



# The Power of Balanced Learning

by JAN RICHARDSON

*Teaching reading requires a balancing act similar to spinning plates on poles. The plates have labels: phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, decoding, comprehension, vocabulary, background knowledge, etc. Each serves a critically important role in reading development. Teachers must carefully observe a child's reading actions to determine when a child is ready to add another plate and which of the spinning plates needs immediate attention to keep it going.*



## **LITERACY CHAMPION: JAN RICHARDSON**

Often called America's leading expert in guided reading, Dr. Jan Richardson is the author of Scholastic's best-selling *Next Step Forward* collection of professional books and co-author of Pioneer Valley's *Literacy Footprints* series. Jan and her consultants provide schools and school districts with customized professional development and demonstration lessons that equip teachers with practical and effective techniques for strengthening small-group reading instruction. Jan and her team want each student to become a better reader who just can't wait to read another book!

## **One to Know: Spinning and Balancing the Plates of Learning**

This year I volunteered to teach several children who were medically diagnosed with dyslexia. It's been rewarding to see them progress and gain confidence as readers and writers. One of my students, Cor, was identified by a university hospital psychologist as the "most dyslexic reader" she had ever assessed. Cor is a highly-intelligent second grader, who began this school year knowing only a handful of letters. He has excellent vocabulary and rich background knowledge, especially of scientific and historical topics. How does he acquire this vast knowledge? Cor has remarkable auditory memory and spends hours grilling Amazon Alexa!

After six months of guided reading instruction, Cor is now reading at a second grade level! As I reflect on my daily lessons with him, I picture myself as a circus performer spinning and

balancing plates on sticks. At the beginning, I needed to get the phonemic awareness and phonics plates spinning while keeping the “meaning” plate spinning at center stage. As Cor progressed through the various reading levels, and as the texts became more complex, I added comprehension and fluency plates. Since children learn a great deal about reading through their writing exercises, I always have a writing plate spinning. I don’t want to push the illustration too far, but I think you get my point: Reading is a complex process and teaching reading is equally complex. Teachers must be flexible and able to continually balance the multiple components of a balanced learning program. It’s a lot of work and it requires skill, careful observation, and thoughtful analysis—but the results are well worth the effort. Just ask my little friend Cor!

## What to Do: Support the Balancing Act

How do you support balanced learning (reading, writing, phonics)?

**Prompt the students as they read challenging texts.** Using challenging texts and guiding students as they read affords them an opportunity to apply the skills and strategies you teach. As your students read, prompt them to use a variety of strategies to construct meaning. Choose prompts that extend students’ use of phonics, decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Here are some examples.

- *Check the word to make sure you are saying all of the sounds.* (phonology)
- *Break the word at the ending and find a part you know.* (phonics)
- *Try another vowel sound and see if that makes sense.* (phonics)
- *Reread, and think about the character. Why did the character say (or do) that?* (comprehension)
- *Do you know what that word means? What can you do to figure it out?* (vocabulary)
- *Can you read that sentence the way the character would say it?* (fluency)

**Teach appropriate phonics skills.** A whole-class approach to phonics does not reach the corners of the room. Not all the class will be ready at the same time to learn the skill being taught. Phonics instruction should address what individual students need at a particular stage in their individual reading development. By embedding explicit phonics activities into a small group lesson, teachers can target the specific skills most needed.

**Include guided writing.** Be sure to include guided writing in your small group reading lessons. Not only does writing about the book they read strengthen students’ comprehension, writing with a teacher’s support is a great way help students transfer their newly learned phonics skills to their reading and writing.

## More to Know and Do: Read! Read! Read!

A few days ago, I had a conversation with a literacy supervisor from a very large school district where only 10-20% of students were reading on grade level. She told me she had recently observed a number of primary classrooms and was appalled at the lack of actual reading. There were phonics worksheets galore, but children only read stories for about three minutes! Although phonics is important and should be explicitly taught in a systematic way, reading instruction must also include authentic reading and writing with guided instruction in vocabulary and comprehension. Teaching reading means keeping all of the plates spinning at the same time so that children experience balanced learning and become proficient, engaged readers.

### How to Reach Jan:

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