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Perceptions and Reactions of Language Arts and Reading Teachers

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The success of whole language will depend upon its acceptance or rejection by classroom teachers. Some teachers avidly support change to whole language while others are reluctant to do so. Given the shift of language arts instruction from the mastery of skills and subskills to a whole language approach, this study investigated current practices in language instruction, the nature of changes, and the perceptions and reactions of teachers. Although the basal reading program continues to be the most widely-used approach to teaching reading in our country (Flood and Lapp, 1986; Barksdale, Thomas and Jones, 1990), a whole language philosophy is infiltrating elementary schools and appears to be establishing a foothold in many schools. In many instances whole language instruction has been initiated at the grassroots level where teachers are viewing it as a natural process to teaching reading and writing.

Statement of purpose

The purpose of this study was threefold: 1) to determine changes in the methods of language instruction nationwide and identify current practices; 2) to examine the roles that

teachers' experience, school location and size play in today's language instruction; and 3) to analyze teachers' perceptions and reactions to whole language instruction. Through five major questions, we investigated the following: 1) the use of a curriculum guide which governs language arts instruction; 2) the establishment of whole language in schools; 3) pilot programs using whole language; 4) the length of time that whole language had been in existence; and 5) teachers' satisfaction with their total language curriculum. In addition, we examined teachers' perceptions and reactions to the establishment of whole language instruction within their schools.

Method

A three-page written survey, designed to investigate the manner in which teachers view whole language instruction, was mailed to an elementary teacher located in one of the 20 randomly selected elementary schools in each of the 50 states. The names were procured from a computer list of schools throughout the United States (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1990-91). When answering the survey, teachers first provided demographic data concerning years of teaching experience, school location, number of students per classroom, and number of students per school. Secondly, their responses addressed five major questions: *Do you follow a curriculum guide which governs your language arts instruction?; Has whole language been instituted in your school?; Are pilot programs in whole language instruction being planned and conducted?; How long has your whole language program been in existence?; and Are you satisfied with your total language instruction?* When the surveys were returned, they were prepared for computer analysis and manipulation of data. We tabulated results based on the total number of responses to each question rather than the total number of surveys.

Results

Of 1,000 surveys mailed to 20 randomly selected schools in each state, 491 surveys were completed and returned (49 percent return). Responses came from all 50 states; 45 states returned between 6 and 15 surveys, 4 states returned less than 6, and one returned 18 surveys. Results were presented in two parts: 1) percentage responses to 5 major questions and 2) representative comments from teachers, noted by states, regarding their perceptions and reactions to whole language.

Table 1
Demographic Variables of Responding Teachers

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i># of Teachers</i>
Teaching experience	Beginning (1-2 yrs)	18
	Critical Yrs. (3-7 yrs)	16
	Experienced (8-19 yrs)	47
	Veteran (20+ yrs)	19
Location	Urban	24
	Suburban	32
	Rural	40
# of students per room	11-20	18
	21+	82
Average # of students per school	200	21
	300	22
	400	57

Demographic variables. Because of the number of returned surveys, we divided the years of teaching experience into 4 categories: 1) beginning teachers, one to 2 years; 2) teachers in the critical years, 3 to 7 years; 3) experienced teachers, 8-19 years; and 4) veteran teachers, 20+ years. We

termed the second category critical since teachers who are dissatisfied with the teaching profession tend to leave during this time (Schlechty and Vance, 1983). We divided experienced teachers into 2 categories when the data revealed teachers with 20 or more years had different perceptions and reactions to whole language than did those with less than 20 years. Approximately half of the respondents were experienced teachers located in rural schools, followed by suburban schools. Predominating were schools with enrollments of approximately 400 students per school and more than 21 students per classroom (see Table 1).

Responses to major questions. The teachers addressed five major questions. All answered the first, second and fifth questions. Only those responding "no" to the second question answered the third question; "yes" respondents answered the fourth question.

Do you follow a curriculum guide which governs your language arts instruction? Of all the responding teachers, the majority (85 percent) stated that they followed a curriculum guide. The remaining 15 percent reported they had no curriculum guide or they were not required to follow it.

Has whole language been instituted in your school? Two-thirds of all teachers indicated they were teaching reading through basal readers. A small portion of this number reported they use an eclectic approach implementing other instructional methods to complement or supplement a basal reader. Some reported they used whole language to provide variety but did not advocate teaching reading predominantly through a holistic approach.

One-third of all responding teachers, located mainly in suburban schools, reported whole language has been

implemented in their schools. The majority of whole language teachers had less than 21 students in their rooms and approximately 300 students enrolled in their schools (see Table 2).

Variables	Whole Language in Schools		Pilot Programs			
	Yes (29%)	No (71%)	Planned Yes	Planned No	Conducted Yes	Conducted No
Location						
Urban	27%	73%	52%	47%	48%	52%
Suburban	33%	67%	53%	46%	45%	55%
Rural	23%	77%	45%	55%	41%	59%
# of Students per classroom						
11-20	31%	69%	49%	51%	30%	67%
21+	28%	72%	50%	50%	47%	53%
Average # of students per school						
200	27%	73%	28%	72%	30%	70%
300	32%	68%	54%	46%	42%	48%
400	27%	73%	55%	45%	46%	54%

Are pilot programs in whole language instruction being planned and conducted? Only "no" respondents answered this question. Several reported their schools had pilot programs planned to assist teachers in making smooth transitions to whole language instruction. The highest percentages for *planned* pilots came from urban and suburban schools and schools with 300 or more students. The highest percentage *conducting* pilot programs were reported by urban

schools, classrooms with 21+ students, and schools with approximately 400 students (see Table 2).

Table 3
*How long has your whole language program
been in existence?*

	1-2 yrs (51%)	3-4 yrs (24%)	5+yrs (25%)
Location			
Urban	59%	34%	7%
Suburban	60%	23%	17%
Rural	56%	30%	14%
# of students per classroom			
11-20	53%	40%	7%
21+	58%	25%	17%
Average # of students per school			
200	39%	44%	17%
300	63%	23%	14%
400	60%	25%	15%

How long has your whole language program been in existence? Teachers who are implementing whole language responded to this question and were grouped in the following three categories: 1-2 years, 3-4 years, and 5+ years. Of the respondents, 7 to 17 percent have implemented whole language for at least five years, 23 to 34 percent have used it during the past three to four years, and 56 to 60 percent reported implementing it within the past two years. In this study the number of teachers using whole language doubled during the past two years. Whole language instruction escalated in classrooms of all sizes but particularly in rooms with less than 21 students. Schools with enrollments of over 300 students advanced most rapidly in the use of whole language, more than doubling in number during the past four years (see Table 3).

Table 4
Are you satisfied with your total language program?

	<i>yes</i> (28%)	<i>somewhat</i> (55%)	<i>no</i> (17%)
Variables			
Teaching experience			
Beginning (1-2 yrs)	35%	46%	19%
Critical (3-7 yrs)	22%	62%	16%
Experienced (8-19 yrs)			
	26%	57%	17%
Veteran (20+ yrs)	33%	51%	16%
Location			
Urban	35%	46%	18%
Suburban	28%	57%	14%
Rural	25%	57%	18%
# of students per classroom			
11-20	28%	70%	1%
21+	34%	63%	3%
Average # of students per school			
200	28%	42%	30%
300	25%	62%	13%
400	29%	55%	15%
Whole language in schools			
Yes (29%)	46%	52%	2%
No (71%)	31%	56%	23%
Teachers currently using whole language			
1-2 yrs (53%)	31%	68%	1%
3-4 yrs (26%)	51%	43%	6%
5+ yrs (25%)	68%	32%	0%

Are you satisfied with your total language curriculum?
All teachers answered this question: 28 percent reported they were very satisfied, 55 percent were somewhat satisfied, and

17 percent not satisfied with their total language curriculum. Expressing the greatest satisfaction were beginning (1-2 years) and veteran (21+ years) teachers, teachers in urban schools, and those in larger classrooms. Those who had implemented whole language in their schools expressed slightly more satisfaction than those not using whole language. Teachers who have used whole language for a longer period of time expressed the greatest satisfaction (see Table 4).

Teachers' perceptions and reactions

Teachers appeared to react diversely to the philosophy of whole language. To report all responses would have been time-consuming and repetitive so we selected representative comments from teachers and indicated the state in which they teach. For their perceptions and reactions to whole language, we classified responses in the following categories: 1) positive; 2) negative; 3) more information or resources needed, and 4) changes needed.

Positive comments. Several teachers in various states praised whole language. A teacher in Arizona reiterated what many of the teachers expressed: "We are just getting our feet wet with whole language. It is a marvelous, exciting challenge." "Whole language is beginning to spread in our system due to teacher demand and supportive principals" (Idaho). "Since our district has not made a commitment to a whole language program, several primary teachers and I have devised our own." "We have seen fantastic results in the affective as well as cognitive domain of students' learning" (Illinois). "Teaching whole language is very exciting... our children enjoy it" (Hawaii). "The excitement and desire to read is so evident in the K-3 students that we are sold on the results and are encouraging others to get involved. It's a *natural!*" (Wyoming).

Negative comments. Negative comments were also reported from the east to the west coast. A teacher in Maine said, "We have had whole language courses offered but not all teachers have participated." One from California stated, "Whole language takes excellent teachers to implement it and most teachers are mediocre and/or old-fashioned. Whole language will ultimately fail because of the negative attitudes toward phonics which most children need to learn to read." "Our school has only begun to use a whole language approach but many teachers are reluctant to change their methods" (Tennessee). "The difficulty with a whole language approach in this school system is that we are under pressure to teach for tests" (Florida). "Our school board strongly discourages anything labeled whole language... we just don't use those words" (New Mexico).

Changes needed. Just as change is needed in any endeavor, teachers who have instituted whole language instruction in their classrooms recognize that their approach to teaching reading will always need adjusting. "Since this is our first year using whole language instruction, we have learned things that worked and things that didn't. We are excited about using the whole language approach to a greater degree next year" (Virginia). "Changes are slow and we continue to revise and revamp our approach to reading" (Missouri). "We have so much more to do! Continual efforts to improve are being made" (Indiana). "We are still exploring, experimenting, and enjoying whole language in the classroom. More inservices and literature will be most welcome" (Hawaii).

More information or resources needed. "Our teachers are open to new ideas and would like more information about planning and implementing whole language in order to do a more effective job" (Idaho). "We believe in the whole

language program; however, a great deal of training needs to continue for several teachers" (California). "Most staff members feel untrained to attempt new teaching styles" (Connecticut). "I believe some of us still lack an awareness and understanding of the whole language process" (Nebraska). "The administration also needs to be more educated in workshops and courses about whole language" (Utah). "The resources needed are inadequate. We need appropriate literature selections and classroom libraries" (Oregon).

Discussion and conclusions

Teachers expressed strong perceptions of whole language instruction which appeared to influence their reactions regarding its implementation. However, while reading through the comments, we questioned teachers' definitions of whole language. Those who commented on using whole language on a part-time basis did not necessarily demonstrate an awareness that whole language is a philosophy committing to process and child-centered learning and teaching. Rather, they are viewing whole language as a program, similar to a basal reading program, which can be fractioned and used with a combination of approaches. Some teachers have not grasped the concept that whole language is a belief system, not a package of materials or a set of books to be purchased (Chew, 1991).

Although whole language instruction has almost doubled during the past two years, there exists the question of what constitutes a sound whole language curriculum. Ideally, as teachers become more familiar with whole language, they will become more aware of its benefits in their classrooms. Even though 85 percent stated they are governed by a curriculum guide in language arts, almost one-third reported they currently have or are beginning whole language instruction

in 1992. This may indicate that teachers are questioning curriculum guides with written objectives to be imposed on children who are unknown to curriculum writers. Whole language appears to be gaining a foothold in suburban schools that tend to have approximately 300 students and less than 21 students per classroom. These small numbers appear to provide some degree of security to teachers who try new approaches to language instruction. Urban and suburban schools reported having *planned* more pilot programs but fewer schools reported actually *conducting* pilots. The teachers recounted difficulties in establishing whole language in schools because of a lack of familiarity or misconceptions about whole language.

Although rural schools comprised the largest reporting population, those teachers indicated little movement toward whole language. It appears that current updates in whole language replacing existing language arts and reading curricula are reaching suburban and city schools but have not penetrated rural areas as reported in this sampling.

Beginning and veteran teachers expressed satisfaction with whole language. This seemingly polemic population may suggest the following. Beginning teachers are not entrenched in any open language arts philosophy and whole language has probably been presented in their preservice university classes. Therefore, whole language may be the known approach to teaching and is rewarding and satisfying for beginning teachers. Veteran teachers, however, may represent the crux of the matter in adopting whole language philosophies and instruction. Veteran teachers, with 20+ years of experience, have taught through the days of skills, subskills, teach, reteach, test for mastery and retest. These management systems offered a preset guide of skills in an instruction sequence or format determined by people outside the classroom

who do not know the students to be taught. Having spent large amounts of time on such management and mastery systems, veteran teachers are in a position to pose hard questions regarding such language arts systems. Obviously, this population of teachers did not find answers favoring reading and language arts programs which parsed, segmented, and isolated language arts and reading. Whole language represented an alternative for the veteran teachers. The satisfaction experienced by the veteran teachers attests to the fact that whole language implementation is offering them and their students a chance to succeed in ways not allowed under the former language arts programs.

Another population reporting satisfaction with whole language was found in teachers in urban schools who had more than 21 students in their classrooms. Obviously, whole language is not just for small groups but works well in larger classrooms. Teachers who have been implementing whole language for at least five years reported the most satisfaction with their whole language instruction. The test of time appears to be favoring whole language. We see this as a strength; whole language is not a quick-fix nor a patch-up answer to ailing language arts and reading programs, but rather a commitment to how people grow and learn over time. With added time, whole language approaches can resolve issues of assessment, resources and materials, and, probably, parent education.

Teachers' comments represented both the best and the worst of the teaching profession. In these self-reports, teachers labeled their colleagues who were not attempting whole language and not succeeding with whole language as "mediocre," "old-fashioned," and "not willing to change." While these labels are highly subjective, they do indicate some problematic areas of instituting change in our schools. Likewise, administrators posed some problems as reported by

teachers in this survey. Several teachers said that they could not attempt whole language because administration held teachers accountable for test results and teachers were afraid that tested items may not be covered in whole language classrooms. In this case of the "tail wagging the dog," curricula appeared to revolve around tests.

However, the best of the teaching profession came through statements praising whole language such as "exciting," "natural," and "the kids love it." These statements praising whole language speak to teachers who work and learn with their students and work hard at instituting change. Comments indicating a need and desire for change to whole language became evident. Several teachers mentioned change as a necessary component of teaching, but changing to whole language was "too slow" for them. Several expressed a desire for more inservices to foster a change to whole language. We viewed teachers who perceived themselves as change agents for their students' learning as healthy and productive professionals.

Summary

Inherent in all the reactions to and perceptions of whole language is the concept of teacher belief systems. If teachers are to change their language arts and reading instructional behaviors, it is necessary for change in their beliefs about how children learn. An understanding of current teacher beliefs may need to precede attempts to change beliefs (Allington, 1990). Tied into teachers' belief systems is their knowledge. Kagan (1990) defines knowledge and beliefs as being the same. Therefore, the whole notion of change implies learning and changing one's actions based upon new knowledge. Change involves an uncomfortable set of circumstances for some teachers. Therefore, it is most encouraging to read the comments of teachers who are changing and attempting to make a

difference, and even more encouraging to read about teachers slowly committing to change, struggling to incorporate whole language instruction despite adversity. These are successes in teachers' belief systems, systems that know teaching and learning are forever changing and growing.

Language arts and reading instruction is a process not a product. The very process that teachers go through in transition to whole language instruction is one of the characteristics of whole language, that of process. Further research is indicated. Research involving rural, suburban, and urban schools going through changes and the struggles involved in changing belief systems needs to be documented.

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