“FROM PRINT TO EYE WITH VOICE SUPPORT” is a mantra of the balanced literacy program that has taken hold in Monroe Middle School in Tampa, FL. Monroe implemented the balanced literacy pilot program as part of a districtwide effort to improve student literacy. The implementation allowed Monroe’s reading teachers to work with Janet Allen, a noted expert in reading development. Allen currently works with districts implementing large scale literacy initiatives. She conducted a four-day conference at which the reading teachers learned the balanced literacy approach to reading improvement. The teachers then modeled their classes after the balanced literacy week schedule outlined in Allen’s book *Yellow Brick Roads*, which was the handbook Monroe uses to support the balanced literacy initiative.
Balanced Literacy

Balanced literacy is characterized by four components: read-alouds, shared reading, independent reading, and guided reading. Initially, the teachers implemented read-alouds and shared and independent reading. The fourth component, guided reading, was implemented later as they became more comfortable with the strategies. By the end of the first year, all teachers were successfully rotating the four components of the balanced literacy approach.

Read-alouds. Teachers choose a reading passage (e.g., a paragraph or a poem) and read it to the class. Read-alouds are done every day and are modeled during faculty and leadership team meetings. Read-alouds are the easiest of the four components to implement. According to Allen (2000), reading aloud “improves listening skills, builds vocabulary, aids reading comprehension and has a positive impact on students’ attitude toward reading” (p. 43).

Shared reading. While the teacher reads the text aloud, students follow along in their copies of the text. Allen (2000) writes, “While I consistently used read-alouds to demonstrate the breadth of reading, I used shared reading to illustrate its depth” (p. 59). In shared reading, the teacher models fluent reading with a variety of text. Through shared reading—which teachers at Monroe model three times a week—teachers are able to demonstrate the thought process they go through when reading. Shared reading helps students build the relationship of text-to-self and text-to-world that they need to develop literacy—that is, the ability to construct meaning from text.

Independent reading. Students choose what they will read from a wide variety of books. Independent reading challenges teachers to give up the control of what students read and how students assess what they read. Students who have been exposed to a variety of texts through read-alouds and shared reading are better equipped to handle the text they encounter independently. Independent reading allows students to expand their world, background knowledge, and experiences. Many students have obligations outside of school that limit their independent reading time. Schools need to provide time for students to read, so students can live the stories.

Guided reading. Teachers work with small groups of students on common skill deficiencies. Allen (2000) calls guided reading “the heart of the balanced literacy program” (p. 80). In guided reading, students read silently but the “teacher will stop them for questioning, connecting, strategizing, predicting and reinforcing” (Allen, p. 81).

Implementation

After the training, the district provided some books on tape to use during shared and independent reading. To supplement and expand the program, Monroe bought more than 400 audiobooks. Recognizing the power of a balanced literacy approach, Monroe contacted a

PREVIEW

A middle school uses a four-pronged approach to improve literacy: read-alouds, independent reading, shared reading, and guided reading.

Audiobooks are also important components of the schoolwide program.

Success has been reflected by four years of improved reading scores.

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representative of an electronics company and used Title 1 money to purchase cassette players with headphones. The books and cassette players were distributed to classrooms. The cassette players have since been replaced with CD players and books on disk.

Many classroom reform strategies are implemented with administrators being only peripherally aware of them, and the audiobooks were no exception. One teacher decided to have her class listen to a book on cassette while relaxing outside. As the class was moving from the classroom to their outdoor area, an administrator stopped a student to stress the school rule against electronic equipment at school. The student had to explain that he was listening to a book. The embarrassed administrator encouraged the student to read more.

The recorded books added rigor and relevance to the reading program by immersing students in the print books they have chosen. One sixth-grade teacher faithfully uses the books on tape, and data reflect that 90% of her students made year over year of growth in reading on the statewide assessment. She even found that after listening to a few books, some students take their headphones off while reading because they could read faster than the tape. The books on tape helped all students read independently, and many had never read a book in their lives.

Audiobooks also do not allow to students to fake reading. There are fake readers in classrooms across the United States. Both of us were fake readers when we were in school. Fake readers are those who stare at a page for a while before turning it, giving the impression of someone engaged in the text. There are many reasons for students to be fake readers, including boredom and lack of flow (i.e., the student’s understanding of the natural flow of the language and how words interact with punctuation and one another). Lack of flow becomes evident when students are asked to read aloud. Students who understand the flow of language are able to read aloud without pause or hesitation.

Monroe’s reading teachers follow a schedule. Every day, classes participate in a read-aloud; three days a week, they have shared reading; two days a week, they have independent reading and guided reading. Balanced literacy is a schoolwide program, not just a program for reading classes, however, so the strategies were also adopted by the social studies and science teachers. These teachers began using read-aloud, shared reading, and independent reading to support their class curriculum. Teachers fight over books, reserving them a year in advance. With the explosion of the reading program, the school has had to meet the challenge of purchasing more class sets of books and audiobooks.

Success
The balanced literacy program began at Monroe four years ago at the direction of the district. Although the principal [Joseph Brown] was reassigned to a new school within the district—where he plans to expand the balanced literacy approach—the program is still ongoing and viable at Monroe under the direction and support of Patricia Fisher, the reading coach.

The schoolwide acceptance of the program has improved Monroe’s results on the statewide assessment. The reading scores have risen the past four years. Some of the biggest gains were made by the lower quartile of students, 76% of whom made several years of growth, the highest mark in our district of 42 middle schools. We believe that their success is a result of the schoolwide approach to balanced literacy. Students are surrounded by and immersed in reading. Teachers are using audiobooks to enhance their textbooks. One math teacher even uses audiobooks during homeroom. Teachers have a newfound enthusiasm for their subjects because of this approach. We are excited to see what successes the balanced literacy program brings in the future.

Reference