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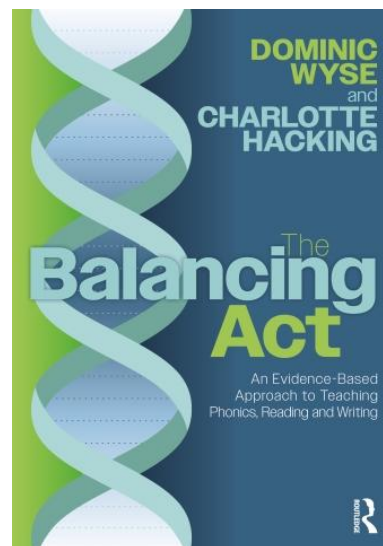
Wyse, D. & Hacking, C. (2024). *The balancing act: An evidence-based approach to teaching phonics, reading, and writing*. Taylor & Francis.

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The Balancing Act: An Evidence-Based Approach to Teaching Phonics, Reading, and Writing is collaboratively written by childhood literacy scholars Dominic Wyse, Professor of Early Childhood and Primary Education at the University College London (UCL), Institute of Education (IOE), and Charlotte Hacking, who was Director of Learning and Programs at the Center for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE), UK. Charlotte is now Teacher Engagement Lead for the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy at the UCL Institute of Education and a teacher and Research and Curriculum Lead at Herne Hill School. With the aim of supporting young children in reading and writing and addressing the practical needs of primary teachers, the authors introduce a new paradigm of literacy instruction: the “Double Helix of Reading and Writing,” especially for the English-speaking context.



Drawing on a comprehensive review of literacy theories and models, empirical studies, and their experience with teachers in action, the authors advocate a balanced approach to teaching rather than a discrete synthetic phonics approach. Based on their arguments, I understand a balanced approach to teaching reading and writing to be the integration of all key elements of literacy learning rather than overemphasis on any single element or method. In this sense, the approach conceptualizes holistic reading instruction that encompasses decoding, comprehension, meaning making, and writing, including handwriting and spelling. The balanced approach aligns with the idea of reading and writing as reciprocal skills, since both rely on a common base of knowledge (Fitzgerald, 1992), with readers and writers drawing on and constructing similar knowledge (Shanahan, 2004).

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Wyse and Hacking critique how literacy instruction, particularly synthetic phonics, has been politically imposed across countries – particularly the UK, the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand – resulting in a narrow approach that does not fully reflect the empirical evidence. They argue that literacy instruction should be understood as a balancing act among research evidence, children’s developmental needs, and teachers’ professional judgment, rather than politically mandated. With that in mind, the book positions the “Double Helix of Reading and Writing” as a new theory of teaching which underpins a balanced approach that works as an effective way to meet the developmental learning needs of children. The Double Helix is set over against the treating of literacy skills as decontextualized and narrowed down to phonemes, spelling, and grammar.

The book serves a dual purpose: Part I addresses the political and scientific context of “the reading wars,” reviewing influential models such as the Three Cues model, the Simple View of Reading, the Reading Rope, the Simple View of Writing, and cognitive models of writing. After critically examining the existing models, it offers the “Double Helix of Reading and Writing” as a solution. The Double Helix not only incorporates elements of literacy instruction but also the role of real text selection. Part II serves as a guide to teaching with examples, providing a descriptive, practical model for implementing the balanced approach to literacy instruction. This shift from theoretical and political analysis to instructional implementation constitutes the authors’ overall contribution.

As the arguments develop through the book, they become clearer and more convincing. If the readers leave the book halfway, the authors’ argument and position on phonics instruction could be misinterpreted. The initial arguments strongly critique the policy-driven phonics approach, claiming that it undermines students’ motivation and achievement. If one stops there, one would leave with the misimpression that the authors completely reject phonics instruction. However, later sections clarify the authors’ position. Phonics instruction is influential and necessary but not sufficient; decoding instruction needs to be combined with reading connected texts to support progression from recognizing words in isolation to actual reading (Kuhn & Stahl, 2022).

The authors clearly articulate the need for a “balanced approach” to literacy instruction. They present a comprehensive review of empirical studies, such as randomized controlled trials of Reading Recovery and their own large-scale comparative study (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022), meta-analyses, and longitudinal studies, such as Suggate (2016). This review of longitudinal studies addresses approaches that improve reading and writing over the long term, rather than just immediately after the intervention. The inclusion studies on both typically and atypically developing children lend credibility to their arguments.

The literature is in agreement: reading and writing are reciprocal. The “Double Helix model” also conceptualizes reading and writing as developing in a reciprocal manner. Phonics supports decoding and spelling, and an engagement with real texts strengthens comprehension, vocabulary, and composition. The literacy instruction adopting this model enables children to become both accurate readers and purposeful writers, supporting technical skill, deep understanding,

motivation, and long-term literacy development simultaneously. While the term “balanced” is central to their argument, for me, the concept remains subjective; an explicit discussion of what constitutes balance and how much emphasis each component should receive could enhance clarity.

Reading and writing are complementary skills in which readers/writers employ approximately parallel yet not identical skills (Unrau et al., 2019). While the authors acknowledge that reading and writing are interconnected, it does not address the fact that they are also distinct skills. Further research could explore the theoretical underpinnings of when the “Double Helix of Reading and Writing” is not in action, since this book leaves a gap in this regard.

The authors’ main argument is that decoding and comprehension develop together, and that authentic texts that motivate students and meet their developmental needs should be integrated with systematic phonics instruction. The instructional part discussed in the second half assumes that teachers have professional knowledge about cognitive, environmental, motivational, and developmental processes and needs of children. Therefore, the effectiveness of this approach depends heavily on teachers’ professional knowledge. In settings where teachers lack strong preparation in literacy theory and child development, the approach may be difficult to implement.

Overall, the book provides a comprehensive picture of teaching reading and writing. It offers an impressive synthesis of how literacy has been understood, researched, and practiced, and makes a compelling case for teaching it through a balanced approach. The authors draw on a wide range of theoretical models, empirical studies, and policy debates, which strengthens the credibility of their argument. At the same time, the discussion’s conceptual density can make the text challenging for readers without prior knowledge of major reading and writing models. Even so, the book is highly recommended for teacher educators and classroom practitioners alike, for developing a broad, critical understanding of literacy instruction and for seeing how a balanced approach can be enacted in classroom practice.

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About the Reviewer

Sangita Sapkota is a doctoral student in curriculum and instruction with a specialization in literacy studies at Virginia Tech. Her research focuses on the reading–writing connection, the teaching of writing, and integrated literacy instruction, with particular attention to how teachers develop and enact knowledge of integrated approaches in classroom practice. Her work further engages cognitive and sociocultural theories to examine how reading and writing function as reciprocal, mutually reinforcing processes. Prior to beginning her doctoral studies, Sangita worked in English language education in Nepal as a secondary school teacher, teacher educator, and college instructor. She earned her degree from Kathmandu University, graduating with the Chancellor's Gold Medal, and remains committed to advancing research that meaningfully informs literacy teaching across diverse educational contexts.



About the Book Authors

Dominic Wyse is professor of early childhood and primary education at the University College of London Institute of Education. Internationally recognized for his influential work on the teaching of reading and writing, Dr. Wyse co-developed with Charlotte Hacking the award-winning theory, *The Double Helix of Reading and Writing*. With more than 25 years of leadership in national curriculum and pedagogy research, and policy development, Dominic is a sought-after researcher, collaborator, and consultant on high-impact educational projects. He is the Founding Director of the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy (0 to 11 years), a research center focused on effective primary and early years education. He is the Chair for Unit of Assessment Education for the UK Research Excellence Framework. He is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences and served as President of the British Educational Research Association from 2019 to 2022. From 2012 to 2018, Dominic was an editor of *The Curriculum Journal*, and prior to that, of *The Cambridge Journal of Education*. As Head of Department (2012–2019) of more



than 120 academic staff, Dominic's leadership roles included establishing the UCL Department of Learning and Leadership.



Charlotte Hacking is teacher engagement lead at the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy and Research and curriculum lead and teacher at Herne Hill School, London. She formerly worked as the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education's (CLPE) Learning and Programming Director for 13 years. Over her teaching career she held several senior leadership posts including assistant headteacher, and leadership of literacy, early years foundation stage, more able pupils, and KS2. Charlotte's special interests lie in early years, early reading

development, the development of writing and the use of picturebooks and poetry to raise children's engagement and attainment. She developed and led the CLPE's groundbreaking Power of Pictures research, investigating the impact visual literacy and illustration can have on children's reading and writing. In 2022, Charlotte was awarded the Anna Craft Creativities in Education Prize by the British Educational Research Association.

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