Balancing Literacy With Other Curricular Demands: An Autobiographical Account

Mary F. Rice
University of New Mexico, maryrice@unm.edu

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Balancing Literacy With Other Curricular Demands: An Autobiographical Account

Mary Rice, PhD

Abstract—This paper is an autobiographical account of one junior high teacher’s attempts to teach a Balanced Literacy curriculum with an emphasis on her experiences with English language learners (ELLs). The account is framed chronologically from her first days of teaching through her final semester and is organized by her attention to her state’s old English/language arts core, her state’s new English/language arts core, the World-class Instructional Design Association (WIDA) standards for ELLs and finally, the Common Core Curriculum Standards (CCSS). At the end of her autobiography, the author emphasizes the lessons she learned about trying to overlay Balanced Literacy with standards as they evolved during her teaching career. Those lessons focus on the opportunities and limitations of teacher agency and what is means to sustain oneself and sustain other teachers in their attempts to engage in Balanced Literacy practices.

Sleeter (2010) argued that achieving cultural responsive pedagogies require that educators purge their simplistic notions about what it means to be culturally responsive, that they embrace teaching based on a wide array of high-quality research, and that they anticipate and plan for the social and political backlash that will inevitably follow when it becomes public that a particular teacher, school, district, state, or even nation is taking steps not just to foist standards on all the children, but to truly do right by them. This reflective autobiographical essay outlines some of my experiences wrestling with various types of curriculum standards over the course of my 10 year teaching career while also balancing literacy in culturally responsive ways. I begin with an overview of how I became a teacher and how I attained my initial understandings about Balanced Literacy. Then, I continue to tell my story through the lenses of the various curriculum standards that I constructed curriculum from during my tenure as a teacher.

I earned a bachelor’s degree in English, with minors in Teaching English to Speakers of other languages (TESOL) and geography. My pedagogical training focused mainly on English as a second language (ESL). When I started teaching, my first assignment was to work part-time with English learners in a pull out ESL class in a junior high school serving students in grades 8 and 9. That first year there were about 1400 students. During all the almost 10 years I worked there, the enrollment vacillated between 1200 and 1300, with a low year of just over one thousand the year that a new junior high opened. The class periods were 45 minutes long. The number of English learners was unknown when I arrived. I determined that there were about 30 in the school. The number of ESL students climbed to over 100 during the years I worked there and then plummeted the year that I left to approximately a dozen. When I walked into the closet in the library that had been designated as a makeshift classroom on that first day, a handful of children, mostly Spanish speakers, looked up at me curiously.

My job as their pull out instructor (as it was explained to me) was to help them with their homework for their other classes, quiz them with an elaborate set of flashcards, or read from a selection of books that I realized quickly was either blatantly too immature for them or obviously too difficult in terms of vocabulary. The other instructional media available to me consisted of old National Geographic magazines being stored from the library and some dried up tempura paint. When I asked the students what they had been doing, they responded that they did homework if they had it, but they never did, and so they mostly played Uno® — a card game. One child defended this quite adamantly as curriculum. “We learn the colors in English from this game,” he said to me in Spanish. We broke out the cards and I watched them play. Not one word of English was spoken.

After my shift with the English learners, I walked up and down the halls of the junior high, listening to my colleagues teaching. I wanted to hear topics to see if there was some way I could overlap my instruction with theirs. As I heard ideas for lessons, I wrote them down. Then, I went to the local public library and checked out books from the children’s section so there would be pictures on these topics because I thought that might help my students understand or reinforce content. I brought these books to school and we started reading them in class. I also knew that I should be
teaching reading strategies because of an ESL endorsement class that I had taken. Some days we would talk about a strategy and the next day, we would practice it. I also had writing prompts for them from a class that I had taken. So I would give them the prompt and show them what I had written and then they would write. They kept what they wrote in a notebook. Eventually the students started requesting books that we could read as a class and they wanted more autonomy over what they wrote. Since my directives for working with the students reflected generally low expectations for these students, I felt comfortable taking up whatever they were interested in so I could demonstrate to the children the promise that they had. I must say, we had a great time.

What I did not realize at the time was that my makeshift program—my haphazard curriculum—could be described as a crude form of Balanced Literacy. What I was doing balanced certain kinds of literacy curricula with other kinds of content curricula (International Reading Association, 2000). It was also a balance of teacher-initiated activities with student-initiated activities (Spiegel, 1994). However, I was not initially attending to Balanced Literacy in definitions that would require the equal weighing of multiple types of curriculum (Baumann & Ivey, 1997). Finally, I was not emphasizing assessment as a key element in planning for an appropriate balance (Rafael, 1998) and I had no training in the idea of authenticity (Pearson & Rafael, 1999) as a factor in Balanced Literacy.

Spiegel (1998) defined balance as a decision making approach where teachers make thoughtful choices about how to help children increase their capacities as readers and writers. My primitive efforts to help children were not as thoughtful and systematic they could have been, but the desire to have the children learn reading and writing skills was.

I would like to say that I lived out my ten years teaching junior high children in public schools doing the more sophisticated versions of Balanced Literacy and that when state and local, and Common Core State Standards curricula came online, I was able to find some balance with it, but that is not was happened. The rest of this account traces my journey through that decade as I negotiated the demands the district scope and sequence tied to the old state core, and then to the new state core, and finally the WIDA English language development standards (Wisconsin Center for Educational Research, 2012) and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) initiative (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Throughout this article, I document the tensions I experienced in teacher identity and my relational patterns with the students. My goal is to autobiographically explore curriculum shifts and policies enacted at the school level as I worked to develop my knowledge, disposition, identity, and integrity (Grossman, 2005) as an educator.

OLD STATE CORE

Although I had been told in my teacher training that collaboration was important for student success, it was a long time before I stopped merely listening to my colleagues teach and was actually going to talk to them. This was an intimidating thing to do. I was 22—barely an adult in my estimation—and these were seasoned professionals.

Since I had a bachelor’s degree in English, it seemed to make sense to affiliate with the other English teachers, even though I had been hired to teach ESL. My district often hired intern English teachers since they were less expensive than full time teachers. I thought these interns would be natural community for me. Indeed, they were welcoming. As I was sitting and talking with them one day, someone mentioned something called the “scope and sequence.” It caught my attention because I was completely oblivious. Apparently, they were all going to a district meeting to learn about it. I found out when the meeting was and asked my principal if I could go and he consented. At the meeting I learned what a scope and sequence was—a plan for the distribution of the state English/language arts core curriculum items between various grade levels and timelines about when such material should be taught. I also learned more about the state language arts core and how I could access it on the Internet.

Armed with my new knowledge, I returned to my students that year wanting to be a good teacher. My definition of good teacher included following the policies and adhering to the scope and sequence. The thing that I noticed right away was that my lessons made it more difficult for me to consider student interest. While I was learning what the core was, and what it meant, I had to stick to texts and topics that I felt I knew well in order to convey the content. I also had certain types of texts that I was supposed to use—narrative, informational, and functional. It was also difficult to find texts that represented only on one of these types. In addition, I was supposed to teach the students how to read, write, listen to, and speak about these three types of texts. To cover all the ground I needed to and to make sure I was exercising fidelity to the core curriculum, I divided the year into narrative, informational, and functional sections and then went through sequences of reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

I remember finding and using many news articles as texts for lessons since they were easy to gather from the Internet and also using the scholastic magazines that appeared in my faculty mailbox every month or so. One of the articles was about mummies that were found in South America. Since I had students from South America, I thought I would see if those students had heard of these mummies. I made photocopies of this article and distributed it to the students. I planned a lesson where we activated background knowledge and then inferred. The students were aware that there were mummies in Central and South America, but they had more knowledge about the Egyptian
mummies. As we read the article, I asked the questions I had designed to help the students make inferences, and they answered them dispassionately and with politeness. I arrived at the question I had generated about whether the mummies that were found were rich or poor. The students immediately answered that the mummies had been wealthy. When I asked how they knew that, one boy explained that he knew they were rich because the Egyptian mummies were kings. I suggested that we could go back to the text and check that inference against other clues and we re-read a few passages. I got the parts where it said that the mumified people were sick, probably with tuberculosis, and they had been buried together and asked the class how likely it was that rich people would be buried together, rather than in separate burial chambers like many Egyptian mummies had been. The most talkative student rose up literally out of his seat and asked if he could give a discours or speech. I said he could. He cleared his throat and told us about all of the new research on mummies in South America and about how they could be rich, but they could also be poor. Then the bell rang.

I went home that night thinking that I could go get some more books on mummies and mumification and the students could see that the Egyptian mummies were mummified on purpose and these South American mummies were mummified by accident, but when I went to the library all the mummy books in the children section were checked out. It did not matter so much that I couldn’t acquire the books because the next day there was an assembly. The day after that the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test began and many of my ESL students had been assigned to take it. When the NAEP had finished, the end of the term had arrived and the counselor at my school who was in charge of the ESL students requested that I only use class time to help the students with their homework for those last few days.

Soon I realized that I was far behind in my curriculum map and I was not going to be able to teach the scope and sequence based on the core to the children who needed instruction the most, and so I went back to finding short articles. There were several advantages to this system. The first advantage was as students moved in and out of my class (ESL students are a highly mobile population), there was little to no “catching up” to do in terms of what we were reading and that hid the fact that the children were arriving as we focused on various aspects of the scope and sequence. Looking back as a more experienced teacher, I should have been able to do more Balanced Literacy with my students, but as soon as I started trying to layer the curriculum map from the scope and sequence together to make lesson plans, all of the sudden, I had no time.

THE NEW STATE ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS CORE

After I had taught about three years, I learned that a new state core curriculum document would be coming along. In the meantime, I had expanded my position to include teaching mostly language arts classes in addition to the ESL students I had been teaching. In the interest of being a better teacher to all the children, I read more about Balanced Literacy and attended training and so I could learn some new techniques for managing portfolios, gathering material for mini-lessons, and practicing think aloud activities. We were told at the training that with the new core there would leave space for a more Balanced Literacy approach. This new core would be shaped like the old district scope and sequence in that it would tell you what to what to teach at what grade level. My colleagues were excited about this format since the old language arts core was indicated for grades 9 through 12. Particularly when my school went from one that served grades 8 and 9 to one that served grades 7 through 9, some of us felt like we were just teaching the same things with different books.

The district had noticed this phenomenon of teaching the same things with different books and to assuage it, along with some other concerns about content appropriateness for children of different ages and maturity levels put together what came to be known as “the sacred book list.” Every school in every grade stipulated books for sanctification that no teacher in a lower grade could teach and all teachers in a higher grade could potentially expect that the children had read. Initially the students in the various catchment areas all went from one junior high to one high school, but as student population growth ensued, that was no longer the case. Every time a new junior high or high school opened, the sacred book list had to be renegotiated. The high school teachers picked their books first. At one point, there were about 80 titles on it. When I became department head during my sixth year of teaching, I went to several district meetings and questioned whether high school teachers could teach 80 books to adolescents in the three years of high school as class novels, but my question did not generate discussion.

The sacred book list made it difficult to enact Balanced Literacy because you never knew when you would be asked to stop teaching a book. At the height of Stephenie Meyer’s (2005) reign as the queen of young adult literature with her Twilight series, my students became interested in vampires and vampirism. I applied for some grant money from the district to buy about a dozen copies of Bram Stoker’s Dracula to use, along with newspaper articles, Internet sites, and other materials about vampires. I had been to training in using inquiry as a stance for instructional design and so I had generated a question for the students to explore about belonging and whether one has to change to belong. I was told that since Dracula was on the high school booklist, I could not have any district funds for buying copies. Therefore, I went and bought my own with my personal funds. I planned to use them in tandem with some books I had already collected about various types of superstitions in different
parts of the world.

One morning I came to work and my door was open and the lights were on already. I set my personal belongings down and went to the main office to investigate; wondering if a substitute teacher had been directed to the wrong classroom. As it turns out, a person from the district had come because she had heard that I was teaching Dracula and she had come to look at my bookshelf and make sure that Dracula was not on it and remind me that I was not to teach it. I wrote an apologetic email that afternoon detailing what I had been doing and assuring her that I was not doing a novel study in Dracula and the high school teachers were welcome to do so. The response that I got was that when the students knew anything about that story it ruined the book as a tool for teaching the students how to put together details and meet the demands that the state core curriculum had outlined for the students in grade 11. After we finished only part of the curriculum I had planned, I hid my copies of Dracula. After that incident, I provided a copy only when a student asked for it specifically. I had similar problems with Beowulf (Chickering, 2006). I was told that the Anglo-Saxon epic belonged to the high school because a section of it was in their literature anthology textbook. I grabbed a copy of the grade 9 literature anthology and showed the section of Beowulf that it contained. I was given permission to teach that portion of the story only.

I studied in earnest the grade 8 and grade 9 portions of the new state core curriculum. It was especially difficult to plan curriculum over the next several years because I was teaching ESL, reading classes, general education classes and honors English classes all during the school day. During these years, I tried to plan my curriculum around an inquiry question that could be answered with multiple novels. I then helped my students select novels that were at their independent reading level and we worked through a common text that was short, did activities with the self-selected novels, and then I tied in informational texts and Internet research where I found space and student interest. Doing curriculum like this required a constant supply of new books in my room and heavy collaboration with my school librarian. I wrote grants for book money, but was unable to secure financial support because I could not be specific about the titles I wanted. I discovered that I needed was a budget to go out and get whatever books the students needed from year to year. A colleague and I found a funding source that met our need for this “slush fund” for about three years, but then the year she left teaching, she was harried and forgot to turn in our application for a fourth year of support. I was never able to get back in the funding loop for that money.

The ESL classes I was teaching were more difficult to find texts for than the general education students. I was able to convince the guidance counseling staff that the ESL students should get a regular English language arts class in addition to ESL and so I no longer had to deliver the language arts core. I was relieved at this victory because to me it meant I could go back to the more balanced approach. My ESL classes had become larger, however, and I needed a constant supply of shorter books and these books were read and studied by the students until they literally fell apart. At this point, I resumed topic studies with the students. They would say that they were interested in the ocean and I generated questions and projects and bring in as many texts as I could find. They were also supposed to be using a computer developmental reading program that had been validated for students with Lexile® reading levels much higher than the level the students could achieve. In order to comply with directives, I rotated the students through three stations: using the computer reading support program, reading on their own or in pairs, or small group tutoring sessions with me. When all the students had rotated through the computers, I took a day and did something as a whole group with them.

None of the students could demonstrate improvement on the reading program, or at least not growth that was more than about 50-100 Lexiles®. The students were mostly frustrated with the program and because they were unsuccessful, they were hard on the equipment. About this time, I was in a master’s degree program and I had discovered several ways to test their reading one-on-one. I started using some of these reading inventories that included word recognition, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension with my students. The students preferred these reading assessments because they were less stressful and because they felt they had more information about their performance. However, doing these inventories took time away from the reading coaching I had been doing and the students still were obliged by the district to use the computer equipment.

WIDA

When I entered my master’s degree program, several other teachers in my cohort were former or current ESL pull out teachers in secondary contexts like I was. These colleagues at other schools usually had one question for me when I told them that I was an ESL teacher: What do you do with the kids for ESL? I explained that was doing topic studies, finding books, using the computer reading program, and doing the reading assessments that we had been learning in class. Some asked for curriculum. It was difficult for me to explain that I did not have any per se. I just got books, and I looked at the data from student work and I planned short lessons and decided what writing we ought to do. When I described what we did, sometimes people told me that I should write it down and sell it, but I did not think what I was doing would make any sense to other people because they did not have my students.

One day, a master’s cohort member came to our class and told me that she was going to something called WIDA training.
and she wondered if I were coming. I told her I did not know anything about that and so I emailed the ESL specialist in the district and asked him what WIDA was about. He explained that it was an acronym for World Class Instructional Design and Assessment (Wisconsin Center for Educational Development, 2012). The training was state wide because they were adopting the WIDA standards and abandoning the state ESL standards that they had been working on. He told me that no one in our district was going to the training that he knew of and if I wanted to go, I could. I wondered how these standards would impact what I would have to do with the ESL students in the classroom on top of the reading program and the responsive literacy training I was trying to do. My colleague from my master’s cohort attended this training together.

As it turns out, the WIDA standards are for teachers of content such as math, science, and English, and well as social language development. The standards came with CAN Do statements that indicate the linguistic complexity of responses that students can be expected to produce at given levels of proficiency. I realized that the WIDA standards were not as important for me in ESL class as they were for me in the language arts classes that I was teaching that had ESL students in them. When I started my master’s program, I also started teaching reading remediation classes for struggling readers. Many of these students were ESL students at varying proficiency levels who could not leverage their bilingualism in school. Although in prior years, the reading support students were taught in separate class from language arts, when I took over the classes, the district decided that the reading support should occur in English. The teachers of these classes would need to teach the core, use the computer program, provide reading support, and in the case of the ESL students, attend to the WIDA standards.

The first year I taught these classes, only students who were identified as needing reading support were enrolled in the class. There were about 25 of them. It did not take long for me to realize many of them were misidentified and could pass reading tests without problems. When I went to have these students moved, I was told there was no other English class for them. Other students had legitimate reading difficulties that grew out of weak conceptions about what counted as reading. Other struggling readers were students that had poor attendance and so they appeared to be underachieving but they did have reading skills. It was obvious to me that these students should not be put at the computer to do the reading program and so I set up only those with documented underachievement in reading at the validated level. Running rotations with these students like I had the ESL students proved difficult because they hated the program as much as the ESL students had, but they were much less nice about it. I found it difficult to coach the children or work with small groups because I had to engage in constant surveillance of the students on the computers who preferred to play games, find their houses on Google Earth, check their grades, or listen to music.

In order to avoid the being entrapped by the surveillance and punishment cycles I was getting myself into, I drastically reduced the number of times when the students used the computer to do the reading program. I returned to cycles of shared reading, interactive writing, and workshop formats. The next year I told the guidance counselors that I could teach a hybrid English/language arts class composed of general education students and struggling readers so that the school could avoid entrapping students in a remediation class who were misidentified as long as the total number of students did not exceed 22 and the struggling readers were only about a third. I also built a PowerPoint presentation to help my colleagues identify students who struggle with reading in more empirical and less anecdotal ways. I also compiled information about how to help students in content classes. Finally, I notified my colleagues of the WIDA standards and offered to do training. I was not taken up on my offer to train. When my new class rolls came out in July, I had at least 28 students in all of my classes.

Over the next two years, I did as much Balanced Literacy instruction as I could, except for the assessment pieces. I could not do the formalized reading measures and monitor the students’ reading and writing. I also had fewer and fewer books as they wandered out of my room and never returned, and my funding sources were exhausted and new ones were hard to find in the contracting economy. One year I spent 600 dollars of my own money on books and other materials for my classes. My husband and I decided that kind of spending could not happen anymore, especially since I had recently discovered that I was pregnant. Writing a plan that moves a learning agenda forward for a substitute when you are trying to do responsive literacy practices is very difficult and when students get used to living in a class a certain way, they are aggravated on two fronts: one that their teacher is gone and two that they are not able to enjoy the freedom that they usually have. Hence, I was rarely gone my first eight years of teaching. However, I knew that when the next academic year came around, I would be taking maternity leave and I could not see how to manage Balanced Literacy while I was gone. Moreover, I had arrived at school one day to find that someone had dropped a spiral bound document on my desk: the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

**COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS**

The district scheduled training in the late spring that school year. I attended and learned that we were supposed to implement the new core immediately although the end of level test would remain the same for several years and gradually the questions would portend to the common core. In other words, the students were going to
take a test based on an outdated curriculum document while we were supposed to teach a new one. When teachers at this meeting raised concerns with this edict, we were issued an alignment document assessing which pieces of the old core appeared nowhere in the CCSS and where there was some conceptual overlap. This did not solve the problem of the non-alignment between the tests—which had items that were both unique to the old core and shared with the CCSS. At the end of the day-long training, we were notified that we would have to sign up for additional two-day training during the summer to make our classroom curriculum align with the CCSS. I signed up for some days in late June, when I was scheduled to be close to eight months along in my pregnancy. I went home, plopped the common core on my growing belly, and read it, cover to cover. The emphasis was on argument. Not persuasion, because that was passé, the document explained, but argument. Literary text was supposed to be all but gone by the late years of high school. There was nothing about poetry.

Summer was filled with preparing to implement the CCSS. It was also filled with phone calls and emails from district personnel wanting to know where the data was for the computer reading program I was supposed to be using. The program was Internet-based and the server was supposed to record the data as my students completed lessons. I admit that I had not had the time. I received no response. Coming year. The computers I had were eight years old by this computer program if I was going to be expected to use it in the district personnel and also asked for new equipment to run the computer support staff from the school and district and from the company providing the computer reading program during the summer and find out if the data could be restored. I did not have much time that summer. I traveled to Ohio and Alaska for academic reasons and helped write a new ESL assessment for the state. When people did not return my phone class, I could not find time to track them down. I also nearly lost my unborn child and so I took several weeks of bed rest where all I could do was worry. No lesson planning, book finding, grant writing, or school work necessary to pull off Balanced Literacy or any other curriculum planning occurred during this time. I was healthier and so was my baby by the end of the summer and so I resumed my search for the lost computer data to no avail. I wrote a letter detailing my struggles in locating the data to district personnel and also asked for new equipment to run the computer program if I was going to be expected to use it in the coming year. The computers I had were about six years old by this time. I received no response.

When I arrived in the fall for my first year working with the CCSS, I was also working in an interdisciplinary team with a social studies and a science teacher. These men were both serious about incorporating literacy instruction into their lessons. Indeed, they were already engaged in such practices. In the course of our collaboration, we determined that a unit about evidence and what constitutes evidence in our various disciplines would be both challenging and interesting for the students. I set to work teaching my students about arguments, since that is a place in language arts where the students would be using evidence. I decided to use Toulmin’s (2003) method of conceptualizing argument since this method had been implied in the CCSS. As I taught this unit, it was very difficult for students to explain why a piece of data supports a particular claim. They needed a lot of practice with many different topics and they needed lots of feedback on how they were coming along in these skills. That task for learning how to tie together evidence and claim took up most of one term. In the meantime, no word work was done, students selected no texts, little interactive writing occurred, and most think aloud activities were focused on my analyzing arguments. Writing went from a workshop format where students selected their topics, analyzed the genre, generated content, and conference with instructors to essay drills.

I was able to attend to the CCSS, including the grammatical features that were mandated, but the soul of my class was gone. Another standard in the core talks about having students learn to select ways to organize their information and plan their writing. To this end, we read an abbreviated version of Homer’s Odyssey (Eickhoff, 2001) where I lifted social issues that were still relevant today (conscription, absentee fatherhood, kidnapping, and so forth) and I had the students research these issues and connect them to the story. In so doing, I had them practice several note-taking strategies, we talked about how various graphic organizers worked, and they practiced. The students entered my class every day, listened to my instruction, and completed my tasks, but they said nothing. When I tried to ask them about their lives, they hedged and gave short answers. That was also the semester that I had the highest number of empty spaces in my grade book. I emailed parents and sent home descriptions of the assignments and the support that I was giving. I offered to hold special study sessions for interested students. I gave the class more days to work. At the end of the semester, I still had the most students with Fs in my class that I ever had.

My ESL classes, by contrast, were going well. I presented the students with a variety of options for reading and they chose to do an author study in Charles Dickens. We began by reading about Dickens and making a timeline of his life. Then we read adapted versions of several of his books. The students started to point out patterns in Dickens’ work and we started keeping track of these commonalities. Together we wrote a story in the Dickensian style as a class where we left spaces for individual variation. The students typed the material that we had compiled together and then they each wrote new material where we had left space. We also made a catalogue of Dickens’ typical characters and made artistic representations of salient scenes. The students loved his
work. They thought Dickens interests in social justice were admirable. We also discussed aspects of his life that were less admirable, such as his family life, and then we talked about how authors come from many circumstances and they have flaws, personal struggles, and professional setbacks. I also planned a mini-unit were the students used evidence and amassed textual support for ideas, but the weight of the CCSS was just not there like in the ninth grade classes I was teaching. My curriculum was still challenging; we were just having much more fun.

The day the term ended, my daughter was born. I took four weeks of maternity leave, during which I was still reading and grading assignments, and then I went back to work. While I was gone, there was no Balanced Literacy instruction and there was little attention paid to the Common Core, especially to the more sophisticated aspects of it. The students were not using the computer reading program either. The monitors had lost their vertical hold, the disk drives would not stay closed, the system froze and crashed, and the headphones were inoperable. The grant I had written for new computers the previous year was funded, but no new equipment was purchased. I reasoned with myself through the years that the program could offer some useful data for certain students and it did allow me work in small groups with students and having the program meant that I had six computers in my classroom, which was a rarity in my building. Therefore, I determined that I could keep trying to procure the new computer equipment.

When I came back from my leave that year, set up the ninth grade students doing a group project that focused on using technology to use multiple sources online and synthesize information. In collaboration with my interdisciplinary team, I determined that the students should research scientists and then write a dramatic presentation about the life of the scientist using those sources. Finally, the students would present the drama to the class. The students were excited to be able to use video cameras. I lacked the technological resources to help them do sophisticated editing, but we did discuss some techniques for presenting information through the medium of film and I rotated the groups through several conferencing sessions with me.

In the eighth grade class that I was teaching that year, we read several small sections of HG Wells’ War of the Worlds (Wells, Kroeber, & Asimov, 2007) and then listened to the radio show by Orson Welles. I assigned them to do apocalyptic radio shows where they used the elements of verisimilitude found in these versions to present a radio show about a potential apocalyptic event that the groups decided on and researched. For both of these projects, the students were attending to the CCSS by using multiple sources and presenting in multiple formats. I was even able to work with students in small groups and give feedback and model some playwriting for them, talk about what makes a good story in a non-prose format, and teach them how to use databases. The missing element of Balanced Literacy was attention to the reading levels of the students. I was also only able to do the qualitative reading assessments with these students twice that year, in addition to the normal battery of Fall/Spring district wide reading tests, state writing tests, NEAP tests, and the end of level tests for language arts that tested the state core and not the CCSS.

The final year that I taught, I left teaching to attend graduate school in January after the first semester. I had ESL students, a grade 9 reading support, and three sections of honors English. The ESL students were mostly seventh grade boys. When they walked into the class, they said that they were interested in swords. I showed them the materials that I had and we studied adapted versions of The Legend of King Arthur (Naxos of America & Flynn, 2008), Ivanhoe (Meyer & Rush, 2004), and The Adventures of Robin Hood (Pyle, Burrows, Corvino, & Polber, 2005). I had become really interested in Gardner’s (2008) work in using informational and narrative texts on similar topics and/or by similar authors in order to recycle vocabulary words and help English learners understand and use words in multi-dimensional ways. I used this to guide my selection of texts for the students and we read them together because there were only five ESL students and they tested at roughly similar reading levels. I matched the texts I chose to those levels. As soon as we started reading the books, a new student moved in from Mexico who was much further behind in his reading development. When this happened, I started planning instruction for the five boys that were in the class initially, and then I planned mini-lessons for the newly arrived student that targeted his needs as a recent arrival. Since the class was small, it was easy to plan for interaction and to have the children help me hold open space for the new student to participate with the rest of us.

That fall, the high school determined that I should teach To Kill a Mockingbird (Lee, 1988) to the honors students and so I complied. I used a thematic approach where the students selected a lesson that Scout learned and then traced the development of that lesson for Scout across the novel. Then we viewed a documentary about Monroeville, Alabama, the town on which Maycomb from the novel is based, and we talked about whether there had been progress in terms of race relations since Harper Lee published her book. The students became interested in racism, but also in Harper Lee’s life, in southern Gothicism, the judicial process, and Civil Rights in general. They wrote narrative, expository, and rhetorical texts exploring these ideas. When this unit ended, the student studied some of the work of William Shakespeare. I helped them find picture book versions of plays, and we analyzed common elements and then applied our theories to The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet (Shakespeare, 1985). At the end of this unit, the students engaged in genre studies through writers’ workshop as a response to this play. They did about 35 different genres or combinations. With 40 students and
45-minute class periods, I could not manage conferences, so I held mini-conferences as I monitored their work.

In the meantime, I offered my reading support students the option of reading different books or doing something as a class and they opted to do an author study in Paul Fleischman’s work. They planned projects where they wrote autobiographies, wrote myths, and composed expository texts based on ideas from the text. I had a practicum student from a local university and I helped him design and implement activity centers focused on types of inference along with training the students to engage in group work. I did a lot of modeling of writing that year for all of my students. During this semester, I looked at the CCSS several times, but I did not study it or map my lessons by it with the fidelity that I had in the previous year. In looking at that document now and thinking about what we had done, I see that many objectives were met. I was especially pleased with the progress of the reading support class. I felt like I was finally able to do skill-based instruction that used text that met their needs and interests as readers and that I was able to model reading and writing in helpful ways for them.

Later that year, a colleague informed me that she had been chosen by the district to take over the reading support sections because I refused to comply with the directive to have the reading support students use the computer reading program. I wrote a multi-page memo to the district literacy specialist detailing the equipment failure and documenting the attempts I had made to rectify the situation. Two weeks before I left teaching, the new computers that I had been awarded two years ago arrived and were set up. I put the students on the computers and had them take the reading test that accompanies the program so that the new teacher could come along and get the students onto the program.

**REFLECTING ON CURRICULUM**

As I composed the account that would become the basis for this autobiography, I realized several important lessons learned in my struggle for balance as a teacher. First, that if it were just Balanced Literacy and a core curriculum that I was juggling, that would have been stressful enough, but what makes the task so difficult is attending to all of the other things that take away time from meaningful instructional planning and assessment—things like computer programs that must be used, the WIDA standards, state and national tests, sharing technology, finding money for books and other materials, and so forth. I admire the persistence of Miller (2009) and others who are able to implement reading programs based on choice and that help children read books that are appropriate for them all year long in every instance, but authors who write such accounts are never particularly forthcoming about all of the hardship involved in trying to maintain such programs over many years. Instead there is usually some admonishment along the lines of “where there’s a will there’s a way” placed after some brief admissions of jealousies, setbacks, and hard days.

I also thought about teacher agency while writing this autobiography. When I went to review information about Balanced Literacy in preparation to draft, I found several websites that asserted that attending to Balanced Literacy was simply a matter of being a skilled teacher and that most teachers were insufficiently skilled. It is my hope that readers were able to see clearly that agency in language learning is mediated in a context (Ahearn, 2001) and so therefore, must teaching be. It seems to me that advocates of Balanced Literacy might make efforts to back away from the notion that “good teachers will just find a way” and instead, consider ways that teachers deserve to be sustained and supported as they wrestle with agendas, impossibilities, and the other inevitable personal struggles of daily living that distract them from attaining their goals for themselves as instructors.

Finally, I learned that if teachers are going to take up Balanced Literacy, even at the secondary level, then they have to see it as both as a balance of various research-based activities (International Reading Association, 2000) undertaken with students and as a balance between these activities and the official curriculum documents and other demands that teachers are supposed to use in lesson planning (Baumann and Ivey, 1997). This balance is also made in the context of culturally responsive pedagogy as teachers consider the cultures of the children in front of them and demonstrate care about these students by learning about them, but also by holding them to high expectations for learning (Rychly & Graves, 2012). Culturally responsible pedagogy, as I have come to a more complex understanding of it, desires a high expectation that moves beyond saying “these kids can pass this test or meet this benchmark” towards saying “these kids can lead optimally significant lives and make lasting contributions to society.”

In the course of my teaching, I had to become a person who could forgive myself for not being able to do everything I knew I should be doing in my work with students, but who was also brave enough to do something—whatever I could, however I could see to do it. That is the other part of high expectations—that I have high expectations for myself. This realization actually made me more understanding of my colleagues in my building and of the personnel at the district office who were also acting in a context and that were likely experiencing various kinds of pressures and trying to respond to them. Notice how I never gave up trying to resources or pleading my case about materials; I just kept looking for another chance to be heard. These experiences of disappointment and disillusionment were not the strong political backlash that Sleeter (2011) warned about, but were actually more subtle, even mundane trivialities that formed the greatest threat to the balance of standards with research based pedagogies in classroom life.
In the face of those pressures from various sources, I draw from a question that Keyes (Keys & Craig, 2011) was asked by her major professor as she embarked on her new career as a teacher educator: “What sustains you?” I realized that what sustained me as a teacher was my sense that I was helping students take up identities as readers and writers and that I was able to report to them in describable, definable ways how they were doing in the fundamental skills of reading, especially as a beginning place for helping them feel sustained as readers. I did not want to teach a technical curriculum, even if students received high-test scores, if it meant that I could not have playful interpersonal exchanges with students as members of a learning community.

As Balanced Literacy moves forward as an approach to literacy development, I challenge its advocates to consider this question in the same reflective ways as advocated by Heydon, Hibbert, and Inanacci (2004) as they work with teachers to reconceptualize who they are and who they could be as reading teachers. I suspect that they will discover teachers who find Balanced Literacy sustaining, either because they believe in its principles, because it helps them to have better relationships with students, or because students are able to participate and demonstrate their learning in ways that support their own identities. These teachers may find, as I did, some way to do something that fits the framework. I hope that teachers who participate in Balanced Literacy—to whatever level they can—will be respected and supported as they move forward in their own learning and juggle the Common Core and all of the other distractions that threaten to disrupt balance rather than achieve it.

REFERENCES


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