

Teacher Perception of the Impact of *Shifting the Balance* on Motivation and Reading Ability

Colleen M Whidden and Garrett S Fredeen

Introduction and Background

In the past decades, the optimal approach for teaching reading to students in a classroom setting has been debated significantly. The main approaches currently are balanced literacy and science of reading, with supporters of both maintaining that their approach results in the best reading foundation for young students (Fountas and Pinnell 2009; National Reading Panel 2000). Burkins and Yates (2021), in their book *Shifting the Balance: 6 Ways to Bring the Science of Reading into the Balanced Literacy Classroom* (referred to as *Shifting the Balance*), have aimed to mediate the debate by showcasing where balanced literacy and science of reading overlap, connect and complement one another and how approaches in a balanced literacy-focused classroom can be shifted to incorporate more science of reading approaches. *Shifting the Balance* asserts that teachers must be mindful of the neurological processes involved in reading and, armed with this knowledge, create a connection between the instructional practices of balanced literacy and the science of reading (Burkins and Yates 2021). To fully understand how *Shifting the Balance* is hybridizing these two reading approaches, it is important to understand the fundamentals of each and the debates around them.

Balanced Literacy

Balanced literacy is based on the philosophy that children require a balance of decoding instruction, guided reading using leveled texts and independent learning using high-quality literature. It is a flexible, comprehensive approach to teaching reading that integrates various methods, including phonics, whole language and reading comprehension strategies, and aims to strike a

balance between whole language and phonics programming for reading instruction (Calkins 2017; Fountas and Pinnell 2019; Routman 2014; Serravella 2015; Tobin 2020). One main way of teaching reading is to guide students to use meaning, structural and visual (MSV) cues to identify words and comprehend the text. This MSV three-cueing system encourages students to ask the following questions when reading and deciphering words: Does it make sense? Does it sound right? and Does it look right? (Calkins 2017; Fountas and Pinnell 2009; 2016; 2019; Goodman 1997). Advocates state that balanced literacy supports diverse learning styles by providing a mix of structured and contextual reading instruction through strategies like reading aloud, shared reading and independent reading (Calkins 2017; Fountas and Pinnell 2019; Routman 2014; Serravella 2015). The importance of balancing phonics with opportunities for students to engage with rich, authentic texts is also emphasized by proponents. Balanced literacy is considered adaptable, allowing teachers to cater to the needs of individual students while encouraging critical thinking, problem-solving and comprehension skills (Fountas and Pinnell 2009; Routman 2014; Serravella 2015). However, as with any reading approach, this approach has also faced criticism. In recent years, there has been a re-evaluation of balanced literacy as a viable reading approach because, although it claims to provide an equal distribution of explicit decoding and phonics instruction, its focus is on having children derive meaning from context clues, graphics and images (Castles, Rastle and Nation 2020; Goldberg 2022). Critics are claiming that a lack of explicit, structured phonics instruction can hinder students' understanding of the relationship between letters and sounds, which

is foundational to learning to read (Castles, Rastle and Nation 2020; Moats 2020).

Science of Reading

The science of reading refers to both a collection of interdisciplinary, evidence-based research on the acquisition of the cognitive skills required for reading and the pedagogical strategies based on those studies. This body of knowledge helps educators identify the incremental stages that developing readers progress through and informs instructional practices to strategically advance learners (Gentry and Ouellette 2019). The science of reading gained prominence when the National Reading Panel (2000) released its report, re-establishing the importance of explicit phonics instruction, phonemic awareness, fluency and vocabulary in improving reading comprehension. Since then, the science of reading has evolved and expanded, with proponents describing learning to read as the construction of a personalized internal dictionary that allows individuals to fluently access context from the orthographic representations of words (Gentry and Ouellette 2019; Snowling, Hulme and Nation 2022). Gentry and Ouellette (2019) state that phonetic decoding and orthographic recognition are needed for proficient reading. They also suggest that using both is likely the most effective model for teaching all children to read adeptly. Advocates argue that science of reading offers a proven approach for helping all students by addressing the cognitive processes involved in reading, while showing that phonics instruction helps students decode words, which is essential for fluency and comprehension (National Reading Panel 2000). Nonetheless, similar to balanced literacy, the science of reading has also garnered criticism. Hahn and Hood (2022) suggest that explicit phonics instruction and improper use of decodable texts could decrease children’s motivation to read. They express concerns that some assessment methods aligned with the science of reading may be detrimental to children’s critical thinking skills. This is because comprehension is not prioritized in reading instruction, although it is considered the ultimate goal of reading. Instructional practices often assume that if a student develops decoding skills and a broad knowledge base, comprehension will inevitably follow. This consequently leads to testing that is mainly based on decoding, with

minimal comprehension components, which diminishes the multidimensional experience of reading. This singular approach could then be insufficient for addressing diverse student needs (Cabell and Hwang 2020; Hahn and Hood 2022).

Differences between Balanced Literacy and Science of Reading

While balanced literacy and science of reading classrooms share fundamentals of reading instruction, the approaches used to teach those fundamentals are different. See Table 1 (Burkins and Yates 2021; Calkins 2017; Fountas and Pinnell 2019; Moats 2020; Routman 2014) for a description of what each fundamental of reading instruction looks like in the classroom.

Table 1 Differences in Fundamentals of Reading Instruction between Balanced Literacy and Science of Reading

Fundamentals of reading instruction	In a balanced literacy classroom	In a science of reading classroom
Phonics	Taught implicitly alongside other strategies	Taught explicitly through systematic direct instruction
Comprehension	Emphasized at the beginning of reading instruction	Built on a foundation of phonics and decoding skills
Instructional Strategy	Uses variety of methods, including read-alouds, guided and shared reading	Uses highly structured methods focusing on phonemic awareness, decoding and fluency
Use of Texts	Uses authentic literature (trade texts) and a range of texts	Uses decodable texts in early stages, with authentic literature introduced later
Teaching Approach	Employs a range of instructional methods	Employs structured and systematic methods
Research	Draws on theories around whole-language and social constructivism	Draws from cognitive science, neuroscience and linguistics

Shifting the Balance

Shifting the Balance is a resource that aims to integrate key teaching principles from the balanced literacy approach with insights from science of reading research to disrupt systems that perpetuate reading failure and the reading wars (Burkins and Yates 2021). The authors are two literacy teachers and advocates who designed a resource to assist teachers in cultivating more effective reading practices in the classroom (Burkins and Yates n.d.). The authors acknowledge the inherent tension in reconciling two seemingly divergent perspectives on reading instruction. However, they also recognize the value and validity of both approaches and provide concrete definitions and illustrative examples of how this modified approach can be implemented. *Shifting the Balance*, while exploring both approaches, is grounded in balanced literacy principles. It encourages teachers to take a broader, more adaptable approach where balanced literacy and science of reading fundamentals can support reading instruction (Burkins and Yates 2021). In each chapter of the book, common misunderstandings that drive current practices, a short summary of the science behind the shift, recommendations for making the shift and reflection questions are included. Specific tools designed for student use are also included, along with practical examples of what each of the six shifts to balanced literacy would involve. These shifts include the following:

Shift 1 - Rethinking how reading comprehension begins: Prioritize comprehension from the start, focusing on meaning making alongside decoding.

Shift 2 - Recommitting to phonemic awareness instruction: Reinforce phonemic awareness as a core skill for early literacy development.

Shift 3 - Reimagining the way we teach phonics: Integrate phonics instruction with a focus on meaning and context, not only memorization.

Shift 4 - Revising high-frequency word instruction: Teach high-frequency words strategically to support recognition and understanding.

Shift 5 - Reinventing the ways we use MSV three-cueing systems: Re-evaluate the reliance on MSV cueing systems, promoting a more balanced approach.

Shift 6 - Reconsidering texts for beginning readers: Select texts for early readers that are accessible, engaging and meaningful (Burkins and Yates 2021).

The authors evaluate, hybridize and blend ideas from both approaches to create what they feel is the best learning situation for students.

The focus of all shifts is on incorporating more science of reading fundamentals into classrooms where teachers are predominantly teaching using balanced literacy fundamentals. This resource is different than other balanced literacy or science of reading resources as it shifts the approach to reading instruction. The authors evaluate, hybridize and blend ideas from both approaches to create what they feel is the best learning situation for students. The authors share this sentiment in their introduction where they ask, “Is it possible that a few simple but powerful shifts *could* help us unlock literacy for more children than ever before, especially those for whom the current systems do not work, or do not work well enough? ... The shifts we need to make are not big shifts! They may take courage, but they are manageable, yet powerful changes that you can make without sacrificing the heart of balanced literacy” (Burkins and Yates 2021, 4).

Since its publication in 2021, *Shifting the Balance* has received diverse reviews that span a spectrum between concern and elation. For instance, some critics express concerns specifically regarding Shift 5, which involves reinventing the MSV three-cueing system, as it potentially overlooks the essential speech-to-print connection, instead positioning reading primarily as a visual activity (Stollar 2021). Conversely, advocates of the resource highlight that, overall, it offers an honest consideration of the polarization of the balanced literacy and science of reading debates and seeks to find sources of commonality (Ginsberg n.d.). This is seen throughout the book and reinforced by starting each chapter with an invitation to reimagine, revise, reinvent or reconsider current balanced literacy practices without asking teachers to

abandon them (Burkins and Yates 2021). *Shifting the Balance* offers accurate and lucid insights into effectively integrating and complementing the strengths of both approaches for the benefit of early readers (Burkins and Yates 2021; Ginsberg n.d.).

Overview of Research

As a postsecondary literacy instructor, the possible impact of this resource on reading instruction warranted exploration. The research objectives were therefore to discover the impact of this hybridized reading approach on both students' motivation to learn to read and/or motivation to read and their reading ability. The research questions were twofold and focused on ascertaining elementary teachers' perceptions of the impact of the incorporation of *Shifting the Balance* shifts on students' motivation and their reading ability. While some scholars indicate that classroom teachers may not consistently rate students' reading ability accurately (Gatlin-Nash 2021; Hamilton and Shinn 2003), others find moderate to high correlation between teachers' predictions and their students' reading fluency (Feinberg and Shapiro 2003; Juhkam, Soodla and Aro 2022). Since research on this topic is inconclusive and given this study is based on perceptions of the impact of this reading approach, teachers' perceptions are situated in this premise without a desire for definitive results.

Context of Teacher Environment

The research project involved collecting interview responses from four professional elementary teachers teaching at the same primary school within a public-school division in Alberta, Canada. This school was deliberately selected as it had committed to incorporating the shifts of *Shifting the Balance* across all grade levels. This provided a significant opportunity for teachers at the school to talk about the depth of the impact of adopting these shifts not just in their own class but across grades. Prior to data collection, all teachers in the school had undergone an intensive six-week *Shifting the Balance* professional development and training session with an external facilitator in the previous year, and they had been actively implementing the shifts in their classrooms for almost an entire

academic year. The project was open to all teachers in the school with one Grade 1 teacher, two Grade 2 teachers and one Grade 3 teacher volunteering to be part of the in-person interview process.

Research Methodology

Semistructured interviews and a qualitative research method were chosen because the lived experiences of the classroom teachers who had incorporated a new approach for reading instruction were to be examined. The opportunity to participate in the research project was proposed by a postsecondary instructor (who has no influence in the public school system) to the school literacy lead, thus diminishing the possibility of coercion or a power imbalance between participant and researcher. This research project received postsecondary research ethics approval before commencing. Given that a qualitative research method and a small sample size was used in this study, it is important to acknowledge that the findings provide a snapshot in time and do not aim to establish a hypothesis or causality.

The semistructured interviews lasted for one hour and were conducted in person, with two interviews being one-on-one and one being in a group of two. All interviews were held during the school day at the teachers' primary elementary school to maximize accessibility and comfort. Structured interview questions were divided to answer the two research questions pertaining to perceptions regarding the impact of *Shifting the Balance* shifts on students' motivation to learn to read and/or the motivation to read and on their reading ability. See Table 2 and 3 for interview questions.

Table 2 Interview Questions on the Perceived Impact of *Shifting the Balance* Shifts on Students' Motivation to Learn to Read and/or Motivation to Read.

- | |
|--|
| 1. Overall, how has the inclusion of these shifts impacted motivation to <i>learn</i> to read and/or motivation to read? |
| 2. Shift 1: How has the focus on improving oral language development in your teaching practice impacted your students' motivation to <i>learn</i> to read and/or motivation to read? |
| 3. Shift 2: How has the focus on a systematic and intentional teaching of phonemic awareness in your teaching practice impacted your students' motivation to <i>learn</i> to read and/or motivation to read? |

4. Shift 3: How has the focus on an explicit and systematic teaching of phonics, rather than the “leave-too-much-to-chance” approach, impacted your students’ motivation to <i>learn</i> to read and/or motivation to read?
5. Shift 4: How has focusing on decoding high-priority words instead of memorizing such words impacted your students’ motivation to <i>learn</i> to read and/or motivation to read?
6. Shift 5: How has prioritizing print and decoding and not focusing on meaning, structure and visual (MSV) cues impacted your students’ motivation to <i>learn</i> to read and/or motivation to read?
7. Shift 6: How has the inclusion of thoughtfully included decodable texts impacted your students’ motivation to <i>learn</i> to read and/or motivation to read?
8. Are there any strategies or approaches from <i>Shifting the Balance</i> that have been ineffective or had a detrimental impact on students’ motivation to learn to read and/or motivation to read?

Table 3 Interview Questions on the Perceived Impact of Shifting the Balance Shifts on Students’ Reading Ability.

1. Overall, how has incorporating any or all of the <i>Shifting the Balance</i> approaches in your teaching impacted students’ reading ability?
2. Shift 1: How has the focus on improving oral language development in your teaching practice impacted your students’ reading ability?
3. Shift 2: How has the focus on a systematic and intentional teaching of phonemic awareness in your teaching practice impacted your students’ reading ability?
4. Shift 3: How has the focus on an explicit and systematic teaching of phonics, rather than the “leave-too-much-to-chance” approach, impacted your students’ reading ability?
5. Shift 4: How has focusing on decoding high-priority words instead of memorizing such words impacted your students’ reading ability?
6. Shift 5: How has prioritizing print and decoding and not focusing on meaning, structure, and visual (MSV) cues impacted your students’ reading ability?
7. Shift 6: How has the inclusion of thoughtfully included decodable texts impacted your students’ reading ability?
8. Are there any strategies or approaches from <i>Shifting the Balance</i> that have been ineffective or had a detrimental impact on students’ reading ability?

Follow-up questions and prompting gave each teacher the opportunity to share more specifics from their individual experience. During the interviews, all teachers answered the questions with little hesitation. The vast majority of questions were met with excitement, and participants were eager to share insights and examples. All interview sessions were audio recorded and transcribed using a voice-to-text transcription software, with necessary edits made by the research assistant to rectify any inaccuracies in the transcriptions.

Once transcribed, the researcher and research assistant coded the data to discern themes around teachers’ perception of the impact of incorporating the *Shifting the Balance* shifts on student motivation and ability to read (Delve and Limpaecher 2021). For perceived impact on motivation, three themes emerged. For perceived impact on reading ability, four themes emerged. At the culmination of the analysis, recommendations for future educators and researchers were drawn from these seven themes; these are shared in the Discussion section. After this article was written for the *English Language Arts Journal*, ChatGPT 3.5 was used with a specific prompt for grammatical accuracy, with the researcher, research assistant and a copy editor performing the final edit to ensure clarity and accuracy in the intention of writing and information included (<https://openai.com/>).

Results

Perceived Impact on Student Motivation of *Shifting the Balance* Shifts

All four teachers discussed the positive impact on student motivation when they implemented the shifts from *Shifting the Balance* to teach reading in the classroom. They shared that when they taught with these shifts as their pedagogical foundation, students appeared excited to learn to read regardless of their reading level. When analyzing the teachers’ responses, the following three themes emerged regarding teachers’ perceptions of students’ increased motivation to learn to read:

Theme 1: importance of decoding skills being taught through systematic and structured instruction

Theme 2: importance of access to decodable books

Theme 3: school-wide commitment to teaching with the shifts as foundational in reading instruction

Theme 1: Importance of Decoding Skills Being Taught through Systematic and Structured Instruction

The teachers perceived that teaching decoding skills through systematic and structured instruction influenced students' motivation to learn to read. They shared that when students grasped the relationship between phonemes and phonics, they felt empowered and excited to tackle previously inaccessible words. Students developed confidence in approaching any word because they were no longer relying on guesswork. For instance, Leslie, a Grade 1 teacher, shared that she can teach her students more complex words now because they are acquiring the necessary decoding skills to tackle most words because of her systematic reading instruction. She shared, "when we take words apart and put them back together, they're actually building into words which leads to reading the big words." This early reading success was also noted by teachers from Grades 2 and 3 during the interview process. These teachers shared that students were coming to them with a deeper understanding of the connection between phonemes and graphemes. They attributed this to structured reading instruction in previous grades and its continuation in upper grades. For example, Candace said, "It reaffirms that we need to give them a code for reading ... It's a full breakdown from that phonemic area all the way

Another theme for the possible increase in motivation to read was access to decodable books.

through to that graphing kind of correspondence." Furthermore, these three teachers shared that the seemingly positive impact of systematic and structured instruction on motivation has reinforced their commitment to continue using such an instructional practice when teaching phonemic awareness, phonics and their correlation to graphemes.

Theme 2: Importance of Access to Decodable Books

Another theme for the possible increase in motivation to read was access to decodable books. Decodable books are designed for early readers and contain a high percentage of words that follow conventional spelling patterns and phonetic rules, rather than irregular spellings or high-frequency words. Shift 6 explicitly emphasizes the importance of teaching reading in conjunction with appropriate, decodable books, indicating that when students spend much of their reading time with texts they can decode, they have ample opportunity to practice phonics, improve fluency and enhance comprehension (Burkins and Yates 2021). When asked how the inclusion of decodable texts impacted motivation to read, Kristi, a Grade 2 teacher, noticed that students were drawn to decodable books and were engaged and excited about reading because they experienced success with the text. She shared, "I have many more decodables in my classroom than I used to as of last year and [after] taking this course and when students are able at free reading time or at guided reading to select a decodable book on a skill that we are learning or have learned, they gravitate to those books very much so ... They have an extension of the phonics in real context." Kristi also commented on her own past perception of decodable books when she said, "I always, in my head, for some reason had thought that decodable texts didn't make sense because they're just focused on the sounds, not the story. But it's not true. There are some really good ones out there now."

Theme 3: School-wide Commitment to Teaching with the Shifts as Foundational in Reading Instruction

The final theme focuses on teachers' perceptions indicating that the adoption of the *Shifting the Balance* shifts school-wide greatly impacted motivation. Teachers commented that using the shifts across all grade levels allowed their students to hear and use consistent decoding language and terminology, which reduced the need to learn new instructional frameworks when moving grades. Resources such as Heggerty (<https://heggerty.org/>), Secret Stories (<https://www.thesequestories.com/>) and the University of Florida Literacy

Institute (UFLI) (<https://ufl.edu/education/ufl.edu/>), which individual teachers had used in the past, were now being used consistently and intentionally across grades. Kristi noted that she had less to review at the beginning of the year because her Grade 2 students already understood the terminology and had the confidence to engage with reading in a new teacher's class. She said, "I would say that they [*Shifting the Balance* shifts] are motivating in the fact that we are able to ensure that there are very minimal gaps in their learning. Hence, they [students] are able to build on what they've already

"The advantage of this approach is that it's holistic rather than piecemeal."

learned in a scaffolding-type way." When asked a follow-up question pertaining to the plausibility of this approach actually having an impact on motivation across multiple grades, she shared that there has been a positive impact on student motivation and teacher engagement. She said, "It [*Shifting the Balance*] feels different; it really does ... The advantage of this approach is that it's holistic rather than piecemeal. So, it feels different."

Amber and Candace in Grades 2 and 3, shared the same positive sentiment. When asked why it was important that these shifts be school-wide, Candace stated, "It's the common language moving through and, you know, that building up, moving through the grades, they understand when we say let's do our phonemes now or let's sound it out or map it. They understand it all. So, it's not something that they're like, 'what are you talking about?' It's familiar to them." Amber added, "So, I'm excited to see how this is going to go. How is it going to translate like a couple years from right now? Once we start getting those kids that have been getting it since junior kindergarten and kindergarten!"

Perceived Impact on Learning to Read

When all four teachers were asked for their views on the impact of implementing the *Shifting the Balance* strategies on students' learning to read, their response was unanimously positive. When

exploring their results, the following themes emerged:

Theme 1: importance of intentional, systematic and structured instruction

Theme 2: importance of using decoding tools

Theme 3: need for focused use of books that support and inspire reading in a real context

Theme 4: need for comprehension to be supported in multiple ways

Theme 1: Importance of Intentional, Systematic and Structured Instruction

Teachers felt that the *Shifting the Balance* practices had a positive impact on learning to read because of their focus on intentional, systematic and structured reading instruction, particularly in the areas of phonemic awareness and phonics (Burkins and Yates 2021). All the teachers shared that they noticed an improvement in their students' reading ability when robust and consistent phonemic and phonics instruction was incorporated in their reading instruction. For example, Leslie expressed that through explicit phonemic awareness and phonics instruction, her Grade 1 students consistently succeeded in decoding the text. She joked about constantly having to bring in books with more advanced language because "... they're ahead of where I think they should be. So, then I have to go get new books. So, then it's fun!" Kristi felt that for her Grade 2 students there were fewer gaps in student learning, which led to more students mastering decoding skills. She also found that students were more advanced in rhyme production and sound manipulation when these concepts were taught systematically. She said, "We talk about how many sounds there are in a word, how many syllables and so forth. And I've noticed that there are way better results in sound manipulation and rhyme production."

Theme Two: Importance of Using Decoding Tools

Shift 5 is comprised of specific instructional tools focused on teaching decoding skills. The teachers in this study shared that explicitly using these instructional tools created a solid reading

foundation. Kristi claimed, “So in the past, when I would work in small groups with students or even one on one, oftentimes I would be a little bit too quick to either want to sound it out or help them. And so, some of the strategies *Shifting the Balance* suggested was that I not be so quick in jumping in

Decodable books provide opportunities for students to extend their phonics learning into comprehension through engaging and authentic storylines.

to help them but instead use the suggested tools.” For example, in her Grade 2 class, she incorporated a decoding tool mentioned in Shift 5 called “touch the text” (Burkins and Yates 2021, 123). This high-leverage instructional tool was designed to support word-solving by suggesting that when a student stops reading and asks the teacher for help, the teacher simply touches the text to reinforce the concept that all the information needed to solve the word lies in the text itself (Burkins and Yates 2021). Kristi found that when she used such reliable tools, it translated into an improvement in reading and writing skills. She found that most students demonstrated overall improvement on spelling tests with less polarization of test scores, which aided in both reading and writing success. She said, “And you know, this [learning to decode through specific instructional tools] allows the newly emergent writer to experience success, whereas there used to be a wide gap between spelling scores with the cans and the maybe cannots.”

Theme 3: Need for Focused Use of Books that Support and Inspire Reading in a Real Context

One of the recommendations in *Shifting the Balance* is to use books that support and inspire reading in an authentic context. Shift 6 specifically supports using both decodable and independent-choice texts to promote multiple ways and means to read. Burkins and Yates (2021) have provided the following definitions for these two types of literature: decodable books contain a

high percentage of regularly spelled words and are specifically crafted for early readers while independent-choice texts encompass any kind of literature selected by the student, typically driven by personal interest. Independent-choice literature encompasses a range of materials, such as decodable books, graphic novels, textbooks or trade books (Reading Rockets n.d.).

Burkins and Yates (2021) have proposed that students should have access to decodable and independent-choice literature for different reasons. Decodable books provide opportunities for students to extend their phonics learning into comprehension through engaging and authentic storylines. The teachers in this study indicated that current decodable books offer substantial narratives, which support deeper comprehension. Leslie, a Grade 1 teacher, shared an example of her thoughts while referencing a well-known book. “They [*Shifting the Balance*] talk about reading and being intentional with the books you choose because[for example] *Brown Bear, Brown Bear*, it’s a really great book, but what is it getting at? Like how much conversation can we have about that book?”

Nevertheless, students also need access to diverse independent-choice literature for two reasons: 1) when students are allowed to choose books that are of interest to them, they are more engaged during reading time (Kittle 2013) and 2) they have more opportunities to try alternative reading strategies for text comprehension (Burkins and Yates 2021). This year, Amber organized her Grade 2 classroom library by topic rather than according to traditional reading levels, and she found that all students, particularly struggling readers, became more excited about reading when they were allowed and encouraged to read books that interested them. She noted, “So now they get to pick, you know, books on sharks, even if they’re just looking at the pictures and thinking about you know, what’s happening in them. ... And they might try and attack some of those hard words because they want to know what’s happening in there. But we, for years, had them read those books that were important for guided reading but yeah, not for enjoyment. No wonder they didn’t want to read. They would rather go to the bathroom!”

Furthermore, independent-choice literature is essential to enable students to explore alternative

reading methods for text comprehension. Shift 6 introduces the concept of “read-in-other-ways” (Burkins and Yates 2021, 154). This method includes students studying and discussing the pictures in the book with a small group, attempting to decode words, or orally explaining concepts using their background knowledge instead of print knowledge (Burkins and Yates 2021). By offering such alternative methods to reading a text, students are encouraged to use their previous knowledge and experiences with the topic to generate connections between new orthographic representations and existing phonological and contextual knowledge (Burkins and Yates 2021; Gentry and Ouellette 2019). Both Amber and Candace, Grade 2 and 3 teachers, discovered that having decodable books accessible during guided reading time was crucial. However, they also believed that it was important for students to explore various reading skills using trade books during free reading time. For example, when Amber’s students read trade books, they used illustrations to infer the story, attempted to decode unfamiliar words and engaged in discussions drawing on their prior knowledge to comprehend the text. Amber praised such methods as they provided her students with additional reading skills.

Theme 4: Need for Comprehension to be Supported in Multiple Ways

The teachers in this study indicated that implementing *Shifting the Balance* practices appeared to help with comprehension. Burkins and Yates (2021), in their chapter focusing on comprehension, ascertain that comprehension is based on three different processing systems: phonological, meaning and context. Comprehension of language begins with hearing (either orally or “in your head”) and recognizing words that the brain then reviews with stored vocabulary to connect a possible meaning to, with the culmination being that an appropriate meaning is chosen based on context. For teachers in the classroom, this means using high-leverage instructional routines for language development, such as asking quality questions, using interesting words, reading aloud and teaching with texts set across all reading instruction types to build content area knowledge (Burkins and Yates 2021, 26). Comprehension is considered the

goal of reading instruction, and it is emphasized in Shifts 1, 2, 3 and 4 (Burkins and Yates 2021).

Shift 1 emphasizes the importance of developing a strong foundation in oral language skills to support comprehension. All four teachers, after implementing recommendations from Shift 1, such as engaging in interactive read-aloud, now recognize oral language as a crucial and foundational component of the reading process. They have discovered that an intentional focus on oral language comprehension leads to improved reading comprehension. For example, Amber engages her Grade 2 class in oral discussions about background knowledge when introducing new books, which she has found enhances their understanding of the text. She said, “We’ve always done kind of read-alouds, like where I’m reading from a novel, but just that reminder that, Shift 1 had taught us that how that listening comprehension can translate to their own reading comprehension. So just, it was a reminder for me to like make it more meaningful, be stopping more, talking about it and covering those complex reading comprehension kind of questions, and then having it translate to like their decodable books that they’re reading.”

Kristi, also working with Grade 2 students, incorporates short story read-alouds and encourages students to sketch during the oral reading. When asked about the effectiveness of this approach in increasing comprehension, she shared, “I can’t believe how successful it is and what they recall or remember just by drawing it. I had a student, the other day, retell a story I read three months ago, and he knew it verbatim. He remembered!” By intentionally integrating oral language at different stages of the reading process, these teachers have observed that students comprehend texts at a higher cognitive level.

Focusing on teaching decoding skills by committing to phonemic awareness and phonics instruction, as highlighted in Shifts 2 and 3, equips all students with the necessary tools to tackle a majority of the text. When students can successfully decode most of the text, they can devote more time and energy to extracting meaning from it (Burkins and Yates 2021). Leslie expressed that through explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics, her Grade 1 students achieved success in decoding, which freed up cognitive

capacity for comprehension. She also shared that previously when students were taught in primary grades to use pictures to extract meaning from a text, they often struggled with comprehension in higher grades. When asked why, she stated that reliance on this one tool to extract meaning meant they were ill-prepared to comprehend the text when visual prompts were no longer included and there was a shift from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.”

Shift 4 suggests that learning high-frequency words, such as “are,” “give,” “the,” “who” and “you,” is crucial for supporting comprehension. In the past, many of these words were described as sight words that needed to be memorized (Burkins and Yates 2021). However, Shift 4 discusses that most high-frequency words are at least partially decodable so a combination of memorizing and decoding can be used to unlock these common words (Burkins and Yates 2021). Even high-frequency words with irregular spellings still follow decoding rules, which reduces the number of words that solely rely on memorization (Secret Stories n.d.). By focusing on both memorization and decoding of high-frequency words, Kristi shared the following observation about her Grade 2 students: “I find that this takes away some of the hard work when students read a book because their brains don’t have to decode every single word. And imagine the effort that that takes to do that.” Candace, teaching Grade 3, has also found success when students need to memorize a part but not necessarily the entire word. She states, “It just takes us back to reminding them to break those [high-frequency words] into their phonemes. Just that practice again going back to let’s pound out or tap out those sounds and then they get that excitement and say ‘Oh yes, I do know my sounds. I can do this.’” Ultimately, the ability to quickly recognize high-frequency words through both decoding and memorization improves fluency and, more importantly, has a positive impact on comprehension.

In conclusion, when all themes were analyzed based on the teachers’ perceived impact on motivation to read and learning to read, these four teachers were adamant that the use of *Shifting the Balance* shifts had a positive impact in their classrooms. When asked whether they were satisfied with the results of using these shifts, Kristi commented, “Yes, I am very pleased ... Yeah, I do

think [using *Shifting the Balance* practices] makes a difference.” When questioned about any disagreements with the shifts, Amber responded, “I kind of agreed with every one [*Shifting the Balance* practices] ... ” and Candace stated, “Everything made a lot of sense.”

Recommendations and Conclusion

Through thematic coding of these teachers’ voices, it became evident that these four teachers perceived the use of the shifts in *Shifting the Balance* to have a positive impact on students’ motivation and ability to read. These shifts were deemed successful in the classroom due to their emphasis on systematic and structured instruction in decoding skills, as well as the incorporation of decodable and independent-choice texts. Additionally, the commitment to implementing the *Shifting the Balance* shifts school-wide was identified as a contributing factor to their success.

Five overarching recommendations for consideration emerged that may be relevant when deliberating on reading instruction. These recommendations include the following:

- Students, regardless of their reading ability, benefit from explicit instruction in decoding skills and the use of appropriate tools. This systematic and structured instruction in decoding ensures that students employ these skills effectively.
- Providing students with the right resources, such as decodable and independent-choice literature, at the appropriate time promotes engagement and facilitates the acquisition of reading skills.
- Prioritizing comprehension as the goal of reading instruction encourages students to view reading as a means of deriving meaning from texts, which leads to increased engagement and deeper discernment.
- A school-wide commitment to systematic and structured reading instruction across all grades fosters consistent language and facilitates the development of strong foundational literacy skills across grade levels.
- Teachers who instruct reading bear the responsibility of evaluating and implementing evidence-based practices in their classrooms.

In researching new reading instructional

approaches, teachers are continually asked to navigate a multitude of ideological viewpoints. The four teachers in our study unanimously shared that implementing the shifts outlined in *Shifting the Balance* had a positive impact on student motivation and ability to read. Reflecting on these narratives, we hope that sharing these experiences will contribute to a resolution in the reading debate and strengthen reading instruction to inspire students to become successful readers. 📖

References

- Burkins, J, and K Yates. n.d. *The Six Shifts: Supporting K–5 Literacy Instruction through Professional Books, Online Courses, Workshops, Literacy Audits, and Consulting*. The Six Shifts. <https://thesixshifts.com/>.
- . 2021. *Shifting the Balance: 6 Ways to Bring the Science of Reading into the Balanced Literacy Classroom*. Portland: Stenhouse Publishing.
- Cabell, SQ, and H J Hwang. 2020. “Building Content Knowledge to Boost Comprehension.” *Reading Research Quarterly* 55, no S1: 99–107.
- Calkins, L. 2017. *A Guide to the Reading Workshop: Primary Grades*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.
- Castles, A, K Rastle and K Nation. 2020. “Ending the Reading Wars: Reading Acquisition from Novice to Expert.” *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 21, no 2: 1–37.
- Delve, H L, and Limpaecher. 2021. *The Practical Guide to Grounded Theory Research*. Delve. <https://delvetool.com/groundedtheory>.
- Feinberg, A B, and E S Shapiro. 2003. “Accuracy of Teacher Judgements in Predicting Oral Reading Fluency.” *School Psychology Quarterly* 18, no 1: 52–65. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1521/scpq.18.1.52.20876>.
- Fountas, I C, and G S Pinnell. 2009. *When Readers Struggle: Teaching that Works*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.
- . 2019. *Fountas & Pinnell Classroom: A Comprehensive Literacy System*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.
- Gatlin-Nash, B, J K Hwang, N E Tani, E Zargar, T S Wood, D Yang, K B Powell and C M Connor 2021. “Using Assessment to Improve the Accuracy of Teachers’ Perceptions of Students’ Academic Competence.” *Elementary School Journal* 121, no 4: 609–34. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/714083>.
- Gentry, J R, and G Ouellette. 2019. *Brain Words: How the Science of Reading Informs Teaching*. Portland: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Ginsberg, M. n.d. *Shifting the Balance: The Authors’ Story & A Review*. Reading Simplified. <https://readingsimplified.com/shifting-the-balance/>.
- Goldberg, M. 2022. *Seeing the Good in Balanced Literacy...and Moving On*. Reading Rockets, August 2. <https://www.readingrockets.org/blogs/right-read/seeing-good-Balanced-literacy-and-moving>.
- Goodman, K. 1997. “Putting Theory and Research in the Context of History.” *Language Arts* 74, no 8: 595–99.
- Hahn, J, and M Hood. 2022. “When the ‘Science of Reading’ Goes Too Far.” *Education Week*, July 29. <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/opinion-when-the-science-of-reading-goes-too-far/2022/07>.
- Hamilton, C, and M Shinn. 2003. “Characteristics of Word Callers: An Investigation of the Accuracy of Teachers’ Judgements of Reading Comprehension and Oral Reading Skills.” *School Psychology Review* 32, no 2: 228–40. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02796015.2003.12086195>.
- Juhkam, M, P Soodla and M Aro. 2022. “How Accurate Are Teachers and Support Specialists When Judging Students’ Literacy Skills? Special Educational Service as an External Factor Influencing Judgements.” *Dyslexia: An International Journal of Research and Practice* 28, no 4: 378–96. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/dys.1725>
- Kittle, P. 2013. *Book Love: Developing Depth, Stamina, and Passion in Adolescent Readers*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.
- Moats, L C. 2020. *Speech to Print: Language Essentials for Teachers*. 3rd ed. Baltimore: Brookes Publishing.
- National Reading Panel. 2000. *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction*. <https://www.nichd.nih.gov/sites/default/files/publications/pubs/nrp/Documents/report.pdf>.
- Reading Rockets. n.d. *Glossary*. <https://www.readingrockets.org/teaching/glossary>.
- Routman, R. 2014. *Teaching Reading in the 21st Century: Motivating All Learners*. New Jersey: Pearson Education.
- Serravallo, J. 2015. *The Reading Strategies Book: Your Everything Guide to Developing Skilled Readers*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.
- Snowling, M J, C Hulme and K Nation. 2022. *The Science of Reading: A Handbook*. New Jersey: Wiley & Sons.
- Stollar, S. 2021. *Shifting the Balance?* [Video], April 13. YouTube.
- Tobin, B. 2020. *Tipping the Scale on Fountas & Pinnell*. Breaking the Code: Phonics & Reading. June 24. <https://www.breakingthecode.com/tipping-the-scale-on-fountas-pinnell/>.

AUTHOR BIOS:

Colleen Whidden, PhD, is the director of teaching and learning at Medicine Hat College. She has taught in the K-12 system, as well as at the postsecondary level in the Education departments at the University of Calgary and Medicine Hat College. She has received the Alberta Colleges and Institutes Faculties Association's (ACIFA) Provincial Instructor Award, the University of Calgary's U Make a Difference service award and the Alberta Choral Federation's Arts Advocacy Award.

Garrett Fredeen is a Red Seal journeyman carpenter currently enrolled in the bachelor of education program at Medicine Hat College. He was a research assistant for the Faculty of Education at Medicine Hat College and has practicum and coaching experience in K-12. Garrett has received the Humanities and Social Sciences Book Award and the Ignite Student Scholarship Award, and has been placed on the Medicine Hat College president's honour roll.