Welcome fellow Recovering Traditionalists to Episode 215: Why Balance in Teaching Isn't What You Think

Welcome to Build Math Minds the podcast, where fidelity to your students is greater than fidelity to your textbook. I'm your host, Christina Tondevold, the recovering traditionalist and BuildMathMinds.com Founder, where my mission is to change the way we teach elementary math to our kiddos. Are you ready to start building math minds and not just creating calculators? Let's get started.

Most of us are trying to balance our teaching all wrong. Heck we are trying to balance in our lives in general all wrong…And it's exhausting us and it's not helping our students.

When I say the word "balance", what comes to mind?

For most of us, we picture that measurement scale, right? Like, if I do this to one side, I have to do this to the other. To make the two sides balance out. In my life, if I spend too much time working I feel like I need to balance it out with my family time to “make it even.” When you are teaching if you do too much number sense work, you need to do that same amount of practice. If I spend this much time on problem solving, I better spend equal time on fact fluency. If you are a math coach and you do a bunch of model lessons then you feel like you need to even it out with observations of teachers doing the teaching. Everything has to be equal. Everything has to be the same.

But - that's not actually balance. That's equality. And they're not the same thing.

So let me show you what I mean.

Real balance looks more like this...

[VISUAL: Show image of balanced rock structure]

Have you ever seen those beautiful rock structures where rocks are balanced on top of each other? Some rocks are bigger, some are wider, some are different colors, made of different materials. They're not all the same size. They're not equal. But they're balanced.

And that's what balance in all areas of our lives, teaching mathematics included, should look like.

You need some math activities that focus on helping kids build number sense. You need some math activities that are focused on getting them more efficient and faster and with more accuracy. You need to balance it all out. It can't be the same thing over and over and over again, you need the variety, but that variety doesn't have to all get equal amounts.

Think about it this way - if all you did was build number sense, number sense, number sense, your students might be great flexible thinkers, but they might not have the efficiency they need.

But if all you do is drill and practice, practice, practice, your students might be fast, but they won't understand what they're doing or why it works.

The balance comes from knowing what your students need right now and adjusting accordingly.

And when you really look at what your students are needing you will find that sometimes you need bigger and smaller amounts of things to create the perfect balance. Sometimes you need a bigger rock of number sense development. Sometimes you need more practice. Sometimes you need that application piece where they're solving real problems. It's not about making everything equal - it's about creating that beautiful structure where everything works together.

Let me give you some examples of what this looks like in practice.

If your students are struggling with multiplication facts, you might need MORE number sense work right now - helping them see the relationships between facts, using visuals, building that understanding. That's a bigger rock in your structure right now. Then when you move into practice, that practice might be a bigger rock right now but then you intersperse little "practice" rocks within the other rocks you are adding.

It's not equal. It's balanced based on what they need.

The same thing goes for math coaches, by the way. Your coaching shouldn't just be you always going in and modeling lessons for teachers. You want to balance that out with some observations, with some co-teaching, with some planning time together. All the different things.

We need to find ways to create a balance of these rocks because they all serve a purpose. It's not that we have to make sure everything is equal.

And this applies to your personal life as well. There are times that some rocks are bigger and take up more space and other things in your life have smaller rocks in your structure. It may feel overwhelming sometimes when you are spending a lot of time in one aspect but just try to think of it as laying a foundation for the things to come.

So here's what I want you to think about as you head into your planning this week.

Are you trying to balance like a scale - making sure everything is exactly equal?

Or are you balancing like a rock structure - adjusting the size and emphasis based on what is actually needed right now to keep those rocks from falling over?

Because here's the truth - when you try to make everything equal, you end up with a boring stack of identical rocks. It might stand, but it's not really balanced. And it's definitely not beautiful.

But when you thoughtfully layer different sized rocks - different types of mathematical experiences - based on what your students need, that's when you create something powerful. That's when you create real balance.

So this week, I want you to look at your math instruction or your plans for math coaching. What does your rock structure look like right now?

Are all your rocks the same size? Or are you creating that beautiful, balanced structure where some things get more emphasis when needed, and other things get more emphasis at different times?

Balance isn't about equality. It's about meeting your students (or the teachers you are coaching) where they are and giving them what they need, when they need it.

I hope this has helped you build your math mind so you can go build the math minds of your students. Have a great day!

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