



The Ball Design

Sustaining Literacy Improvement for Every Student Through Whole Systems Change

*The Ball Foundation Education
Initiatives Value Proposition*

by Education Initiatives Staff

It is the intent of this paper to make the link between literacy improvement for every student and whole systems change in the context of the work of Ball Education Initiatives (Ball EI) with school and district partners. The paper is organized as follows:

- (1) a description of Ball EI's literacy work,
- (2) a brief explanation of Ball EI's approach to whole systems change, and
- (3) a statement of the value proposition regarding Ball EI's work.

Literacy and Being Literate

Because Ball EI works with elementary and secondary schools, it is important to understand the plurality of meanings present in the term *literacy*. At the start is a very basic concept that literacy is making meaning or making sense of symbolic language. Concepts like comprehending, understanding, and knowing are central to the notion of someone's being literate.

Much of the time when educators talk about literacy in the context of school instruction, they are referring to making meaning or making sense of *instructional language*. Instructional language is the language in which students' literacy learning is assessed in the formal processes of schooling. In some countries, instructional language may vary regionally—Canada is an example where English is the instructional language in all of the country except for Quebec, where French is instructional. In the United States, English is the dominant instructional language.

This distinction is drawn for an important reason. The task of instructing students' literacy learning is a complex process even when their primary or home language (the language that they learn in their families before entering school) is the same as the instructional language. However, many students in Ball EI's partner districts

enter school speaking a primary or home language that is different from the instructional language of English. Noting this fact is important because in many U.S. schools the achievement gap gets defined by those students whose primary or home language is English performing better on measures of literacy learning than those students whose primary or home language is something other than English.

Instructional Literacy is the work of teachers, from kindergarten through 12th grade, who support students in

- acquiring competence in their use of receptive language (reading, listening, and viewing),
- using expressive language (writing, speaking, and constructing visual representations), and
- developing and appropriately selecting background knowledge (understanding the world around us)

in order to effectively learn new information.

Despite mistaken assumptions commonly held by the public that instructional literacy is acquired solely during the early or primary years of schooling, intentional instruction in a range of skills and strategies (e.g., fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) is essential *across the grade levels* in order to ensure that all students graduate with the literacy skills needed to participate as a global citizen. Instructional literacy develops throughout the school years as students acquire new literacy knowledge and skills to understand and construct the increasingly sophisticated and varied texts and contexts that constitute academic learning.

Content area literacy is related but extends instructional literacy into a variety of subject areas or disciplines in ways that are unique to each of them.

Content area literacy refers to the ability to make meaning of discipline-specific languages and text. This includes the ways that one's instructional language functions in a subject discipline, but content area literacy also includes the use of symbolic systems specific to fields such as mathematics, science, the arts, and humanities. Assisting students with content area literacy is also a task for teachers in grades K-12 as instruction in skills and strategies (such as comprehension, vocabulary, and text organization) must be learned in the unique receptive and expressive language contexts of a content discipline.

Teachers generally view instructional literacy as prerequisite to content area literacy and lack understanding of the way that instructional literacy must be acquired (and intentionally taught) throughout the school curriculum as the symbolic and language demands change across subject area contexts and grades. Teachers often are not fully aware of the way that instructional literacy is situated uniquely (and thus requires intentional teaching of new skills) in the various disciplines that comprise the school curriculum (content area literacy).

While early elementary teachers have specific instructional tools as well as curricular time allocated to supporting instructional literacy, middle and secondary teachers typically lack both teaching strategies and pedagogical knowledge of how to continue to support instructional literacy while also building the content area literacy in the subject fields that they teach. Teachers are not adequately provided with teaching tools and models of how to support student development within both dimensions (instructional and content area literacy).

Examples of classroom instruction that operates in both dimensions include how to: (1) write an effective argument in history, (2) read and learn the vocabulary unique to science, or

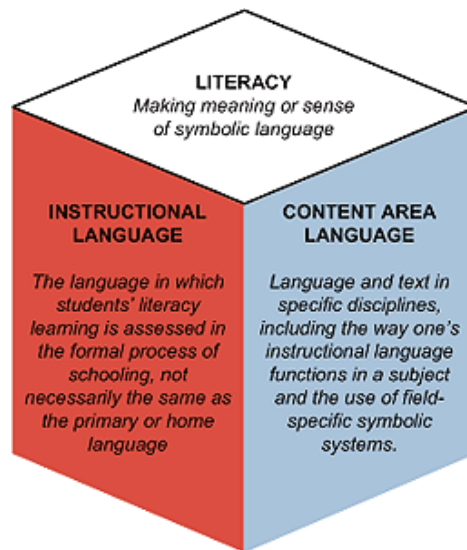


Figure 1: Three facets of literacy

(3) critique various visual and symbolic representations in math and art.

It is necessary for Ball EI to utilize the plural definitions (instructional and content area literacy) in its work with teachers across a school system. Ball EI works to assist K-12 teachers in collectively supporting students' development of instructional literacy skills that transfer or are useful throughout the school curriculum while also identifying and supporting those specific to the disciplines. For example, the letter "B" is pronounced in similar ways when it occurs in science or history or in first or third grade; however, comprehension strategies are vastly different when encountering a science text versus an historical document or in a 4th grade reading story versus a high school novel. Supporting instructional and content area literacy acquisition by every student requires that teachers begin to think in more sophisticated ways about the specific literacy demands in all grades and content areas.

The very act of becoming literate is systemic. Doing so requires us to learn in sophisticated and complex interconnected networks. We continuously acquire literacy skills from the world around so that we can make meaning of new learning. We learn

literacy from our families, friends, and peers. We are instructed at school by teachers who have time allocated and who possess specific professional skills for instructing us in our early instructional literacy learning. We also learn content literacy in increasingly sophisticated disciplines or content areas as we advance through the middle and secondary years of schooling and on into higher education. Most of us continue to learn throughout our lives as productive adults—and much of that learning fits the definition of what we name literacy. Given that our literacy learning itself occurs in a whole, living system throughout the years of our schooling and our adult lives, Ball EI sees whole systems as a logical approach to improving literacy for every student.

From the very beginning days of Ball EI's work in education, instructional literacy has been the focal point. G. Carl Ball, founder of the Ball Foundation, was passionate about the mission of schools to have all students succeed in acquiring instructional literacy. At the same time, anyone who knew Carl is aware that his holistic view of students included the notion of content area literacy in his overarching view of a literate person. Ball EI's current work in building the capacity in partners' schools and districts to educate literate students, keeping in mind the plural nature of literacy while emphasizing instructional language literacy, is the natural extension of our past work into our present and future.

The plurality of the definition of literacy and the complexity of the instructional challenges described above are the reasons why Ball EI works to improve literacy for every student through whole systems change.

A Whole Systems View

As public schools and school districts evolved across the United States, the management approach to organizing corporations, governments, and social institutions was linear, and mechanistic. It is neither surprising nor accidental that schools and districts were organized to mimic assembly line productions, chain-of-command management structures, and large system bureaucracies. It was the way of the world. During the intervening century that has elapsed, our thinking about organization-building has changed considerably. Successful businesses have had to adapt or die. Some schools and districts have adopted much of the new thinking about managing large, complex systems into their vocabulary and sometimes even into their operations.

For the most part, however, schools and districts have adapted much more slowly than other institutions in our society. The Ball Design takes into account the need of partner schools and districts to not only build capacity for better instructional practice, but also for partners to build capacity in their organizational and leadership functions as well.

In the Ball Design, a school district is viewed as the unit of change, and the unit around which the work is organized. One lesson learned in the school reform movement is that substantial improvement is possible to attain when the school site is the level of change. However, another lesson learned is that it is virtually impossible to scale-up work from one or a few schools to many. Furthermore, in numerous cases the improvements isolated in a single school have been lost when key personnel leave or when the school district serves as a barrier or impediment to the change process. This latter point rests on the knowledge that school systems either set or control the conditions in which individual schools can engage the change process.

Ball EI has learned from experience that different schools will engage the work of literacy improvement in many different ways, and some will make more progress than others based upon their approach. At the same time, working with the district simultaneously is essential to ensuring that conditions for change are

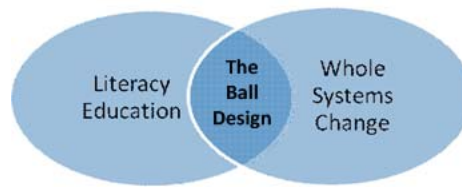


Figure 2: The intersection of literacy education and whole systems change

supported at the district level if sustainability and/or scale-up are intended outcomes. The Ball Design calls for an approach that is simultaneously bottom-up and top-down.

The whole systems view that Ball EI holds in its work sees schools and districts as complex and adaptive rather than as static and mechanistic. As complex systems, they are more than a collection of parts. Each part of a system is interdependent with other systemic parts, some internal and some external to the system itself. These parts of the system are held together by diverse, interactive, and reciprocal *relationships*. These relationships organize and reorganize into patterns that are influenced by and influence the values and beliefs of the system. The values and beliefs of the system, along with the norms and culture that they inform, make up the *identity* of the organization.

To flourish, or even survive, each system uses *information* to guide its adaptation (Margaret Wheatley, 1996, 1999, 2007; Myron Rogers, 1996, 2006; Stephanie Pace Marshall, 2006). As noted above, this type of adaptation

has eluded most schools and districts. Truly successful systems do more than take in or manage information; they generate information that becomes the fuel for learning, innovation, and sustainability.

Ball EI applies its view of the ongoing, dynamic interplay of the identity, relationships, and information present in all systems to its work with schools and districts to support better literacy instruction in every classroom. Traditional professional development approaches for teachers and principals in literacy (or any other discipline or field) typically are based on a belief that adding information alone will build capacity. These approaches often ignore key relationships present in the adult learning and the transfer of new professional learning into classroom practice. These traditional approaches almost never include the inquiry in which a system must engage to make certain that its identity is aligned to (or coherent with) its practice. In other words, the system must ask itself, “Do we walk our talk?”

It is in the convergence and integration of efforts to improve literacy instruction and whole systems change where the value proposition of Ball EI resides.

Value Proposition of Ball Education Initiatives

Sustaining Literacy Improvement for Every Student Through Whole Systems Change

The Ball Design guides Education Initiatives (EI) as it partners with school districts to improve the literacy achievement of every student in significant and sustainable ways. Universal literacy achievement can be attained only when school districts become learning organizations capable of implementing results-oriented practices in every classroom and at all levels of the system. *The Ball Design* empowers EI to teach, model, and implement a whole systems change process that builds the capacity of school districts to become learning organizations that can constantly transform themselves to deliver results in the face of changing needs. Hence, the value proposition of *The Ball Design*, the unique and powerful added value that it offers to school districts, is “**sustaining literacy improvement for every student through whole systems change.**”

In the business world, a value proposition is defined as the unique added value or benefit an organization offers customers (O’Dell and Grayson, 1998). Value propositions are often a way for companies to differentiate themselves from competitors and position themselves to be attractive to their target customers. They are related to but different from mission or vision statements. While mission and vision are about identity and purpose from an organization’s perspective, a value proposition is more about how a company wants to be perceived in the minds of customers. “Biggest bookstore on earth (Amazon)” and “Everyday low prices (Wal-mart)” are examples of how companies want their customers to see them.

In a similar vein, Ball EI’s value proposition, as stated above, is what it can offer to its partners and to the field that is unique and powerful. In other words, it is the answer to the question, “Why should Ball EI partner with you?”

When the value proposition becomes alive in the work of a Ball EI partner, the school district and the schools in it benefit in the following ways:

- Professional learning becomes more than the transmission of new ideas and information from “experts” to teachers.
- Communities of practice (CoPs)

form, thus increasing the likelihood of improvements being taken to scale across the school or district; information is moved through the system at a much faster pace.

- Leaders in the schools and district learn adaptive 21st century management strategies that make it possible for them to create the conditions necessary for the innovation and creativity demanded in today’s complex, adaptive systems.
- The partnership work is grounded in the assets of the school district so that the system learning and stakeholder learning are authentic and transferrable, leading to alignment and coherence in the system.
- Staff members at all levels are empowered and engaged in decision-making, and leadership becomes more distributed in ways that ensure sustainability.

The idea that schools and districts would benefit from being learning organizations, based upon the work of Peter Senge (1995, 2000), began to appear at Education Initiatives after the C-1 Report, *Using What We Have to Get the Schools We Need: A Productivity Focus for American Education* (2006). By 1999, direct reference was made to Senge’s work in the documents produced by Ball EI relative to its emerging partnership work. Much of the school reform work in this country continues to be based on the premise of schools becoming learning organi-

zations, including that of Michael Fullan (2001, 2006, 2008) and Stephanie Pace Marshall (2006). System learning is viewed as critical to the survival, success, and sustainability and schools and school districts.

Capacity-building for the school system and competency-building for the educators employed in the system are designed within a social architecture featuring communities of practice that Ball EI helps the school district create, nurture, and sustain. These communities of practice are open to all district stakeholders. Ball EI’s work in this field has been informed extensively by the writing and teaching of Ettiene Wegner (2002), Margaret Wheatley (1996, 1999, 2007) and Myron Rogers (1996, 2006), leading voices and recognized pioneers in this field. Benefits of building CoPs include their power to take new ideas and changes in professional practice to scale and their ability to migrate information quickly—the antithesis of life in most bureaucracies.

Most successful organizations in the second half of the 20th century acquired the capacity to get very good at what they did through the use of rigorous continuous improvement practices. Gary Hamel (2007) points out, however, that organizations very likely may not thrive or survive in the 21st century if they limit their change strategies to continuous improve-

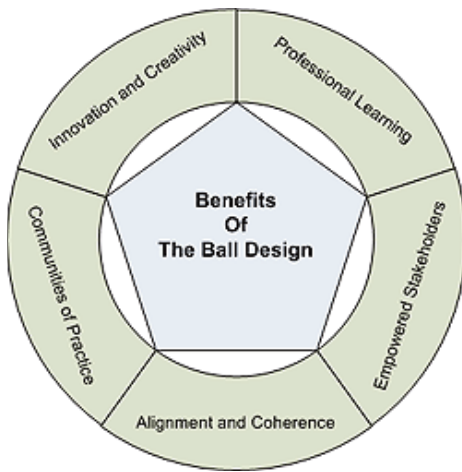


Figure 3: Benefits of The Ball Design

ment. The new management paradigm that he proposes adds the ongoing ability to innovate and create as requisite to being world class.

EI includes in its capacity building work the skill sets for schools and districts to innovate and create better solutions to meeting their challenges, while also supporting skill building

with continuous improvement processes as well. An improved capacity to nurture innovation and creativity increases the likelihood that partners will create conditions for emergence—the condition necessary for what Ball EI refers to as transformation.

Ball EI team members typically encounter a lack of alignment (absence of coherence) between PK-12 literacy instruction and how that instruction is supported in the school system. In order to create an awareness of this lack of alignment, Ball EI works with teams of stakeholders in a way that causes them to bring their whole system into conversations that typically have been isolated or siloed.

By starting its work by assessing assets in a system, Ball EI is able to promote engagement by our partners in the task of building new ways to connect or align their work. We do so by

engaging in literacy improvement work that often reveals to the partners the effects of misalignment and incoherence. Doing so builds their capacity to engage others and transfer learning across the system.

The governance and executive leadership structures of school districts are such that rapid turnover is more common than stability and longevity in key district positions. Ball EI takes a whole systems approach to supporting leaderful behavior throughout the system, so that staff members are mission-driven as opposed to compliance-driven. Empowering stakeholders and distributing leadership are key strategies for building sustainability in Ball EI's work with partners. Interestingly, it is the formal leaders of the school district who play the most significant role in the success of this strategy, in that they either nurture or hinder the distribution of leadership.

Concluding Ideas

Ball EI is informing its approach to building the capacities of our partners to lead and manage change with recent research in the fields of systems theory and complexity theory. It is obvious that few workers today in any endeavor have jobs that look like the assembly line of 1920. The jobs to which many aspire require the ability to think critically, to be able to solve problems, the ability to work on a team, and the need to contribute to organizational innovation and creativity.

In making a case for including transformation in the vocabulary and practice of Ball EI, it is incorrect to assume that in order to work for the creation of the conditions in which transformation can occur, one must forget or ignore all of the good that can be and has been produced in reform efforts. Such is not the case.

The above description of what the workforce (including educators) needs to be able to do does not imply that every moment on the job is one in which those skills are needed or called upon. Some changes that are made in the workplace are minor

course corrections or applications of known technical solutions that “keep the railroad running.” In the life of a teacher, these types of changes are literally moment to moment, due to the fact that 30 other human beings are typically involved.

It is important to note here that transformation is not the additive sum of vast amounts of continuous improvement or reform. In order for a system (school or district) to work in transformative ways, its leaders must be mindful of how to think about their organization in systemic ways. As a thought partner, teacher, coach, and

consultant, Ball EI must assist those leaders in learning the importance of the impact that how they approach change and set it in motion has on the outcomes they can expect to derive from their change efforts.

Holding a systemic view with the intent of creating the conditions for adaptive, creative change is a vital distinguishing characteristic of how Ball EI engages its partners compared to others who solely implement reform strategies. Good continuous improvement practices can indeed produce positive impact. Ball EI approaches change work differently,

however, than limiting the scope of work to continuous improvement efforts.

Schools, like businesses, have proven that they can increase productivity by strengthening their core competencies. In the past, Ball EI has supported reform work: professional development that could help schools understand and implement a continuous improvement process. Portions of the current work with partners continue to demand the use of continuous improvement processes. Those processes are not sufficient when schools and districts face the need to make the types of changes described by Gary Hamel (2007) or by Stephanie Pace Marshall in *The Power to Transform: Leadership That Brings Learning and Schooling to Life* (2006).

The application of technical solutions and continuous improvement techniques are necessary skills for good organizations, but they cannot be the path to schools that meet our aspirations for learning. As Stephanie Marshall (2006) points out:

Until we enable our schools and our school systems to function as the autonomous, creative, interdependent, and self-governing learning systems they are, we will not be able to transform learning and schooling. . . . This means not only thinking outside the box, but transforming the box into a dynamic learning network. (p. 29)

The Ball Design is based on the premise that Ball EI's work, from its beginning days when Carl Ball was personally involved, was intended to be like what Stephanie Marshall describes above. This assumption is informed by the personal relationships that some had with Mr. Ball, by the type and scope of change described in consortium reports sponsored by The Ball Foundation in the late 1990's, and by the knowledge that Ball EI has acquired from the combination of research and on-the-ground application in past and current partnerships. In an internal document prepared in December 1999, the following quote appears: "The vision of EI is to create school systems for the future." (p. 1)

If the word transformation proves overly vague or unclear, one should consider the importance of creativity and innovation to any organization. In *The McKinsey Quarterly* (July, 2008), the idea of transformation was referred to as "step" change (p. 2). "Step" change typically is thought to occur quickly and impact the size or value of something in important ways. It almost always is spawned in an environment of creativity and innovation when new ways of thinking and working emerge.

To some it may seem as though the work of Ball Education Initiatives has changed course during our almost two-decade history. It is true that some processes used in Ball EI's current work that will inform implementation of the Ball Design for Literacy Improvement Through Whole Systems Change are successor versions of prior ideas about how to do this work. On the other hand, it is quite amazing to see how closely aligned (or coherent with) current work is with six values that were named for Ball EI in the same December 1999 internal document referenced above.

These six values are listed below:

- *Public education* is the cornerstone of democracy.
- *People* shape organizations through their thoughts and actions.
- *System Reform* is the most effective strategy for enduring change.
- *Learning* is critical for continuous improvement and self development.
- *Partnerships* are essential to connect education to the larger society.
- *Quality* is a reflection of integrity.

The most senior member of the EI team has been here for just over seven years, and the average tenure on the team is slightly less than three years. Given this fact, the values expressed above have migrated from the people who wrote them to an entirely different team that acts on them today. This observation is testimony to the importance of knowing and communicating values and principles in an organization—they carry the organizational genetic code of sustainability.

The story of this Ball EI team is not one on a haphazard journey, rather, it is the story of a team that understands how to adapt what it does in service to a vision that was passed on to it by those who went before.

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