et al., 1998). Numerous U.S. families do not speak Standard English, which is the language of the classroom. Many children enter kindergarten speaking different dialects of English or different languages all together. However, it is imperative to realize that these children are not deficient but different (Hudley & Mallinson, 2011).

Most reading professionals break the development of reading and writing into three stages including the emergent stage, the beginning stage and the fluent stage. In the emergent stage, young children become interested in books and enjoy writing letters and pretend to use the letters to create texts. In addition, emergent readers are beginning to identify letter names, read and write high frequency words, and to write their name. Beginning readers are starting to make the connection between letter names and sounds as well as pair written words with spoken words. Beginning readers are also starting to write from left to right and to spell phonetically. Children at this stage are ready to start making predictions by looking at pictures and to self correct when they are reading (Tompkins, 2011). Young children usually reach the fluent stage by the age of seven (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Fluent readers can identify and verbalize words in text as well as use intonation and expression as they read. Fluent readers are ready to use reading comprehension strategies, make inferences and read independently. They can write a composition of more than one paragraph using varied and accurate vocabulary and accurate punctuation and capitalization (Tompkins, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

### **Literacy Elements Missing in U.S. Schools**

Over the past decade, much focus has been placed on increasing the reading abilities of our youngest readers. Most children can read proficiently by third grade using word reading skills but are lagging behind with comprehension skills and knowledge based competencies (Reardon, et al., 2012). Another literacy area in which the U.S. is not making progress is with

writing. Persky, Daane and Jin (2003) reported that in grades four through twelve only 25 to 30 percent of students are writing at grade level or above. Additionally, Achieve Incorporated (2005) found that only an estimated 50 percent of incoming freshman are prepared for college level writing.

Notably, the low level of literacy in the majority of U.S. students has not been declining over time. In fact, literacy levels for nine year olds have risen a small amount over the past forty years and the literacy skills of thirteen and seventeen year olds has been consistent (Reardon, et al., 2012). The low levels of literacy found in U.S. students are in fact a worldwide phenomena. In other words, students from the U.S. perform above the international average when compared to other developed nations (Reardon, et al., 2012). The problem therefore is not that literacy is decreasing or that the U.S. is lagging behind other nations. Instead, low literacy levels have become an increasing problem because modern society and the global economy require more advanced levels of literacy (Larson, 2006; Reardon, et al., 2012).

The need for students to graduate with a set of advanced literacy skills falls on the shoulders of early elementary educators because they are responsible for building the solid foundation on which all other instruction will assemble. The first and most important task is for elementary educators to ensure that children enjoy reading and writing. Johnson (2011) wrote, "Children are not born with a natural aversion to reading" (p. 1). Instead, Johnson (2011) argued that certain experiences and environmental factors can cause children to dislike reading. Some children complain that reading gives them a headache while others are embarrassed because they cannot read as fast or as fluently as their peers. Other nonreaders fear reading aloud and being placed in the "stupid" group because their peers will laugh at them (Johnson, 2011). These are just a few of the extrinsic factors that affect a child's motivation to read. Educators should strive

to eliminate these factors and others that may negatively impact a child's perception of reading and writing.

In addition to creating a safe and stimulating learning environment, educators need to ensure that their literacy instruction is balanced and excellent. Over the past decade, early elementary educators have dramatically increased students' word reading abilities. Current instructional practices ensure that students can accurately decode leveled texts by the end of grade three. However, texts that they can decode are not appropriate for engaging in higher level thought or "deep comprehension" (Murnane, et al., 2012). Reardon, et al. (2012) explained that in its most basic form literacy is comprised of "word -reading skills and knowledge-based literacy competencies" (p.18). Word-reading skills include letter recognition, beginning sounds, ending sounds, sight words, compression and words in context, literal inference and extrapolation. Knowledge-based competencies include evaluation, making connections, understanding writing style, critically evaluating nonfiction, comparing and contrasting, and evaluating complex syntax and vocabulary. By third grade, most students are successfully developing their word-reading skills while lagging behind with knowledge-based competencies. Only one third of fourth graders perform proficiently when evaluating texts and making text-to-self or text-to-text connections. In addition, the critical evaluation of non-fiction text is done successfully by approximately twenty five percent of eighth grade students. The trend continues into high school where ten percent of seventeen-year-old students have the same knowledge based comprehension skills as the average nine-year-old (Reardon, et al., 2012).

In addition to a lack of knowledge based skills like comprehension, students are not receiving enough authentic instruction in vocabulary. In a recent study, the National Center for Educational Statistics (2012) found that students with larger than average academic vocabularies

do significantly better on comprehension tasks. The best time for vocabulary instruction is during content area study. However, Murnane, et al. (2012) explained that little time is left for science, social studies, current events and history in the elementary school classroom. Consequently, educators are missing valuable opportunities to teach reading strategies and increase students' knowledge base and vocabulary. This lack of instruction compounds in middle school when students are expected to read and comprehend science and history textbooks with little or no assistance (Murnane, et al., 2012).

Writing is another area where most Americans, adults and students, continue to flounder. According to the Conference Board (2006), high school graduates are considered to be "deficient in written communications" by eighty one percent of employers, which means that they cannot write professional letters, memos, emails and technical reports; and seventy two percent are considered by employers to be deficient in writing proper English (Casner-Lotto, & Barrington, 2006). Therefore, the National Commission on Writing (2004) gives details on U.S. private companies spending approximately \$3.1 billion per year teaching their employees writing skills. There are obviously some gaps that exist in current writing instruction that begin in early elementary school and escalate over time. Applebee and Langer (2006) reported that two thirds of middle and high school students are only required to do about an hour of writing per week (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). According to Griffith (2010), teachers admittedly do not teach the subtle elements of writing craft as much as they teach writing conventions. For example, most students are not taught how to incorporate commanding leads into their writing and memorable endings. In addition, students should be taught how to choose the correct words, and phrasing, as well as develop their own writing voice (Griffith, 2010). Writing continues to be the most neglected literacy.

Unfortunately, many children do not receive the support at home or in school that they need to become efficient readers by the age of seven. These struggling readers might not receive special reading services until they are in fourth grade, and by this time it is really too late because they have learned to dislike and avoid reading and have accepted their status as low achievers (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Many schools now use programs like Marie Clay's Reading Recovery program to intervene on behalf of the struggling reader in first grade before the student has fully formed their identity as a poor reader (Reynolds & Wheldall, 2007). Balanced reading instruction administered by qualified teachers has been proven effective in decreasing the number of struggling readers in the primary grade (Snow, et al., 1998).

### **Components of a Balanced 21<sup>st</sup> Century Literacy Program**

**Balanced literacy defined.** A balanced literacy instructional approach provides instruction in reading, writing, listening, observing and speaking (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Tompkins (2011) explained that reading, phonemic awareness and phonics, literacy strategies, vocabulary, comprehension, literature, content-area study, oral language, writing and spelling should all be included in a balanced literacy program. In a balanced literacy program, educators do not implement one single reading program or instructional approach. Instead, successful reading teachers teach all of the literacy components in a holistic and comprehensive fashion, pulling from multiple programs, while integrating literacy instruction into all other subjects (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Superior reading instruction achieves a harmonious balance between developing fluency and increasing students' language and knowledge base (Murnane, et al., 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

A successful early literacy teacher fully comprehends the organization of the English language both in its written and spoken form. She will fully recognize that within the English

language there are different vernaculars and vocabularies that students will bring to the classroom such as Ebonics and Appalachian English (Hudley & Mallinson, 2011). Successful early literacy teachers have a deep understanding of childhood language development, literacy and psychological development. They must continue to educate themselves on the most current teaching practices and be able to successfully find and implement research based reading instruction as well as work collaboratively with other educators. A thriving balanced literacy program is led by a teacher who is familiar with the breakdown of language into sentences, words, word parts and letters and how they correspond to the sounds of the language. She understands and can teach phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling, vocabulary, fluency, reading strategies and comprehension strategies (Tompkins, 2011). In addition, literacy teachers need to be able to recognize reading and writing problems and be familiar with the process of intervening on the struggling student's behalf (Snow, et al., 1998; U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

**Twenty first century literacy skills.** Technology has changed the way that our society runs throughout history. During the Industrial Revolution, the U.S. changed from an agrarian society to an industrialized nation. Again, after World War II, technology changed society by allowing individuals to calculate and store vast amounts of information instantaneously. In the 1980s, computers allowed individuals to manage data, produce copies and communicate over long distances in a split second. Now, technology has given way to a global economy and a globally connected society (Brown, Bryan & Brown, 2005). Technology has become a part of life to most Americans, children included. Information and technology are evolving so rapidly that many things that students are taught will become irrelevant by the time they graduate (Brown, et al., 2005; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009). Therefore, it has become

increasingly important to teach students digital literacy. Digital literacy was defined by Brown, et al. (2005) as, "the ability to communicate with an ever-expanding community to discuss issues, gather information, and seek help" (p. 1). Giving students a strong foundation in digital literacy as well as the traditional literacies, helps them to be marketable even after current trends have become obsolete.

When used properly, technology can give students authentic opportunities to problem solve, create, and communicate. The Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills (2009) explained that students need to develop superior critical thinking, problem solving, communication and collaboration in order to succeed in modern work and life. These skills should be purposefully integrated into the literacy program of early elementary students. The ability to engage effectively in critical thinking, problem solving, communication and collaboration are just as important to the future success of the student as his or her ability to read and write. Therefore, a successful literacy program will strive to explicitly and implicitly teach students these pertinent twenty first century skills.

**Integrating literacy instruction into all subjects.** Reading, writing, viewing, listening, speaking and twenty first century skills can easily be interlaced into all of the subject areas to deepen the level of learning taking place. Weaving literacy throughout the curriculum will help to build students' background knowledge that is essential for developing knowledge based literacy skills (Lesaux, 2012). It will also foster the development of their creativity, collaboration, critical thinking and communication skills that they will need to succeed in society (Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, 2009). For example, if students in a history class are assigned a reading on the Civil War they could be given a writing assignment to launch them into the upper levels of thought described in Bloom's Taxonomy. Perhaps, they could write a

journal entry from either a slave's point of view or a master's point of view that focuses on the injustice of slavery. This exercise would allow students to role play and synthesize ideas, which would make the lesson meaningful and memorable. Furthermore, having students write about what they have read and increasing the amount of writing that students engage in will ultimately increase student reading fluency and comprehension (Grahm & Herbert, 2010).

Many educators feel more comfortable integrating literacy into history, science and social studies than math because it seems more natural. However, the children will greatly benefit by integrating literacy into math. There are many great children's books like the *Sir Cumference* books by Cindy Neuschwander (1997-2012) that can be used in an interactive read aloud to grab the students' attention before beginning a math lesson. A good opportunity for students to practice deep comprehension is when they are engaged in listening to more complex texts being read aloud (Murnane, et al., 2012). In another example incorporating literacy into a math lesson involving patterns and the Fibonacci sequence, the teacher could begin the lesson by showing pictures of flowers, sea shells and famous paintings that incorporate the Fibonacci sequence. After viewing, the students could engage in a think-pair-share to discuss what commonalities the pictures share and how the pictures might relate to math. This activity would teach students to analyze pictures as they view them, develop their collaborative skills and make the lesson a meaningful and memorable experience. The bottom line is that literacy can be woven into all of the subject matters at all educational levels to make the learning experiences impressive and consequential.

### **Instructional Strategies for Early Literacy Educators**

As mentioned earlier, no two balanced literacy programs are identical because they are tailored to meet the needs of each student and teacher. The creator of a successful twenty first



century balanced literacy program must be familiar with a slew of research based instructional practices that they can use in appropriate situations. Therefore, it is imperative for literacy educators to become familiar with current research based strategies and embed those strategies into their instruction (Jones, Yssel & Grant, 2012). There are resources on the web like the Reading Rockets web page produced by WETA (2013) that list and explain research based methods for teaching phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension and writing. The What Works Clearinghouse (2002), which was established by the U.S. Department of Education, is also a great tool for finding evidence based instructional strategies to teach. It is beyond the scope of this review to include all evidence based practices. However, a few important strategies and practices will be reviewed.

**Differentiation.** The first strategy that is essential to a flourishing literacy program is differentiation. Vygotsky explained that learning can only take place within a student's zone of proximal development (Tompkins, 2011). If students are presented with information that is too advanced they will become frustrated and lose interest. If the information presented is too easy, the student will be bored and lose interest. Differentiation allows the teacher to match each student with the appropriate instruction. According to Tompkins (2011), literacy instruction should be differentiated according to what they are learning, how they are learning it and how they will demonstrate their learning.

A differentiated reading program is necessary because of the wide range of reading and writing abilities within each classroom (Firmender, Reis & Sweeny, 2013). Evertson et al. (1981) called classrooms with reading ability levels covering five to ten grade levels, heterogeneous and those reaching over three to four grade levels, homogeneous. Firmender et al. (2013) found in their study that four out of five classrooms were heterogeneous for reading

comprehension and fluency levels. Twenty first century educators need to exert additional time and energy to make sure they are appropriately differentiating their balanced literacy curriculum to ensure that students reading below grade level, at grade level and above grade level are concurrently challenged.

**Scaffolding.** A second strategy that literacy teachers must be familiar with is scaffolding. Scaffolding requires the teacher to give each student the amount of support that they need to complete the learning objective or task successfully. Tompkins (2011) described five levels of support that educators can give to their students. The first level is modeling, where the teacher shows the students how to complete the task. Modeling offers the highest level of support. The second level is where the teacher and students share the work by creating the product together, but the teacher still does all of the writing or recording. The third level of support is where the teacher and students interact to create the product by incorporating both teacher and student ideas and sharing the work of writing or creating the product. The next level is guided practice, where the teacher presents the lesson and then supervises the children as they practice the new skill they have learned in groups or on their own. The fourth level, which offers the least amount of support, is when the students do the work independently with little or no help from the teacher (Tompkins, 2011).

A fourth grade teacher taught her students to recognize quality writing and to engage in "literary borrowing" by adapting and using the plots, characters, imagery and word choice that they discovered in the literature. The teacher used the "gradual release of responsibility model." First she pointed out accomplished writing to her students. Then, she used guided practice to help her students find examples of quality writing and modeled how to use the strategies in their

own writing. Finally, she engaged them in independent practice by allowing them to implement the quality writing that they had found during a "writing and conferring time" (Griffith, 2010).

**Explicit instruction.** The third strategy that early literacy teachers need to incorporate into their balanced literacy plan is explicit instruction. Although balanced literacy programs are relatively new, they incorporate the best of traditional teaching practices with the most effective modern teaching strategies. While it is more traditional, teacher centered or explicit instruction is necessary for teaching literacy and should be balanced with more student centered teaching methods. Explicit instruction in systematic phonics, spelling, vocabulary and reading comprehension is an indispensable part of a balanced literacy program (Snow, et al., 1998). All readers benefit from explicit or direct instruction, but struggling readers and students from lower socioeconomic status gain the most (Snow, et al., 1998).

**Guided reading.** A fourth essential strategy that should be integrated into a balanced literacy program is guided reading. Guided reading is an essential part of a balanced literacy program because it gives the teacher an opportunity to observe and listen to student readers individually, assess and record their progress and provide individualized instruction in a small group setting (Guastello & Lenz, 2005; Tompkins, 2011). Guastello and Lenz (2005) explained that guided reading gives educators the occasion to develop students into independent readers while still giving them the support they need to succeed when reading and comprehending more difficult texts. As students read, the teacher is examining how each child decodes words, pauses for punctuation, uses intonation, accuracy, speed and fluency and self-monitors progress and understanding (Guastello & Lenz, 2005).

In guided reading time, students are grouped heterogeneously together into small reading groups according to their reading level. The teacher then selects an instructional level text that

the children can read with at least ninety percent accuracy and obtains a copy for each member of the group. Ideally, the teacher meets with the group once per day to engage them in guided reading. The teacher starts by introducing the text, having the students predict what they think will happen in the story and setting a purpose for reading. Then the children read the book, usually silently. The teacher supports their reading by offering them help with decoding, vocabulary and comprehension. The students and teacher discuss the book and revisit the text to learn phonics concepts and comprehension skills. Finally the teacher should place the book in the class library so that the students can read it again during independent reading time (Tompkins, 2011).

**Reading centers and kidstations.** While the teacher is interacting with the students in the guided reading group, the other children can be engaged in centers, independent work or kidstations (Guastello & Lenz, 2005). In centers, the groups move to stations where they complete activities or play educational games, which can involve the computer, manipulatives or paper and pencil activities that support the learning that took place in an earlier lesson. Students can also be given independent work, where they complete assignments that are a part of the regular curriculum. The kidstation approach is the most valuable way to support literacy because it is closely aligned with whatever literacy lesson that has been taught previously and the national literacy standards. Four kidstations are offered in a five day rotation that focus on reading writing, listening, speaking, twenty first century skills and student accountability (Guastello & Lenz, 2005; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009; Tompkins 2011).

For each kidsation, the teacher provides the children with a box of materials that they will need to complete the literacy task, which includes directions, materials and samples of what they must accomplish. There are four kidstations. The first kidsation focuses on word reading skills,

vocabulary and literal comprehension. The second kidstation supports the independent reading of literature and requires a written response to the reading helping students to develop interpretive and inferential comprehension skills. The third kidstation helps students to develop their critical thinking and evaluation skills by reading and responding to different texts. The fourth kidstation is actually a time for the students to present what they have written or created (Guastello & Lenz, 2005). Kidstation four is essential because it holds students accountable for their learning and it gives them an opportunity to present what they have learned

Three things make the kidstation model superior. The first is the flexible time allotment for each station, which gives students the time they will need to complete each task successfully. The second is that students are given an opportunity to present the products that they created. A third valuable component of the kidstation model is that it gives the teacher a daily opportunity to interact with the groups at each station after completing the guided reading session. The teacher does this by assigning the guided reading group an independent activity that cements what the students have learned during their session. While the guided reading group completes their independent assignment, the teacher can circulate to the different kidstations (Guastello & Lenz, 2005).

When creating kidstations, it is imperative to make the stations authentic learning experiences that the children will engage in and then provide evidence of their understanding and hard work. In order to make the groups manageable and productive, the students must have a good understanding of the task they are supposed to complete. Additionally, they need clearly defined individual roles within the group and defined objectives that they must meet. Successful group work also requires that trust and respect are a central part of the classroom conditions (Lyons, 2006). Guastello and Lenz (2005) suggested that collaborative work be postponed until

individual students have proved that they can create meaningful products on their own.

Additionally, to make group work more manageable only one group should work collaboratively at a time to ensure that a respectful work environment ensues (Guastello & Lenz, 2005).

**Word study.** Many balanced literacy programs incorporate word study on a daily basis in order to increase students decoding skills and vocabulary. Children use enjoyable games and activities to discover what letters, sounds, roots, prefixes and suffixes make up words and how they can deduce meaning from the segments or syllables. Word study is a powerful way to teach children how to decode and comprehend unfamiliar words through enjoyable and authentic activities (Charles & Charles, 2008; Gomez-Shanne, 2001).

Tompkins (2011) discussed four main strategies that teachers can use to help children read and understand unfamiliar words. The first strategy is phonic analysis, which is when the student learns to associate certain graphemes, or letters, with specific phonemes, or sounds. The second word study strategy, termed decoding by analogy, is when the student decodes a word by comparing it to a word that they are familiar with. For example they might recognize the -all in ball and apply that knowledge when decoding the -all in tall. The third strategy, syllabic analysis, is when the student breaks the word into syllables and then decodes each syllable individually before reading the entire word. The fourth strategy, morphemic analysis, is when the student searches for the root word and then figures out what prefixes or suffixes have been added and how they might affect the sound and the meaning of the root word (Tompkins, 2011).

**Shared reading.** Shared reading is when the teacher reads an enlarged picture book to the students that is above their independent reading level. While the teacher reads, the children follow along and look at the pictures. This is a great opportunity for the children to hear the good intonation and appropriate pauses for punctuation that fluent readers use. Shared reading

allows the students to actively participate in the reading. The students can participate by predicting what the outcome of the story might be, or by using their visual literacy skills to explain how the pictures enhance the meaning of the text. Echo reading, another way to engage students in a shared reading time, is when students repeat what the teacher has read mimicking the elements of fluency she models. Shared reading helps to develop students' fluency, comprehension, visual literacy, listening and word reading skills. Shared reading time is the perfect time to introduce reading strategies, teach sequencing, make inferences, predict outcomes, identify big ideas, themes, setting, and main characters and make personal connections to the text (Charles & Charles, 2008; Gomez-Shanne, 2001; Tompkins, 2011).

**Reading and writing workshop.** Reading and writing workshop offer students an occasion to engage in authentic reading and writing endeavors (Tompkins, 2011). The benefits of using the workshop approach are many. First, children are able to choose a book of interest to them at their independent reading level or a topic of interest to write about, which motivates them and encourages them to take responsibility for their work. Second, the learning activities are student centered, which creates natural curiosity, interest and motivation for the children to read. Additionally, the workshop model gives teachers the opportunity to work with students individually, which creates an occasion for differentiation.

Reading workshop in early elementary school usually consists of thirty to sixty minutes of independent reading. Then the children are required to respond to their reading in a journal log or using some type of graphic organizer. Reading workshop also consists of a sharing time where students are assigned into groups to discuss their reading. Within the reading workshop time, the teacher teaches mini-lessons on word reading skills, comprehension strategies, text factors or workshop practices. Mini-lessons are about five to fifteen minutes and can be taught

to the whole class, small groups or individuals depending on the students' needs. In addition, reading workshops often include interactive read-alouds where the teacher reads a story aloud that might be above the students' independent reading levels giving the children a chance to engage in a high quality text and practice their knowledge based skills (Manak, 2011; Tompkins, 2011).

Writing workshop, which is similar to reading workshop, gives students the opportunity to produce writing by moving through the five stages of the writing process; pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing and publishing (Tompkins, 2011). Children are able to work at their own pace because the majority of activities are student directed. And just like in reading workshop, teachers and students benefit because they are given the opportunity to work together one-on-one during writing conferences. There are four components that make up writing workshop. First, the students engage in thirty minutes of writing where they are diligently working through the five step writing process at their own pace. Within the writing workshop time, the teacher will teach minilessons about the writing process, writing skills and strategies like organization, punctuation and different writing genres. Interactive read-alouds are also a key part of writing workshop. Reading quality texts aloud to students provides them with examples of quality writing that they can incorporate into their own writing (Manak, 2011; Tompkins, 2011). Like many others, Griffith (2010) believes that it is through the reading of superior literature that students will develop into quality writers. Writing workshop is also a great time to incorporate twenty first century skills by involving children in creative planning, collaboration and communication during brainstorming and editing. Technology can be incorporated using computer storyboard software, auditory recording hardware, live action cameras, video editing software and more (Bogard, 2012).



**Thematic units.** As mentioned earlier, integrating literacy into social studies, history, science, math and other subjects allows educators to easily engage the students in higher levels of thought and it makes learning more meaningful and authentic. Creating and implementing a thematic unit is a useful way to integrate literacy into the subject areas (Tompkins, 2011). Thematic units offer students opportunities to read and write about topics of interest and present an opportunity to increase students knowledge base, vocabulary and comprehension skills. Within thematic units, children can be authentically engaged in memorizing, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating and creating, which will encourage them to become lifelong readers and writers.

In order to create a thematic unit, Tompkins (2011) explained eight steps that educators should take. The first is to decide what the main focus of the unit will be and to identify four or five big goals that the students will meet. The second step is to gather text books, fiction books, informational books, articles and other print sources that will support learning and place the collection in a special place in the classroom. The third step is gather multimedia resources and internet sites that would support learning. The fourth step is to map out reading and writing strategies that would help in teaching the unit content. The fifth step is to plan minilessons on the reading and writing strategies that the students will need to use. The sixth step is to prepare differentiation strategies that will support the lowest to the highest readers and writers. The seventh step in unit planning is to decide on culminating projects that the students will create at the end of the unit to show their mastery of the content. And finally, the eighth step is to plan and create formative and summative assessments. After the teacher has completed the prior eight steps, she is ready to begin planning lessons, rubrics and schedules.

There are many other strategies that educators can and should use in their literacy program. Book talks given by the teacher can introduce students to a new text, which encourages the students to read the book on their own to find out what happens in the end. Reader's theater can be used to build students' fluency. Placing a special share chair in the room will give children a special opportunity to share their best work and practice their oral presentation skills. Choral reading, which is when a class or small groups of children reads a selection together, cultivates students' phonemic awareness and fluency (Tompkins, 2011). Educators of literacy should be familiar with all of the aforementioned strategies as well as other research based approaches.

**Authentic assessment.** Superb literacy instruction is driven by authentic assessment. Authentic assessment is designed by the teacher and closely aligns with an objective that was recently taught. In addition, authentic assessment involves the completion of tasks that the children are familiar with completing during regular class time (Ebby, Herrell & Jordan, 2009). Early elementary educators should frequently use running records, miscue analysis, informal reading inventories (IRIs) and developmental reading assessments (DRAs) to authentically assess their students reading levels (Firmender, et al., 2013; Tompkins, 2011). Some examples of authentic assessment that measure higher level thought are creating a graph, a report showing cause and effect, artwork, an invention or composition, a play or video, engaging in a discussion or a debate and writing an essay that addresses the upper levels of Bloom's Taxonomy (Ebby, et al., 2009). Authentic assessment is a vital piece of a good literacy program (Larson, 2006).

Teachers should use authentic pre-tests to guide their instruction, formative assessments to see how the students are progressing and summative assessments to find out the depth of learning that took place (Ebby, et al., 2009; Tompkins, 2011). The assessment should also be

varied to ensure that student's knowledge and comprehension are being assessed and not merely the students' test taking abilities. Using varied assessments also gives students an opportunity to show what they have learned using their strengths. For example, an artistic child might be able to draw the phases of the water cycle better than they could explain them in a written essay. Children should be tested early and frequently on their skills based competencies as well as their knowledge based competencies. Detecting problems early is essential to the literacy development of the student. Nonie K. Lesaux (2012) stated, "good reading instruction starts with comprehensive assessment" (p. 78). In addition, assessment should be used like a map to guide instruction.

**Authentic Application.** Effective instruction incorporates authentic application, which is when the learner is engaged in a task of interest and a one in which they are analyzing, synthesizing or creating information. By engaging in higher level thought through activities like role playing, publishing a book or engaging in a debate, the learner is experiencing the content that they are learning (Tompkins, 2011). The experience is real to the child therefore the learning is authentic. John Dewey (1938) wrote, "education in order to accomplish its ends both for the individual learner and for society must be based upon experience" (p. 89).

### **Benefits of Balanced Literacy Instruction**

All students benefit when a balanced literacy program is implemented. Larson (2006) argued that using a balanced literacy program that focuses on the literacy of everyday life and twenty first century skills would make learning and assessment more meaningful and authentic. Additionally, it would prepare students for a rapidly changing world with global commerce and communication (Larson, 2006; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009). However, the greatest

beneficiaries of a well implemented balanced literacy program are those students found at the highest and lowest ends of the spectrum.

**Struggling readers benefit.** Students who struggle with reading and writing gain more literacy skills based competencies and knowledge based competencies through a balanced literacy program than they would in a traditional program setting because the teacher is able to tailor instruction to meet their individual needs. In addition, a balanced literacy program cultivates a love for literacy into struggling students by allowing them to read and write about their interests. Certain risk factors like living in poverty, having limited English proficiency, having a learning disability or a hearing impairment can cause students to struggle with reading and writing (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Implementing a balanced literacy program has been proven to significantly aid these struggling readers (Duffy, 2001; Ivey, Bauman & Jarrard, 2000; Larson, 2006).

Traditionally, there has been a literacy achievement gap between whites and minorities. However, the achievement gaps are shrinking as time progresses. Specifically, the Hispanic-white reading gap and the black-white achievement gap have decreased since the 1970s and continue to shrink. Interestingly, Hispanic students tend to struggle more with reading in early elementary school than their white peers but the gap is reduced at the end of first grade (Reardon, et al., 2012). Conversely, black students perform well in elementary school and then the achievement gap widens in middle school. While the achievement gaps between minority and white students are shrinking the reading gap between low socioeconomic students and higher class students is widening. Reardon, et al. (2012) reported that eighth grade students who belong to a low socioeconomic class are approximately five years behind their high-income peers with regards to literacy. Additionally, boys still lag behind girls in their literacy ability.

Implementing a balanced literacy program helps to close these literacy gaps that exist in modern schools (Lesaux, 2012; Reardon, et al., 2012).

**Accelerated learners benefit.** Like struggling readers and writers, accelerated students benefit intensely from a balanced literacy program because the instruction can be adapted or differentiated to meet their learning needs. Unfortunately, differentiated reading instruction is applied more for remediation and less for acceleration (Firmender, et al., 2013). Firmender et al. (2013) found that few advanced readers are provided with suitable instruction and reading content. Instead, high achievers remain unchallenged and sometimes fall into boredom, misbehavior and underachievement.

Meaningful, differentiated reading instruction can and should be accomplished at all levels. In its most basic form, children should be grouped into instructional level groups and given appropriately challenging instruction and reading material during a small group rotation or reading workshop. Even the highest readers need to be challenged, or they will stagnate and little or no growth will ensue throughout the school year. To ensure that growth is happening, teachers should frequently assess students' fluency and comprehension levels using the aforementioned authentic assessment tools (Firmender, et al., 2013; Tompkins, 2011).

Teachers can effectively differentiate content, instruction, environment and student products. Some effective methods of differentiation for accelerated learners are enrichment, acceleration, scaffolding, varied grouping and various scheduling (Firmender, et al., 2013). In addition, cluster grouping, which is when students are grouped by ability into perspective classrooms at the beginning of the school year, has been shown to benefit advanced readers. Curriculum compacting is another form of differentiation that serves to challenge students by eliminating instructional content and busy work that the advanced children have already

mastered (Firmender, et al., 2013). Students' problem solving skills and independence are increased when the curriculum is differentiated to meet their individual needs. Grouping gifted readers, allows them to discuss more complex themes, make deeper connections and create more complex products.

Xiang, et al., (2011) looked at the progress made by the highest achieving students in elementary through high school. Specifically, the researchers were concerned about the effects of legislation like No Child Left Behind that targets the lowest performing students' proficiency. While the research has shown that NCLB promoted academic growth in the low achievers, few studies have looked at the growth of the highest achievers. This study found that approximately two in five students who are considered high achievers in third grade do not maintain their high achieving status. However, the researchers realized that even though their achievement levels dropped they usually did not fall below the 70th percentile and that NCLB is not the cause for their faltering. In addition, the overall number of high achievers did not change because many students, known as "late bloomers" entered the high achieving ranks. The researchers were concerned that the progress of the low achievers was greater than the progress of the high achievers. Perhaps this could be because so much focus has been placed on the proficiency of all students, while little attention and funding has been expended to gifted education. Our nation depends on the success of our highest achieving students and ignoring their needs wastes human capital (Xiang, et al., 2011).

### **Overcoming the obstacles**

Duffy (2001) confirmed that the biggest challenge for elementary school teachers is teaching students to read. She examined the effects of using a responsive, accelerated and balanced literacy program to help struggling second grade readers. Duffy (2001) used a

formative experimental design in which she could adapt her instruction and methods to meet the diverse needs of her students during the course of the study. Struggling readers often have two levels of reading difficulty. The first, termed "higher ground," refers to the struggles that can be overcome using innovative or research based instructional methods. The "lower ground" struggles are those that are beyond the reach of the teacher and could include factors like socioeconomic class and home life (Duffy, 2001). Duffy's study revealed that using balanced literacy instruction, responsive teaching and literacy acceleration was effective in increasing the students' word identification, fluency in reading and writing, comprehension, self perceptions, perceptions of reading and instructional reading levels.

Balanced literacy instruction is frequently incorporated into teacher philosophy and instructional practice because of its known effectiveness (Duffy, 2001; Ivy, Baumann & Jarrard, 2000). However, the implementation of a successful, balanced literacy program is complex and varies greatly between classrooms. Ivy, et al., (2000) stated that within a balanced approach teachers are integrating explicit instruction in specific literacy skills with immersion into authentic literary experiences. Additionally, they argued that successful programs rely on classroom management systems and the teacher's ability to make instructional decisions (Ivy, et al., 2000).

Duke and Block (2012) identified three major obstacles that literacy educators have to overcome to implement a successful balanced literacy program. The first problem is that educators gravitate towards teaching word reading skills and other easier to learn reading skills at the expense of teaching more complex topics like vocabulary, content knowledge and comprehension strategies. The second dilemma is that many educators lack the training and knowledge that they need to construct a successful program (Cohen & Bhatt, 2012). The final

and most challenging obstacle is the lack of time available to devote to the development of literacy (Duke & Block, 2012).

### **Organizing a Literacy Program**

In order to successfully plan and implement a balanced twenty first century literacy program early elementary educators need training, professional development, a plethora of instructional strategies, a functional and diverse plan, a flexible schedule, established classroom routines, and a superb management plan (Charles & Charles, 2008; Duke & Block, 2012; Tompkins, 2011). In order to create an early literacy program that functions effectively, teachers require a plan that incorporates all of the components of a balanced twenty first century literacy program including; reading, phonemic awareness and phonics, literacy strategies, vocabulary, comprehension, literature, content-area study, oral language, writing and spelling. A good plan also requires the teacher to have a deep understanding of all of the instructional strategies discussed in this review as well as other research based practices. Most balanced literacy plans use guided reading, stations, word work and shared reading on a daily basis adding in other instructional strategies when needed (Charles & Charles, 2008; Duke & Block, 2012; Tompkins, 2011).

Additionally, the program needs an extremely organized yet flexible schedule that allows for all of the pieces of the program to come together effectively. The Reading First Initiative requires that kindergarten through third grade teachers set aside one hundred and twenty minutes per day of uninterrupted reading and writing instruction (Lyons, 2006). Other educators set aside ninety minutes per day for their reading program (Charles & Charles, 2008; Gomez-Shanne, 2001). Time is a precious commodity for students and teachers. The only way that students will learn the valuable literacy skills they need is by scheduling time to teach and practice identifying



and writing letters, recognizing sounds, practicing reading and writing, reading for meaning, making connections, etc (Duke & Block, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

Management is one of the biggest problems that educators have when implementing a balanced literacy program; it is essential to have a superb management system in place that values the students' diverse personalities and personal needs while setting learning boundaries to maximize instructional time and create an environment of mutual respect (Ivy, et al, 2000; Manning & Bucher, 2007 ). In addition to a stellar management system, the children need to be familiar with the routines of the schedules literacy time. They need to know how and when to move to different stations, how and when to address the teacher and ask questions and they always need to know what task they should be accomplishing at any given time (Guastello & Lenz, 2005; Tompkins, 2011).

## **Conclusion**

Twenty-first century literacy demands are much greater than they were in the past. The job market is changing and more and more jobs are created that need advanced literacy skills while traditional blue collar jobs are disappearing because the work is being outsourced or done by computers and machines. In today's rapidly changing world, "advanced literacy" is a necessary component for achievement in the adult world (Murnane, et al., 2012; Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, 2009; Tompkins, 2011). The journey to advanced literacy begins at the moment a child enters this world. Early elementary school educators play a key role in developing a child's literacy abilities, which is building a solid foundation of phonics, literacy strategies, vocabulary, comprehension, literature, content-area study, oral language, writing and spelling while cultivating a child's natural curiosity into a lifelong love for reading and writing. Students who do not develop a strong literacy foundation by third grade will not likely catch up

with their age level peers. While it is difficult and time consuming, it is essential for early elementary educators to develop a superb literacy program so that their students are prepared to succeed in the twenty first century academic and professional world.

### **Introduction to the Application**

I created a website called Literacy Lighthouse to help early elementary teachers develop their own balanced literacy programs that support the development of higher level thinking and knowledge based literacy skills. Every child deserves the opportunity to learn to develop advanced literacy skills so that they have a fair chance at success in a competitive and perpetually changing world. Building an effective literacy program that supports a diverse body of learners is an essential part of every educator's job, yet it is extremely time consuming and complex. The purpose of Literacy Lighthouse is to direct and inspire teachers to create superior and effective literacy programs, which will in turn guide young children to reach their literacy potential. A full description of the web site is presented in Appendix A.

Within the website, I included two thematic unit plans that integrate literacy and twenty first century skills. The first is a unit plan on plants and the second is on the Revolutionary War. While I recognize that a specific block of time should be set aside for reading and writing instruction, I also believe that it should be integrated throughout the curriculum. Higher level thought, twenty first century skills, advanced literacy and knowledge based skills should be integrated into math, history, social studies, and science to ensure that students have mastered these essential skills that they will indeed need for the rest of their academic and professional lives. Integration also gives the children authentic opportunities to practice these skills in a safe environment. The thematic units show how to integrate multiple literacy activities to strengthen

students' reading, writing, speaking, viewing and listening skills. In addition, the students will employ higher level thought while working through the lessons, assignments and assessments.

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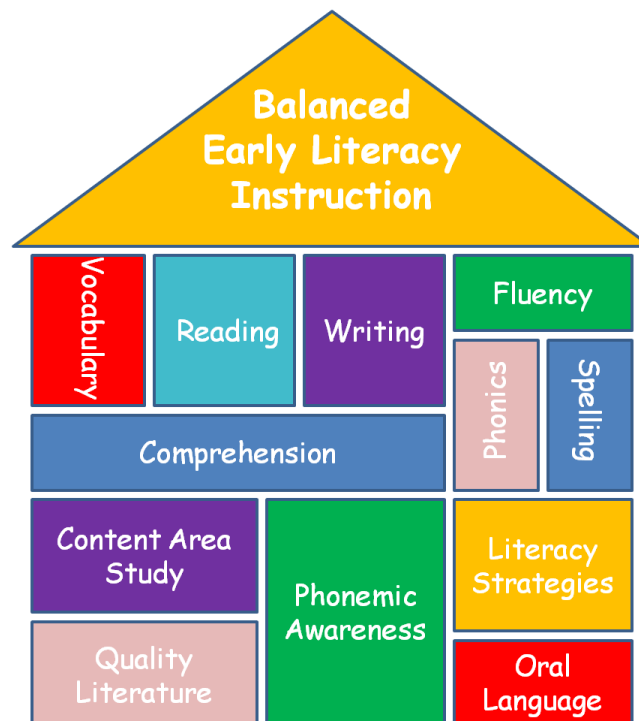
### **Application**

Literacy Lighthouse, [www.literacylighthouse.weebly.com](http://www.literacylighthouse.weebly.com), was created to help elementary school educators create and implement effective balanced literacy programs that support the acquisition of twenty first century skills. Teaching literacy is complex and can be overwhelming, even to the most experienced educator. Despite the challenges, it is essential for educators to help every child develop literacy competencies and experience the joy that being literate can bring. Early elementary school is the place where children need to establish a solid foundation in literacy so that they can develop the literacy skills they will need to succeed in our perpetually changing world. Literacy Lighthouse is a resource that provides early educators with current information about literacy, useful resources, instructional ideas and strategies, and examples of successful literacy instruction. The website is broken down into seven different pages offering a plethora of helpful information from multiple and varied sources.

The first page that the viewer will encounter is the home page, which introduces the website and links the viewer to the complete literature review that prompted the creation of the web site. The home page offers a brief argument supporting the development of a balanced literacy program that supports 21st century learning. There is also a form the viewer can complete in order to contact the creator. The viewer is encouraged to contact the creator with questions, suggestions and problems that they might find with the web site. Literacy Lighthouse is an ongoing project and will change over time to include the most up-to-date instructional strategies and resources as well as the most current web 2.0 and freeware programs that support literacy development.

The second page of [www.literacylighthouse.weebly.com](http://www.literacylighthouse.weebly.com) is called "Building Blocks of Balance." As shown in figure 1, an effective balanced literacy program is made up of instruction

in reading, writing, oral language, comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, phonics, spelling, content area study, phonemic awareness, literacy strategies and quality literature (Murnane, et. al.; Tompkins, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Within the page, the components are explained in detail and instructional strategies and resources are presented that support the development of that particular skill. Many colorful flow charts and pictures are included to simplify the page and support visual learning.



*Figure 1.* The components that make up a balanced literacy program.

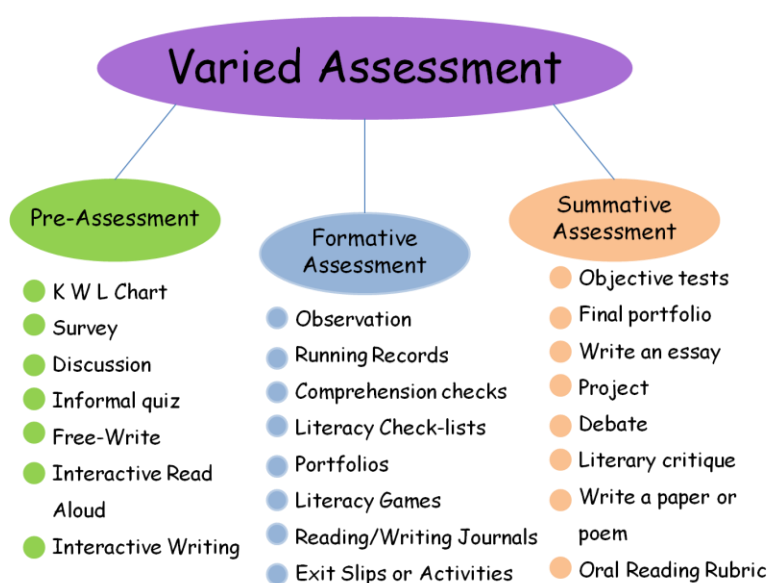
The third page on the web site is called, "Literacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." This page begins by explaining the importance of teaching children digital literacy and twenty first century skills. A link to the "Partnership for Twenty First Century Skills" is provided so that educators can learn more about what twenty first century skills are and how they can be effectively taught in the classroom. A video called "21st Century Skills and Literacy" was created and embedded on this page to explain the relationship between literacy and twenty first century skills and to

emphasize the importance of integrating both throughout the curriculum. Following the video, multiple web 2.0 tools and free software programs that support the development of digital and traditional literacy are listed, linked and described. Next, there is a section about social networking and online communication that provides some safe and easy ways for educators to incorporate this medium into their literacy instruction. Finally, the page offers helpful information and a lesson plan concerning the safety of students who are learning online.

The fourth page at Literacy Lighthouse, "Instructional Strategies," explains the necessity of using research based instructional practices to teach literacy. Links to the Reading Rockets webpage and the What Works Clearinghouse are provided so that educators can search for evidence based practices. Next, the page offers information concerning instructional strategies that should be ever present in an exceptional literacy program including, differentiation scaffolding, explicit instruction and literacy integration. Each strategy is linked to a page that thoroughly explains the tactic and its benefits, and gives examples on successful implementation. The following section presents and explains some instructional tools that educators can use when implementing their own balanced literacy program. Guided reading, literacy centers, kidstations, word study, shared reading, interactive writing, reading, workshop, writing workshop, and thematic units are the tools that are explained thus far. Information on how to implement each strategy as well as the benefits of using it are provided. In addition, resources are offered to assist educators who are planning to incorporate the strategies into their program.

"Assessment Essentials" is the title of the fifth page. A literacy teacher's goal is not to reach some predetermined plateau; but to ensure that every child is growing in their abilities and developing a love for literacy and learning. In order to truly measure students' abilities, assessment should be varied and ongoing. Figure 2 shows some examples of assessments that

should be used frequently to maximize each child's learning potential by guiding instruction to meet their developmental needs. This page explains the importance of frequent and varied assessment as well as a detailed description of pre-assessment, formative assessment, summative assessment, criterion references evaluation and performance based assessment. Again, colorful diagrams and pictures were created to engage visual learners and to simplify the information. Assessment tools that are specific to certain areas of literacy are then provided with explanations and links to helpful assessment tools.



*Figure 2.* Examples of assessments that should be used frequently in a balanced literacy program.

The sixth page on the Literacy Lighthouse web site is titled "Second Grade Literacy Block." Since I will be a second grade teacher, I have created a detailed literacy block schedule that reflects the research that I have completed and addresses twenty first century skills as well as higher level thinking and knowledge based literacy skills. Figure 3 shows how the time will be spent and figure 4 lists the elements that will be included in each time slot. Following the schedules, I have detailed what will occur in each time slot and described management strategies that I will incorporate so that the literacy block will run smoothly. I will update this site over the

course of the year to reflect what I found to work and what did not work. I will also add lesson plans and literacy center ideas as I create them.

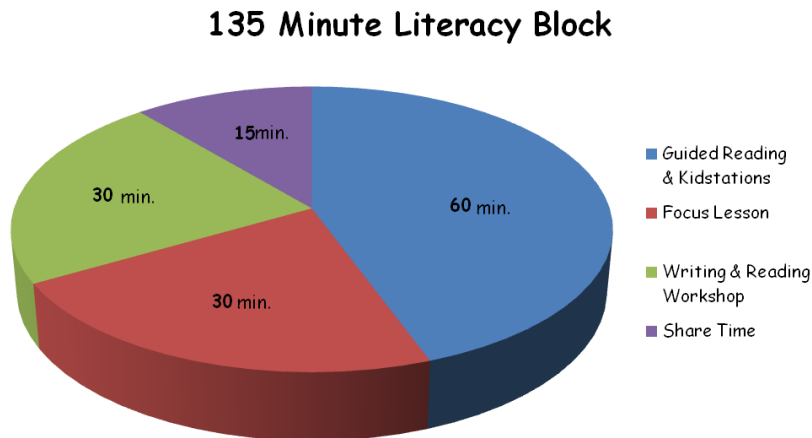


Figure 3. The division of time in a 135 minute literacy block.

Elements Included in Each Time Slot			
❖ Guided Reading	❖ Focus Lesson	❖ Writing & Reading Workshops	❖ Share Time
❖ Small group Mini Lessons	❖ Interactive Read Alouds	❖ Shared Reading & Writing	❖ Oral language & communication skills
❖ Individual reading assessments in fluency & comprehension	❖ Phonological Awareness Instruction	❖ Mini Lessons or word study	❖ Listening and self-monitoring skills
❖ Literacy Centers	❖ Comprehension Strategies	❖ Independent reading & writing	
❖ Independent/ student centered learning	❖ Vocabulary	❖ Individual Lit. Conferences	
❖ Cooperative Learning	❖ Word Study		
❖ Phonics, spelling, vocab., word work, history, science,			

Figure 4. The instructional elements that are included in each time slot.

"Literacy Standards & Online Tools" is the final page on the Literacy Lighthouse web site. Like the title suggests, the page contains links to the Virginia Standards of Learning and the Common Core Standards that address literacy. It is imperative that literacy educators align their instruction with these literacy standards in order to ensure that they are providing their students with the literacy skills they will need to succeed in subsequent grade levels. The final sections of the website provides links to online resources that teachers can use to build their literacy programs and seek out professional development opportunities that will help them to become more effective literacy teachers.

The Literacy Lighthouse site will remain a work in progress, which will adapt and evolve as new instructional strategies, new literature, and new technology emerge. The site will also grow as my knowledge and experience base expands. Since no one literacy program and no single strategy will work for every child, it is imperative for literacy teachers to design flexible programs; and since the world will continue to change and technology will continue to advance, literacy teachers must continually update their programs. My aspiration is that this site will help early literacy educators to both design initial literacy programs as well as to adapt and update their existing programs so that every child receives superior literacy instruction; because achieving advanced literacy is the key to their future success.