



Triple R Teaching

Hello! Welcome to Triple R Teaching, Episode 63. I'm your host, Anna Geiger, from The Measured Mom, and we are in episode seven of our reaction to the Fountas and Pinnell "Just to Clarify," blog series.

Question seven says, "Some people have referred to your work as 'balanced literacy' or 'whole language.' Do these labels accurately describe your work?"

Here's what Irene Fountas had to say:

"We are not fans of using labels to describe literacy instruction because they often mean different things to different people. We have always advocated for teachers and leaders to describe their literacy practices and rationales, rather than label their approach. In our first professional book, 'Guided Reading,' published in 1996, we used the word 'balanced' as an adjective when describing a high-quality language and literacy environment that would include both small group and whole group differentiated instruction that included the various types of reading and writing, letter and word work, oral language, observation, assessment, homeschool connections, all supported by good teaching. Since that time, the term 'balanced literacy' has become a label that means many different things over the years. To some, it means a little of this and a little of that. Rather, we choose to describe effective literacy instruction. Rather, we choose to use terms like 'responsive teaching' or 'effective literacy teaching.'"

I think that what Irene Fountas is saying here is fair. I think it's best not to label a specific practice as "balanced literacy" or "whole language" or "science of reading" or "structured literacy." It's best to look at specifically what is being taught and why.

However, these labels can be useful, right? If we know that something is aligned better with the idea of what balanced literacy is, we know it's not something we're going to want to use because that's in contradiction with the current reading research. I think it's fair though for them not to want to have the "balanced literacy" or "whole language" label.

I always thought that Fountas and Pinnell came up with the "balanced literacy" label, but in doing research for this episode I learned from a Reading Rockets article by Timothy Shanahan, that it actually came from Michael Pressley.

Michael Pressley was actually a big phonics guy. He was one of the authors of the "Open Court Phonics" program at the time, but he wanted to, as Timothy Shanahan writes, "heal the great divide between people like him and the whole language advocates."

The idea of balanced literacy in the beginning was not a bad one. The idea was to help both sides get along and to see the value in both approaches. To me, the value in the "phonics approach" is explicit, systematic, structured teaching, and the value in the "whole language approach" is helping kids develop a love for reading.

We CAN have both, but there are things from the whole language approach that are a real problem that unfortunately have leaked into what we consider the balanced literacy approach. And a lot of that has to do with haphazard teaching of basic skills.

As Timothy Shanahan writes in this article,

"Unfortunately, 'balanced' too often means that kids don't get substantial explicit instruction in chronological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, spelling, handwriting, oral reading fluency, reading comprehension, or writing. Studies show repeatedly that explicit instruction in these is beneficial in moving kids forward in literacy learning and the idea of balancing these essentials against something else is bothersome. It's time we retire the balanced literacy."

To many people today, especially in the science of reading community, Fountas and Pinnell and Lucy Calkins are synonymous with the balanced literacy approach.

They may not want that label, which I understand because as I've said before, there are many different understandings of what balanced literacy is. There are many different definitions and no one wants to connect themselves with a label that's not clear.

But I think when we consider balanced literacy as this approach in which we focus more on activities than skills, in which we have something of a haphazard approach to phonics and phonemic awareness, in which we focus more on the love of reading than

on the skills kids need that will get them to love reading, then I think it's fair to say that Fountas and Pinnell are advocates of a balanced literacy approach.

That's my response to this episode of "Just to Clarify" by Fountas and Pinnell. Go ahead and check out the show notes at themeasuredmom.com/episode63. There I'm going to link to several articles about balanced literacy, and you can decide for yourself, are Fountas and Pinnell balanced literacy instructors?

We'll see you next week!