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# Predicting the Future of the Whole Language Literacy Movement: Past Lessons and Present Concerns

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# Predicting the Future of the Whole Language Literacy Movement: Past Lessons and Present Concerns

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*Progressive Education. The Open Classroom. New Math.* Educational innovations have come and gone over the years. The reasons for each one's demise were different, and some innovations probably were not worthy of continued support, but there certainly seems to be a pattern (or pendulum) regarding educational change. What does the future hold for the Whole Language Literacy Movement?

The Whole Language Literacy Movement is sweeping the nation with its promise to help students become better readers and writers. However, there are issues which its supporters must address to improve its chances for long-term survival. What can we learn from studying its current implementation and about the nature of the change process that can help us predict its future? The purpose of this study was to identify and explore some of the factors which could block the movement and to suggest options for addressing these potential problems.

Specific information on potential problems which may confront the Whole Language Literacy Movement was

obtained through a nationwide survey sampling the opinions and practices of those directly involved with elementary education. Questionnaires relating to whole language beliefs and practices were completed by curriculum directors, elementary principals, veteran teachers, new teachers, and parents from randomly-selected school districts across the United States. The opinions obtained from this sampling were viewed as a glimpse at the views of practitioners which can also be compared with the views of researchers. Patterns which emerged focused on the importance of inservice education opportunities, concern for program accountability, and availability of suitable educational materials. These issues, which can be viewed as potential problems for the Whole Language Literacy Movement, can also form the basis for action to support its continuation.

### **Current viewpoints**

The Whole Language Literacy Movement could be characterized as a current hot topic in many educational publications. Most of these books, book chapters, or journal articles detailing both theory and practice portray it in a highly positive light. *Whole Language: Practice and Theory* (Frocse, 1991), *Case Studies in Whole Language* (Vacca and Rasinski, 1991), and *Reading as Communication* (May, 1990) are just a few of the books for preservice and inservice teachers which explain and support the Whole Language Literacy Movement.

There is another considerably smaller but very important body of literature which looks critically at the Whole Language Literacy Movement. There it is portrayed as an extremist view of reading instruction which neglects the importance of phonics (MacGinitie, 1991), puts the teacher in an uncomfortable role (Mosenthal, 1989), and causes a school district's scores to decline (Viadero, 1991). Even popular magazines such as *Newsweek* have picked up on the notion that

there is a controversy going on which Kantrowitz (1990) labels "The Reading Wars."

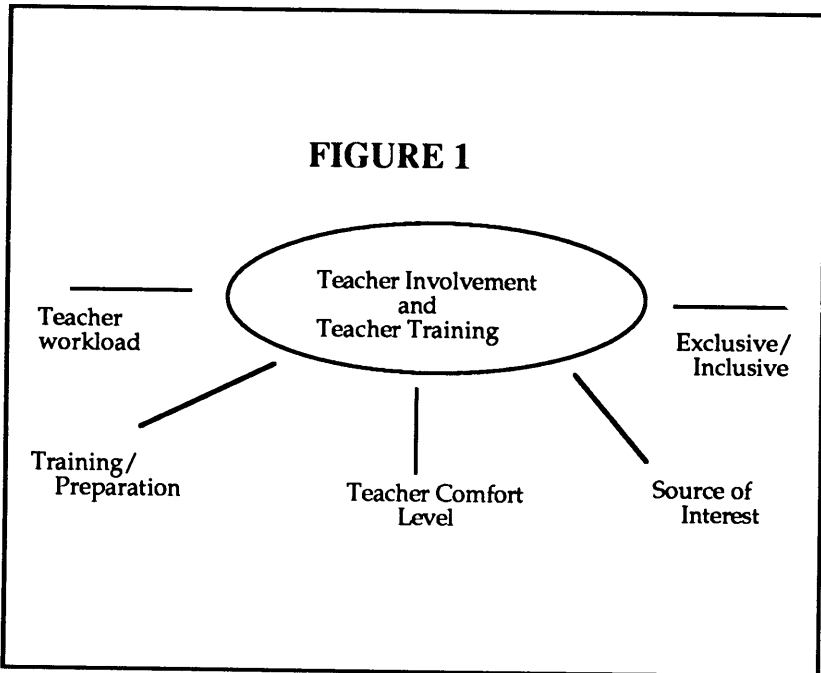
Others support the basic beliefs of the Whole Language Literacy Movement but express concerns or reservations. Harste (1989) believes that for its long-term survival, "...proponents of whole language need to explicate their own theory rather than attempt to build whole language theory on the basis of old philosophers" (p. 247). Incompatible legislated mandates and tests and the lack of a support system for teacher change concerned Pace (1992) as she followed the efforts of teachers trying to implement whole language literacy instruction. Pearson (1989) worries about the possible rift in the educational field which this movement could product and Walmsley and Adams (1993) go one step further, suggesting that due to the demanding nature of whole language instruction it is not for everyone.

Putting the Whole Language Literacy Movement in a context with other educational reforms mentioned earlier yields volumes of literature about these movements, their strengths, and reasons for their eventual demise. A brief sampling, however, reveals some key points relating to the fate of each. Riner (1989), writing about the Progressive Education movement, asserts that "Dewey had great difficulty embodying his ideas into educational practice..." and this difficulty of translating theory into practice caused the failure of true reforms in school curriculum.

Open Education met difficulties, according to Rothenberg's (1989) analysis, for a variety of reasons. Included among these reasons are lack of student achievement data, hasty implementation which emphasized form rather than quality, the perception that it was an extremist

movement, and resistance from teachers who perceived it as too demanding.

The demise of the New Math Movement is attributed by Offner (1978) to mathematicians as, "it is sadly apparent that many professional mathematicians are not only incompetent teachers but have a distorted understanding of their own field." Fey (1979), also looking at the fate of the New Math Movement, cited the importance of agreement of professional judgment with the prevailing political and social attitudes and values. He also noted that teachers generally do not want to change the way they teach as that is perceived as difficult and risky.



The common link between the Whole Language Literacy Movement and the others mentioned earlier is the element of change. Latham (1988) writes of the predictable factors which can lead to the downfall of educational innovations.

Taking those factors, or roadblocks, as well as others gleaned from the journal articles previously cited about the different reform movements, it is possible to try to cluster these roadblocks in broad categories. The diagrams included illustrate these clusters of roadblocks to educational innovations. Figure 1, *Teacher Involvement and Training*, includes items which point to the teacher as a blocking factor. The work load is perceived as too burdensome, appropriate training or preparation is lacking, teachers are uncomfortable with the change, and motivation of the change does not come from the teachers.

Figure 2, *Theoretical Base*, groups together lack of educator involvement in designing the innovation, theory which may not be sound, and unclear connections between theory and practice, as problems stemming from the Theoretical Base.

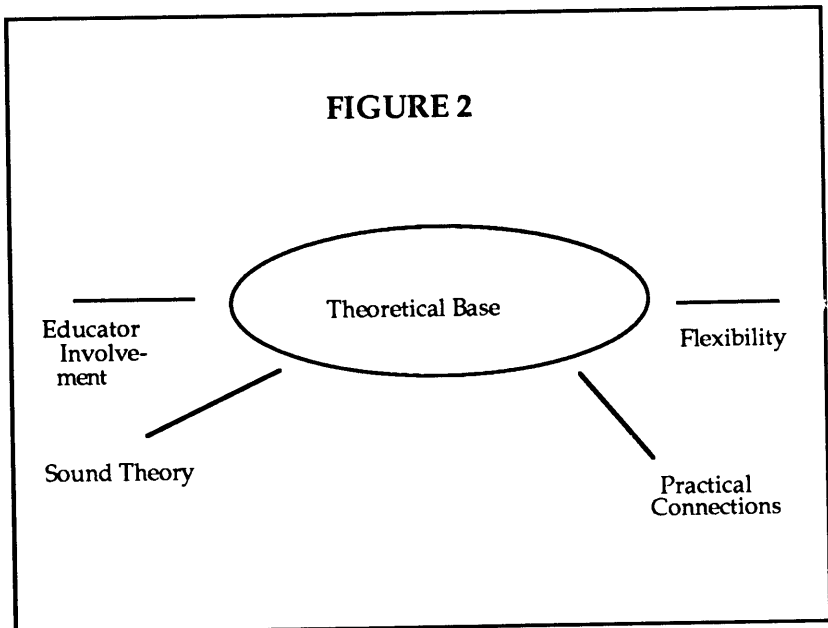
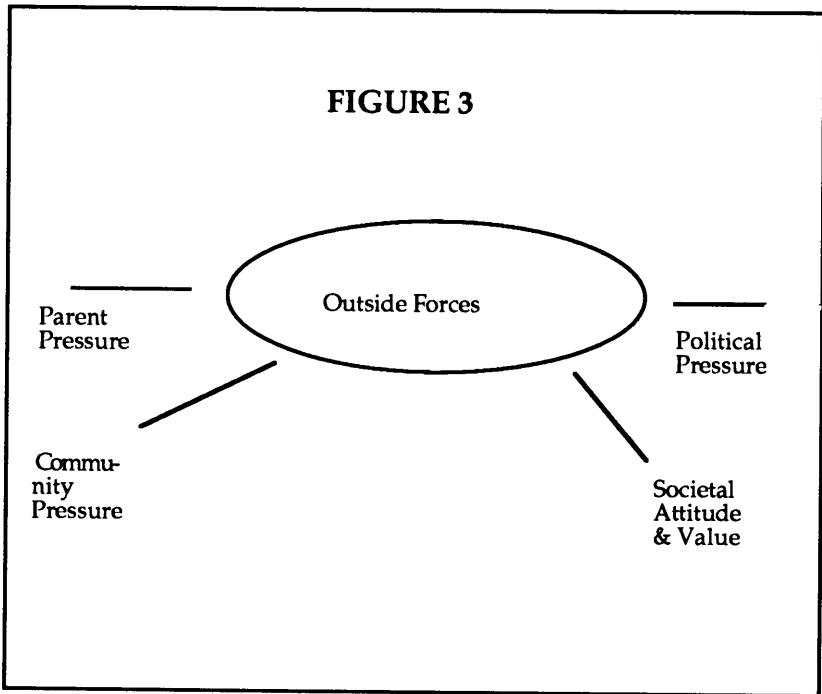
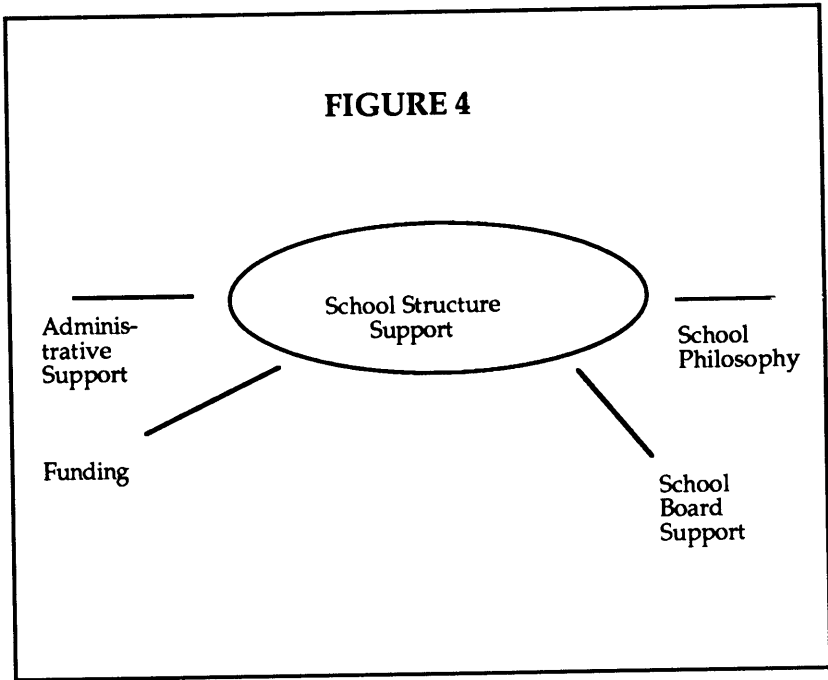


Figure 3, *Outside Forces*, shows how factors such as parent, community, and political pressures, as well as broader societal attitudes and values, come into play.

Figure 4, *The School Structure and Support Roadblocks*, includes lack of administrative and school board support, funding problems, and incompatibilities of the innovation's philosophy with the philosophy of the school.



In Figure 5, *Assessment*, the issues are unrealistic expectations for measurable improvement, required assessment instruments which may not reflect the nature of the innovation, and teacher concern about their personal accountability to prepare their students for the next grade or skill level.

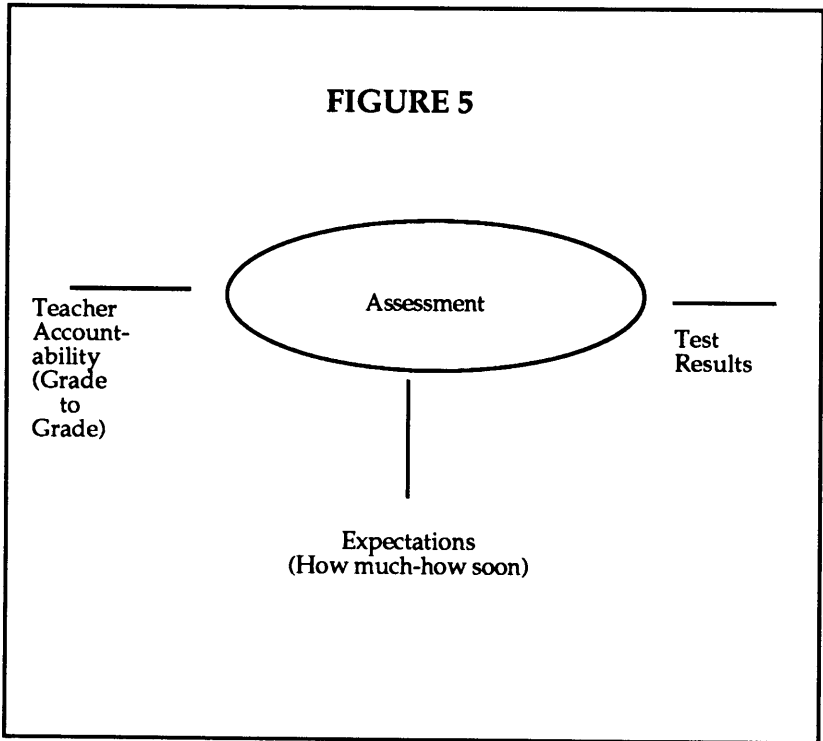


These five figures illustrating roadblocks to educational innovation helped frame the research questions to be asked and the suggestions of means for overcoming these problems.

### **Research procedures**

In order to conduct a nationwide survey of the Whole Language Literacy Movement, the researchers contacted the American Association of School Administrators (Note 1). From this directory, through random sampling procedures, 1,250 names and addresses of curriculum directors were drawn. A letter was sent to each curriculum director along with the self-addressed, stamped questionnaire for the following — a primary teacher; an intermediate teacher; an elementary principal; the curriculum director; a parent.





The curriculum director was requested to distribute each questionnaire to an appropriate person. As a token of gratitude, a new one dollar bill was also enclosed with a tag saying "Thank you... Please take a friend to coffee with our compliments." The questionnaire briefly defined whole language accordingly:

*A view of the reading process primarily concerned with communication and comprehension more than individual skills, where instruction integrates all language arts and often does not use a basal reading textbook.*

The teachers in the survey were then asked their current grade level and years in teaching. Next, the recipient of the

questionnaire was asked to mark an X on a continuum that best described their school's (or classroom's) reading program.

**Skill-Based Basal** 1/...../2...../3...../4...../5 **Whole Language**

Then the recipient was asked to respond to the following two questions: 1) *What do you perceive as the difficulties in implementing whole language practices?* and 2) *In your opinion, how can these problems be addressed?* Participants were then asked to fold, staple, and mail the stamped, self-addressed questionnaire within one week.

## Research results

**Return rate.** Of the 1,250 questionnaires that were sent, 365 were returned for a 29 percent return rate. One possible reason for the low percentage of return was that curriculum directors did not distribute the questionnaires as requested by the researchers. Principals responded most to the questionnaire with the return rate percentage of 25 percent. Parents participated least with a return rate of only 13 percent. Interestingly, only 21 percent of the curriculum directors responded which means that some of them distributed the questionnaires but did not take the time to complete one themselves.

When studying the range of return percentages, it is important to note that despite having completed questionnaires from over 350 people, the sample was not fully representative of each of the groups surveyed. This may be especially true of the parent group, not only because of the low rate of return, but also there exists a likelihood of bias when a curriculum director selects the parent to be surveyed.

**Participant responses.** When participants rated their reading programs on a continuum with the basal approach on

one end and whole language on the other, approximately half of the programs were rated basal. About 25 percent ranked their programs as a combination of both; with an average of 25 percent of the participants reporting that their programs followed the whole language philosophy.

When asked the question, *What do you perceive as the difficulties in implementing whole language practices?*, several issues arose. The most frequent response (31.8 percent) cited concern over not teaching reading-related skills. All groups surveyed expressed concern about this issue (including both those teachers who labeled themselves whole language and those who advocated the basal approach). Along with skills instruction, teachers were concerned about assessment, "inadequate instruments for assessing whole language practices."

Another answer repeated often (28.5 percent) was the lack of understanding about the Whole Language Literacy Movement — what the term means to one person does not necessarily mean the same to another — as well as a misunderstanding of how to incorporate the whole language philosophy in the classroom. Another concern about the Movement that was cited in the questionnaire (24 percent) was people being resistant to change (this concern was mentioned particularly among veteran teachers with six or more years of teaching experiences). One teacher stated in the questionnaire, "Whole language — just another phase... this also will pass." The least-mentioned difficulty in implementing whole language practices was lack of administrative support. Only 16 respondents cited *Administrators* as a cause for concern.

When asked the question, *In your opinion, how can these problems be addressed?*, a little more than half of the

participants (52.6 percent) in the survey expressed the need for inservice. Other solutions noted (approximately 12 percent of the responses) were "more money and materials," "parent education," and "combining the whole-language and skill-based philosophies." The emphasis quite clearly was for more inservice in the Whole Language Literacy Movement. This proposed solution is very consistent with the teacher involvement and training concerns which emerged from the first question. Teachers' comments were *not sure how to go about it, and explain it in simple terms.*

Studying survey responses just from the teachers, other patterns emerge. There were no percentage differences between the novice primary teachers (with five or less years of teaching experience) and the veteran primary teachers when reporting their advocacy of the Whole Language Literacy Movement. Twenty-six percent of each group responded that their reading programs followed the whole language philosophy. However, there was a difference between the novice intermediate teachers (42 percent) and the veteran intermediate teachers (32 percent). This difference suggests a stronger desire of new intermediate teachers who responded to the survey to incorporate the whole language philosophy.

### **Discussion of research results**

Looking at the many possible roadblocks to educational change, a number of factors seem to favor the long-term success of the Whole Language Literacy Movement. It builds on an established theoretical base, seems to have gained acceptance from the general public, and has received support within the school structure. Key writers about this movement such as Goodman (1992) and Harste (1989) also believe that the movement will persist, though it may evolve somewhat in form and co-exist with other innovations.

The survey respondents identified two potential weak spots — 1) the teacher's role including preparation and support necessary to do it well, and 2) skills and assessment with all its related accountability issues. These concerns also echo those of noted researchers and writers cited earlier (Walmsley and Adams, 1993; Pearson, 1989; Pace, 1992). McCaslin (1989) concludes her commentary on this movement, challenging advocates of whole language to focus on the teacher's role and "... attend to issues of practice from the perspective of teacher learning..." (p. 228). So to foster the continuing growth of the Whole Language Literacy Movement, it seems that several support systems are important.

First, teachers need to have a thorough understanding of the Whole Language Literacy Movement and how to implement whole language strategies in the classroom. As one teacher stated in the survey, there is "insufficient time allotted to inservice on a continuous basis on strategies for instruction based on the whole language philosophy." Thorough, ongoing inservice programs and support groups need to be implemented in school districts, with consistent support from knowledgeable administrators. This plan will assist in the successful continuity and structure of a newly implemented whole language program and will help to alleviate some teachers' fear and resistance to change.

Second, along with added inservice, teachers need to be given more time to plan and monitor the change in their own classroom. Released time needs to be provided for this purpose, along with more funds to purchase more whole language materials.

Third, to help overcome the concern about skills and assessment, new techniques for accountability and evaluation need to be devised. These new assessment procedures need to

be carefully implemented in conjunction with the goals of the school district.

Lastly, an important issue in the Whole Language Literacy Movement is to educate parents. Their concern is that skills will be neglected, their children's learning or grades will suffer, and grades will decline on achievement tests. Carefully prepared parent workshops need to be held to address questions and concerns. Open classroom visitation schedules could also help in easing parental concerns. Parents can be very helpful assistants in a whole language classroom and gain first-hand experience with its theory and practice.

Twenty years from now, articles will probably be written about some new popular educational movement which is causing great excitement. As the educational pendulum swings, will we be looking back, nostalgically, or otherwise, at the Whole Language Literacy Movement as an example of another innovation from our educational past? Or will knowledgeable teachers, supported with adequate time and resources, have integrated the Whole Language Literacy Movement? If it is to survive and thrive, we must listen carefully to the voices of researchers and practitioners and respond to these emerging needs.

*Note 1: For a Directory of Curriculum Directors in the United States, contact the American Association of Schools Administrators, 1801 North Moore Street, Arlington VA 22209 (phone 703 538-0700).*

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