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Burkins, J., & Yates, K. (2021). *Shifting the balance: 6 ways to bring the science of reading into the balanced literacy classroom* (1st ed.). Routledge.

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Cunningham, K. E., Burkins, J., & Yates, K. (2023). *Shifting the balance: 6 ways to bring the science of reading into the upper elementary classroom.* Routledge.

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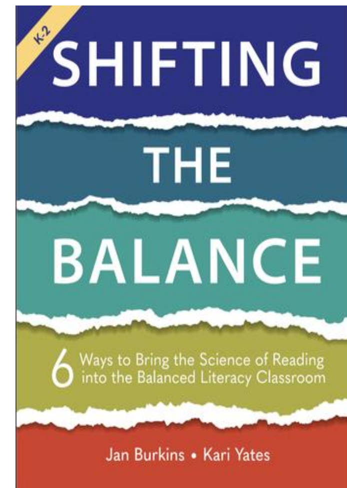

In a two-part series, Jan Burkins and Kari Yates joined by Katie Egan Cunningham in the second volume attempt to reconcile elements of the balanced literacy framework with cognitive research from the science of reading, describing their approach as "bravely embracing science and balance" (2021, p. 3). The first book focuses on Grades K–2, while the second extends the discussion into Grades 3–5. Both volumes follow a consistent structure. Each chapter presents a shift in literacy instruction, beginning with a classroom narrative, followed by a "Common Practice to Reconsider," a "Clearing Up Some Confusion" section that addresses prevailing misunderstandings, and a concluding "Simple and Scientifically Sound Shift." This consistent format enhances accessibility and encourages teacher reflection. However, the repeated use of the term "misunderstanding" and the framing of these shifts as "simple" raise a critical question. If comprehension is a multi-layered, complex outcome resulting from the interplay of interrelated cognitive resources, language comprehension and word recognition among them, is it meaningful or even accurate to present reform as a series of "simple" shifts? In doing so, the framing risks collapsing complexity into simplicity, a contradiction that undercuts the nuanced pedagogy the books seek to promote.

In Shift 1 of the first volume, Burkins and Yates argue that early reading comprehension is not a discrete skill taught through isolated strategies but instead

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develops through the combined growth of two key components: word reading and listening comprehension, following the framework of the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). They challenge the early and frequent use of comprehension strategies as ineffective at the stage when children have not yet developed sufficient orthographic mapping skills. The authors emphasize that comprehension develops through the interaction between accurate, automatic word reading and strong oral language. Their "simple shifts" focus on explicit phonics instruction to support word reading, alongside intentional read-alouds to build listening comprehension, vocabulary, and background knowledge. Although the authors seek to prioritize foundational reading instruction, their resistance to early comprehension strategy use overlooks growing evidence that such strategies are developmentally beneficial. Zucker et al. (2013) and Lombardi et al. (2022) show that limiting comprehension strategy use in the early years may not only disadvantage children's reading development, but also restrict opportunities to build essential cognitive, metacognitive, and reasoning skills that extend well beyond reading itself.

In Shift 2 of the first volume, Burkins and Yates challenge the assumption that phonemic awareness develops naturally, arguing instead for systematic and explicit instruction that positions phonemic awareness as an instructional priority, especially in the early stages of literacy. They distinguish phonemic awareness from phonics, noting that while the two are complementary, they serve different roles in literacy development. The chapter dispels common misconceptions such as the idea that phonemic awareness is only a pre-reading skill or that it requires expensive materials and offers simple, evidence-based routines like blending, segmenting, and substituting sounds. However, the authors do not address how these routines apply in classrooms with English learners or students who speak other language varieties, such as African American English. This lack of recognition risks overlooking the needs of linguistically diverse learners and reinforces the assumption that all students will benefit equally from the same instructional routines.

Kari Yates

Jan Burkins

In Shift 3 of the first volume, Burkins and Yates advocate for a more intentional, systematic approach to phonics instruction, one that is grounded in brain research and responsive to how children learn to decode print. They push back against loosely structured or incidental phonics teaching, promoting principles such as building from simple to complex, selecting letter sequences that allow for early word-building, and embedding phonics in meaningful reading and writing experiences. While they explicitly caution against the assumption that stronger phonics instruction requires the purchase of a program, the promotional content for their own online course at the end of the book complicates this message and raises questions about commercial interests. More importantly, this so-called "shift" may not feel like a genuine rethinking of practice, as few educators today outright deny the value of phonics or the need to teach it systematically. What is at stake is not whether phonics should be taught; few would deny its importance. The real issue is

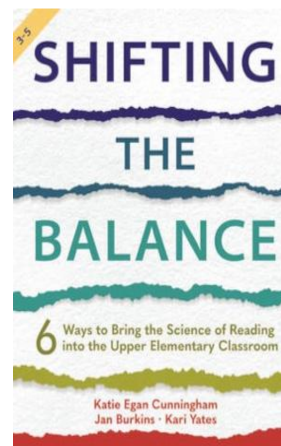
how deeply the authors engage with why past efforts to balance phonics and meaning-making have failed. Their framing of a "shift" risks oversimplifying complex, systemic challenges, especially for students from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

In Shift 4, Burkins and Yates challenge the widespread practice of teaching high-frequency words through rote memorization, advocating instead for instruction grounded in orthographic mapping, connecting sounds to spellings to promote automatic word recognition. They emphasize that many so-called "irregular" words are largely decodable when children have strong phonics and phonemic awareness skills, and that focusing on word structure leads to better retention. Drawing on Ehri's phases of reading development (Ehri et al., 2001), the authors explain that fluent reading depends on the lexical quality of known words. By prioritizing high-leverage words, limiting how many are introduced at once, and reinforcing learning through repeated reading, teachers can support both word recognition and comprehension. While this approach offers valuable clarity and structure, it raises an important question. Where is the bridge to meaning-making and the sociocultural dimensions of word learning? The chapter strengthens the cognitive side of instruction, but misses the opportunity to connect these practices to how children construct meaning, engage with texts in context, and develop language within their cultural and social worlds.

In Shift 5 of the first volume, Burkins and Yates challenge the long-standing use of the MSV (Meaning, Structure, Visual) cueing system, which they argue often leads students to rely on guessing rather than decoding. They propose reordering the system to prioritize visual cues, letters, and sounds, followed by Meaning and Structure, forming the VMS model. Grounded in cognitive science, this shift reflects the view that accurate word recognition begins with explicit phonics and print-based decoding, especially in the early stages of reading development. The authors encourage teachers to guide students away from strategies like "What would make sense?" as a first step and instead focus attention on the word itself. This repositioning does not remove meaning from instruction but places it in a supportive role, used to confirm rather than initiate word learning. While this helps clarify the decoding process, it also invites a deeper question. How do we preserve meaning-making as more than just a reading strategy? Meaning-making is a thinking process central to interpretation, curiosity, and critical engagement with texts. Prioritizing decoding is essential, but it must be accompanied by approaches that nurture children's capacity to make sense of what they read, not just sound it out.

In Shift 6, Burkins and Yates urge educators to reconsider the common practice of using predictable texts to help early readers appear fluent before they have developed decoding skills. They argue that although predictable texts emphasize repetition and context, they often encourage guessing and mask underlying difficulties with word recognition. Instead, the authors promote the use of decodable texts that align with phonics instruction and support orthographic mapping. They identify tensions educators face such as decodability versus predictability and novelty versus repetition, and clarify that exposure to print alone isn't sufficient; young readers must develop the ability to accurately and efficiently decode words. While this shift reinforces the importance of building foundational decoding skills, a point I

fully support, it narrows the conversation about text selection to linguistic patterns alone. We need decodable texts, yes, and decoding is essential for comprehension. But when texts for young children are chosen only for their phonetic regularity, we risk stripping language of its soul of narrative, meaning, diversity, values, and human experience. Children deserve texts that not only build their decoding muscles but also invite them to think deeply, connect with characters, explore differences, and feel something.



Although *Shifting the Balance* (K–2) offers a clear and accessible framework rooted in cognitive science, with practical routines and explicit instruction, its promise of "balance" remains unfulfilled. The first volume concludes by emphasizing foundational skills such as decoding and phonemic awareness, but this focus often comes at the expense of meaning-making, identity, and the sociocultural dimensions of literacy. Texts are discussed largely in terms of decodability, with minimal attention to narrative depth or cultural relevance. For multilingual learners and students from diverse backgrounds, such narrowing risks reducing reading to a technical exercise. As the second volume turns to the upper elementary grades, it opens with an opportunity to broaden the conversation.

Shift 1 of the **second volume,** by Cunningham, Burkins, and Yates, expands the definition of knowledge beyond content to include strategic, textual, word-level, and cultural dimensions. The authors emphasize that background knowledge is a key predictor of comprehension and advocate for purposeful text sets that include both fiction and nonfiction. Interactive read-alouds are positioned as high-leverage routines, paired with vocabulary pre-teaching and guided questioning. The implicit reference to Bishop's (1990) "mirrors and windows" metaphor makes a gesture toward the role of literature in affirming student identity and expanding perspective. Yet while this broadened view of knowledge is essential, some of the foundational "misunderstandings" the authors seek to correct feel overstated. For instance, the claim that teachers mistakenly view knowledge as merely informational lacks grounding in contemporary practice. Moreover, cultural and linguistic knowledge is acknowledged but framed primarily as something students must acquire, rather than as assets they bring into the classroom. The nod to Bishop's framework is promising, but it falls short without concrete guidance on how to select culturally affirming texts that could help realize the book's goal of a more balanced approach to literacy.

K E Cunningham

Shift 2 of the second volume tackles comprehension strategy instruction, a topic notably absent in the K–2 volume. The chapter frames the shift as a move away from treating strategies as ends in themselves, emphasizing instead that strategy use should be embedded in meaningful interactions with "worthwhile texts." The authors present six high-leverage "strategic thinking moves" and offer several instructional routines. They argue that while strategy instruction is important, it should not overshadow

comprehension as the ultimate goal. One especially valuable contribution is their articulation of text selection criteria. Their call to avoid choosing texts just to teach strategies serves as a reminder that tools should facilitate, not replace, the ultimate goal of comprehension. While their suggested strategies are grounded in well-established research, this chapter positions itself as correcting pervasive misunderstandings of common perceptions and practices in actual classrooms. The implication that teachers routinely treat strategy instruction as the ultimate goal, rather than a means to deeper understanding, feels like a mischaracterization. The framing risks creating a false dichotomy between strategy use and meaning-making, when in fact, thoughtfully applied strategies are central to fostering comprehension. Despite these limitations, the authors' call for integrating strategy instruction into purposeful reading remains a sound, if familiar, contribution.

Shift 3 of the second volume centers on expanding and deepening vocabulary instruction in grades 3–5, positioning vocabulary knowledge as foundational to reading comprehension and long-term academic achievement. The authors identify five commonly held "misunderstandings" that influence common teaching practices. For instance, they argue that while oral conversation supports word learning, written language, particularly high-quality, vocabulary-rich texts, is the most effective medium for vocabulary development. They advocate a balanced approach that combines incidental exposure with explicit instruction. The authors also utilized Beck, McKeown, and Kucan's (2013) tiered classification system: Tier 1 (general), Tier 2 (precision), and Tier 3 (academic) and emphasize focusing instruction on Tier 2 words. While the recommended strategies are valid and widely supported, their presentation as "shifts" addressing pervasive misunderstandings feels unconvincing. The suggestion that most teachers rely primarily on conversation or avoid explicit instruction of vocabulary does not reflect the realities of upper elementary classrooms, where vocabulary routines like pre-teaching, context clues, and morphological analysis are already well established. The distinction between which tiers of vocabulary should or should not be emphasized oversimplifies what is often a more nuanced, context-dependent instructional decision. Although the chapter offers helpful reminders and useful instructional scaffolds, its core recommendations are familiar and largely repackaged. As in other chapters, the tension between the complexity of comprehension and the promise of "simple" shifts remains unresolved.

In Shift 4 of the second volume, the authors argue for the continued importance of explicit word reading instruction beyond the primary years. The authors challenge the assumption that upper elementary students no longer need targeted support in phonemic awareness and phonics, and they define key terms such as the alphabetic principle and orthographic mapping to ground their argument. They outline two challenges: the "Filling the Gap Challenge" for students still struggling with foundational decoding, and the "Moving Forward Challenge" for those who read at grade level but need to develop more advanced word recognition strategies. The authors emphasize that automatic word recognition should not be treated as separate from comprehension, but as one of its essential components. The dichotomy between word recognition and comprehension feels artificially constructed; most educators understand that these are interconnected processes. Nonetheless, this chapter stands out for identifying a real gap in upper elementary

literacy instruction and offering a clear, research-based response. Its emphasis on phonemic awareness as neurologically demanding and developmentally relevant, even in later grades, is a meaningful contribution. By providing practical tools for instruction that align with cognitive science without oversimplifying the work of teaching, this shift offers one of the more field-responsive contributions in the series.

Shift 5 of the second volume challenges the "misunderstanding" that reading fluency is more than speed, emphasizing its three core dimensions: accuracy, rate, and prosody. The authors critique persistent classroom practices such as round-robin reading, premature abandonment of oral reading in favor of silent reading, and limiting fluency practice to instructional-level texts. They propose a series of "simple and scientifically sound" shifts that aim at embedding fluency into structured routines. Tools like student self-assessment are also included to encourage metacognitive engagement with fluency development. While the shift addresses some genuine issues in fluency instruction, its framing is undermined by a recurring contradiction: fluency is acknowledged as multi-dimensional and complex, yet the solutions offered are framed as simple. The routines, though grounded in sound practice, are not particularly innovative and may already be familiar to many teachers. More troubling is the absence of any discussion about linguistic variations of learners since no mention is made of how fluency might manifest across dialects, accents, or multilingual learners. This silence reinforces a monolingual, normative lens that risks marginalizing students whose expressive reading may differ from standardized expectations. Though the critique of outdated practices is helpful, the overstatement of certain "misunderstandings" and the lack of attention to student diversity ultimately limit the depth of this shift.

In this final shift, the authors question the assumption that self-selected reading is inherently productive. They argue that for independent reading to be meaningful, it must be supported by engagement structures and intentional guidance. Practical routines are highlighted as ways to extend the impact of independent reading. The authors also critique rigid text leveling systems and call for more nuanced approaches to selecting texts that match students' needs and interests. While the routines presented are practical and widely applicable, many educators already implement structured independent reading frameworks and recognize that text choice alone does not guarantee engagement or growth. The chapter's strength lies in its classroom-based suggestions, but it misses the opportunity to engage with deeper questions of representation and student identity. The recommendations are helpful, but not particularly novel; and the framing again simplifies the complexity of fostering authentic, student-centered reading practices.

Across both volumes, Burkins, Yates, and Cunningham offer a well-structured and accessible framework grounded in cognitive science. Their emphasis on clarity, instructional routines, and teacher reflection is particularly evident in their treatment of phonemic awareness, orthographic mapping, vocabulary, and fluency. These contributions serve as helpful resources for educators aiming to strengthen foundational reading skills. Notably, both books include detailed and well-cited reference lists that reflect a strong grounding in current research, making them rich instructional resources. A further enhancement in the second volume is the inclusion of semi-developed lesson plans that support implementation. These additions offer a

layer of support not explicitly present in the first volume, adding to the practical value of the series.

Yet despite this practical value, the books ultimately fall short of achieving the "balance" they promise. Foundational skills are consistently prioritized, while meaning-making, cultural relevance, and student identity are treated as peripheral. The repeated use of exaggerated "misunderstandings" and the framing of instructional changes as "simple shifts" flatten the complexity of the ongoing arguments of reading and literacy instruction. Furthermore, while the authors caution against overreliance on commercial programs, their own promotion of their online courses by the end of each volume undermines this message. Most notably, the second volume offers only limited engagement with sociocultural, multilingual, and identity-based dimensions of literacy that was completely absent from the first. Without attending to students' full linguistic and cultural lives, literacy risks being reduced to a narrow, technical exercise in decoding and recall. If the goal is to truly shift the balance, future work must go beyond a cognitive pivot. It must integrate foundational skills with the rich, human dimensions of reading, where language is not only processed, but lived; where texts are not just decodable, but meaningful; and where students can see themselves, question the world, and participate fully in the interpretations of the diverse meanings of life.

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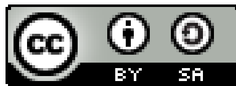
About the Reviewer

Amal Elassi is a visiting assistant professor at Transylvania University. She earned her PhD in curriculum and instruction from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2023. Her research focuses on the linguistic identities of Muslim adolescent girls navigating public and Islamic schools in the United States, with particular attention to how language, faith, gender, and race intersect in their educational experiences. She teaches methods courses in elementary literacy, social studies, and enculturation across global educational traditions, and she supervises student teachers across diverse school settings. Prior to her doctoral work, Dr. Elassi taught English as a foreign language in Egypt for seven years and conducted action research on reading comprehension difficulties among multilingual learners. She is deeply committed to culturally responsive teaching and research that honors the complex, lived experiences of minoritized students.



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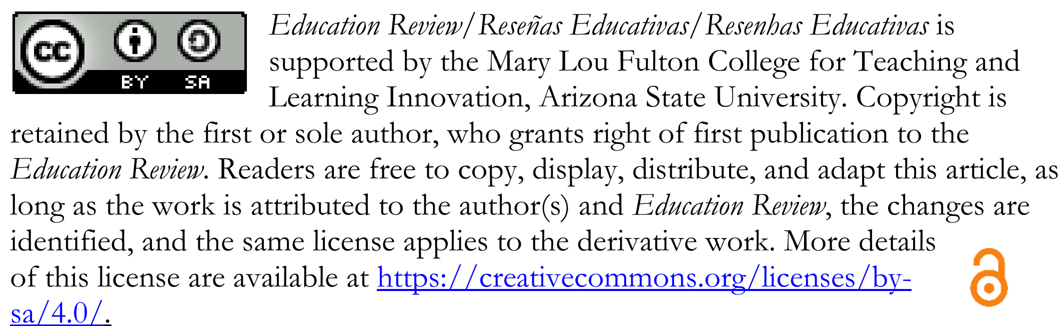

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