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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study was conducted in order to (1) investigate the forces affecting the literacy practices of first year teachers, (2) examine factors that foster the creativity, innovation and growth of teachers, and (3) describe some exemplary literacy practices of beginning teachers. Three beginning teachers in an urban midwestern school were observed over a 5-month period. Pre- and post-study interviews were conducted along with field notes and video analyses. It was found that district-mandated approaches to literacy instruction and the cool reception given to new ideas by experienced teachers had a negative affect on the initial literacy practices of these beginning teachers. Reflective dialogue with peers in a safe, nonjudgmental environment had a positive effect on their literacy practices and resulted in these teachers implementing reading and writing workshops. It was concluded that teacher growth and effectiveness would be enhanced if the principles and procedures of reading and writing workshop were adopted for training teachers at all levels of experience. (Contains 16 references. Interview questions are attached.) (RS)

Running head: BEGINNING WHOLE LANGUAGE

# Beginning Teachers Beginning Whole Language

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## Abstract

This ethnographic study was conducted in order to (a) investigate the forces affecting the literacy practices of first year teachers, (b) examine factors that foster the creativity, innovation and growth of teachers, and (c) describe some exemplary literacy practices of beginning teachers. Three beginning teachers in an urban Midwestern school were observed over a five-month period. Pre and post-study interviews were conducted along with field notes and video analyses. It was found that district mandated approaches to literacy instruction and the cool reception given to new ideas by experienced teachers' had a negative affect on the initial literacy practices of these beginning teachers. Reflective dialogue with peers in a safe, nonjudgmental environment had a positive effect on their literacy practices and resulted in these teachers implementing reading and writing workshops. It was concluded that teacher growth and effectiveness would be enhanced if the principles and procedures of reading and writing workshop were adopted for training teachers at all levels of experience.

# BEGINNING TEACHERS BEGINNING WHOLE LANGUAGE

"Growth in writing requires risk taking, experimentation, and an environment that supports such exploration" (Dyson & Freeman, 1991). These same three factors could also be applied to teaching. This study examines three beginning teachers experimenting with whole language ideas.

## Background

The literacy philosophies of beginning teachers plays an integral role in their learning the art and science of teaching. These philosophies are used to assimilate new information, plan literacy experiences, and assess learning (Hayden, 1994; Hollingsworth, 1989; Jones, 1995; Kuzmic, 1993; Paschke, 1996). Most often, the literacy philosophies of beginning teachers are based on three things: elementary school experiences, experiences as learners in high school and college, and the perspectives presented in undergraduate methods courses (Hollingsworth, Teel, & Minarik, 1992; Roos, 1993). However, these initial philosophies are unstable and highly affected by the environment (Duffy, 1993). Beginning teachers often feel pressure to fit into the existing norms of their school and to use the prevailing system (Allen & Piersma, 1996; Hollingsworth, et al., 1992; Kuzmic, 1993; Paschke, 1996; Smith, 1992). Peer pressure from experienced teachers, along with overly intrusive district expectations, frequently moves beginning teachers away from idealized or innovative approaches to teaching and towards more traditional methods. Thus, instead of infusing new ideas into the school, traditional ideas are often reinforced and maintained.

## Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine those elements that promote the growth of beginning teachers. Specifically, this study looked to answer the following questions: What forces affect the literacy instruction of beginning teachers? What elements foster the growth, creativity, and innovation of teachers? What are some exemplary literacy practices by beginning teachers?

## Method

This section describes the sample selection and the data collection and analysis used in this ethnographic study.

### Sample Selection

Three students from my graduate reading class were chosen for this study. All three were first year teachers, female, in their mid to late twenties, and were taking graduate courses as part of an internship program. Two taught third grade and one taught second grade, all at the same elementary school. These subjects were asked to participate in this study based on their interest in literacy education, their desire to experiment with new literacy methods, and their thoughtful articulation of ideas based on sound literacy theories.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection began in November, 1996 and was completed in March, 1997. Data were collected by means of interviews, class observations, and video taping. Each teacher was interviewed at the beginning of this study. The same 32 questions were asked of each (see Appendix ). Follow up questions were based on teacher responses. Interviews took approximately 60 minutes to complete and were recorded on audio tape. Also, six separate

classroom observations totaling approximately 12 hours were made. Extensive field notes were taken to record relevant dialogue, behavior of students and teachers, and classroom dynamics. Finally, three sessions lasting approximately 50 minutes each were video taped. Here, reading and writing workshops were recorded along with student comments and related dialogue.

Data were analyzed by reviewing audio tapes, field notes, and video tapes. With each, I (a) looked at the whole; (b) identified patterns, reoccurring themes, or groups that emerged from the data; (c) arranged the data into groups; and (d) described the whole in terms of the major patterns or groups.

## Results

This section describes (a) the background and perspective of these beginning teachers, (b) reading workshops, (c) writing workshops, (d) management issues, and (e) the influence of schools and teachers.

### Background and Perspective

Kathy, Stacy, and Linda (not their real names), all received their initial teacher training at separate institutions. They were teaching at the same suburban school located near a large, Midwestern city. The staff at this school consisted of teachers averaging 25 years of experience.

Kathy and Stacy's initial literacy philosophy reflected a strong whole language perspective. This philosophy was developed at their respective teacher-training institutions and reinforced during student teaching experiences. They brought many new whole language ideas with them and were eager to try them in their new classrooms. However, this school district required all teachers to use a skills-based approach to reading instruction. It also became apparent that their new ideas were not validated by their experienced peers. They were advised to

stick with the required basal readers. Thus, a conflict developed between Kathy's and Stacy's literacy philosophy and the practice expected by peers and administration.

Linda's initial literacy philosophy reflected a skills-based perspective which was promoted by both her teacher-training and student teaching experience. She experienced less initial conflict between philosophy and practice. However, Linda was strongly influenced by her interactions with Kathy and Stacy, and by other whole language teachers during evening graduate classes. Despite the skills-based approach mandated by the district and her own initial philosophy, Linda moved closer to a whole language perspective during the course of this study.

Beginning Literacy Instruction

All three teachers said they came to the school year with the goal of creating literacy experiences that were enjoyable, interesting, and relevant. Their early reading instruction, however, consisted of basal readers and workbooks taught in one heterogeneous group. High ability students were often bored, low ability students were often frustrated, there was little time spent doing authentic reading and writing, and they were not able to use many of their new teaching ideas. All three described this as an ineffective approach to reading instruction, but because of their status as untenured teachers, they felt bound to use this type of reading instruction.

After the first weeks of school, Kathy, Stacy, and Linda began exchanging literacy ideas with each other and with other teachers in their evening graduate courses. This helped to reinforce their initial literacy philosophies and gave them the confidence to begin to shape their practice to fit their philosophy. Kathy and Stacy returned to their whole language philosophy, experimenting first with reading workshop, then moving to writing workshop. Linda, influenced

by her peers, also begin to experiment with reading and writing workshop.

Reading Workshop

Initially, each teacher used reading workshop in addition to basal instruction. By March, all three teachers were using reading workshop exclusively. There were slight differences in the structure of their reading workshops. Those elements that were common to all are described here.

Skills. District-mandated skills were still taught during reading workshop. Charts were created listing the specific skills to be taught along with the dates they were taught. These skills, taken from basal manuals and unit tests, were taught in short mini-lessons lasting five to ten minutes. After each skill was presented, students moved into small groups to create examples of that skill. This approach allowed students to help each other generate ideas and hear the thinking processes of other students.

Literature Logs. Students were asked to respond aesthetically (Rosenblatt, 1983; Zarillo, 1991) to the stories read during reading workshop using a literature logs. Sometimes a prompt or question was assigned; sometimes students were asked tell what they thought was interesting or important; at other times they were asked to describe events or emotions in the book that were similar to their own lives. The literature logs allowed teachers to observe students' relationship with books, engage them in dialogues about their books, and examine their thinking and writing skills.

Choice. Choice of books was handled in two different ways. Kathy had five to six copies of several different children's books. She assigned students to small groups. Each group was allowed to choose the book to be read. They were given a specific time period in which to finish

the book and a mandatory number of journal responses to make. After this, students were given two days to put together a presentation based on their book. This presentations included newscasts, enacting a story scene, creating and presenting a story map, puppet shows, dramas, book talks, or a dress-and-tell where students dressed like characters in the story and told the story from the characters' perspective. Children interviewed said that the presentation was their favorite part of reading workshop. Students in Stacy's and Linda's reading workshops were allowed to select and trade book of their choice. They responded daily in learning logs, met regularly in conferences with teachers, and formed small groups to discuss their books.

High Ability Readers. All three teachers felt that reading workshop was more effective than basal instruction in meeting the special needs of high and low ability readers. High ability readers had the opportunity to engage in high level activities which were open-ended and utilized critical and creative thinking. In Kathy's class, students who finished before other group members were given a choice of books that had the same author, topic, or theme. In Stacy's and Linda's classes, students were able to choose books that were at their own level, pace, and interest levels.

Low Ability Readers. Low ability readers in Kathy's class were provided with scaffolded reading experiences (Johnson & Graves, 1997) to help prepare them for reading the selection. Story maps, previews, and outlines were used as pre-reading activities. Reading buddies and audio tapes were supplied for during-reading activities. Group projects were often used for after-reading activities. Here, low ability readers were exposed to the reasoning of other students. They also had the chance to learn and practice skills with more support and less pressure and frustration than with individual activities. Low ability readers in Stacy's and Linda's classes were taught how to choose books that were interesting, but at an appropriate level.

Assessment. These teachers felt that reading workshop was more effective in providing information for them to describe their students as readers. They were able to interact with students regularly in their learning logs, listen to them read during conferences, and observe small group discussions. Stacy scheduled buddy reading days once a week. Here, each student would select a book or a chapter to read out loud to a buddy. This allowed Stacy to listen unobtrusively to many students read during a session, take notes on their reading performances, find skills for future mini-lessons, and avoid round-robin reading. Towards the end of the study, each teacher began to use portfolios. These not only listed the scores earned on standardized tests, but also described reading behaviors such as number of books read, types of books read, number of book talks, favorite types of books, reading goals, and students' descriptions of skills they had mastered.

Writing Workshop

There were slight differences in the structure of their writing workshops. Those elements that were common to all are described here.

Pre-Writing. There were five stages of writing in these workshops: pre-writing, a first draft, multiple revisions, editing, and publication. Teachers sometimes read picture books for pre-writing activities. Students were encouraged to relate the story to similar events or feelings in their lives. Then, they were asked to write about a similar idea. Kathy and Stacy alternated between these types of pre-writing activities and activities where students had total choice of writing topics.

Linda started writing workshop using exclusively teacher-directed writing activities. She found, however, that her students were not receptive to these and instead asked them to keep a

list of future writing topics in their journals. (All three classrooms used journals or literature logs to record ideas, list future writing topics, and to create rough drafts.) Linda taught her students a few pre-writing strategies to use independently. She found that giving students complete ownership of their writing topics created greater motivation to write and increased both the quality and quantity of their writing.

Writing. During writing workshop, students were working at all stages of writing. A parent volunteer was often present along with the teacher to help students at various stages. Each of the classrooms contained two Apple computers and a printer for students to use to write their final drafts. All teachers reported that students were much more excited about writing workshop than traditional writing approaches. Also, students' writing often reflected events going on in their lives, thus increasing feelings of ownership and emotional attachment. Stacy stated that once she gave students the freedom to come up with their own topics, she didn't have to "pull writing from them."

Management Issues

Like many first year teachers, Kathy, Stacy, and Linda were concerned about management issues coming into their first year, however, they all reported that management was going much better than they had expected. Observations showed there to be few incidents of off-task behavior during reading and writing workshops. Most students' conversations here seemed to be task-related. All three teachers were able to create structure while giving students choices and a sense of autonomy within this structure.

Kathy found that putting more responsibility on students for correcting tests, organizing the classroom, and choosing topics and reading material made the room more student-centered

and afforded fewer behavior problem. Stacy spent much of her time initially teaching routines and procedures in order to get her workshops to run smoothly. Linda felt that creating reading and writing experiences that tapped into students' interests and valued their ideas contributed to much of her success with classroom management.

The Influence of School Systems and Teachers

Instead of helping to support and nurture these beginning teachers, the school system and experienced teachers in this study had a negative influence on their initial practice. Kathy felt she was forced to employ teaching practices that were contrary to her literacy philosophy in order to meet the district guidelines. She did not like the fact that students were tested on vocabulary and skills found in the basal manuals whether they needed to know them or not. She felt pressured into following a set of curriculum standards that were "laid out like a recipe." Stacy described the reading curriculum as rigid and not effective in meeting the needs of her students or matching her teaching style. Linda felt that the district's approach to reading contributed to the unwillingness of veteran teacher to try new ideas.

Because they were all in the same building, Kathy, Stacy, and Linda were able to engage in reflective dialogues with each other. All three said they valued the feedback they got from each other and the free exchange of ideas. Kathy described it as "having safe, nonjudgmental people to bounce ideas off of." Stacy wondered what it would be like to be the only teacher with a whole language philosophy in a building. Linda said that having Kathy and Stacy to talk to gave her the confidence to try reading and writing workshop.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine those elements that promote the growth of

beginning teachers. This section examines the three initial research questions.

Forces Affecting Literacy Instruction

What forces affected the literacy instruction of these beginning teachers? The district-mandated approach to literacy instruction had a significantly negative effect on the literacy instruction of these teachers initially. At the beginning of the year they used approaches that they found to be ineffective and not best suited to the needs of their students. Grateful to have jobs, yet feeling the pressure of being untenured, they designed literacy lessons that were in direct contrast to their literacy philosophies.

These beginning teachers were also affected by the responses of the experienced teachers around them who had become entrenched in the district's skills-based approach to literacy. New ideas that conflicted with this approach were seen as bad. Beginning teachers were told to return to a skills-based approach until they were tenured. At this point, meaningful teacher dialogue between new and experienced teachers and the free exchange of ideas was curtailed. Traditional ideas were reinforced while innovation and experimentation was extinguished.

The most powerful influence here seemed to be the interactions these beginning teachers had among themselves and with other teachers in evening graduate classes. Here, their ideas were validated; mistakes as well as triumphs were shared in a safe, nonjudgmental environment; and they had a chance to discuss many approaches to effective literacy instruction. Had any one of these teachers been alone in a building without graduate classes, their literacy instruction would have looked a good deal like everybody else's in the building.

Fostering Growth and Creativity

What elements foster the growth, creativity, and innovation of teachers? This study

illustrates the necessity of a reflective dialogue among teachers to foster growth, creativity, and innovation. Being able to safely exchange new teaching ideas with peers was instrumental in promoting experimentation and implementation of these whole language ideas. Schools and experienced teachers can nurture this reflective dialogue by validating new ideas and encouraging experimentation by teachers of all levels of experience.

Creativity and innovation are fostered when teachers are empowered to make decisions best suited for their students. Just like the students in their writing workshops, teachers will produce better quality and quantity of innovative teaching ideas if they have choice and ownership in their teaching. Creativity is hampered by district-mandated approaches which become overly intrusive. By insisting on what must be, a school eliminates what might be, thus stymying growth and innovation.

Risk taking and experimentation by teachers is instrumental in their growth and creativity. Teachers need freedom to fail if they are to grow. In this study, many of these teacher's initial attempts didn't work. But as in process writing; reflection and feedback allowed them to refine and revise their teaching ideas and create some exemplary teaching practices. If teachers (and schools) engage only in safe, predictable teaching practices, there will be little growth and certainly no innovation, and both are needed if education is to evolve to meet the changing needs of a complex society.

Exemplary Practices

What are some exemplary literacy practices by beginning teachers? These were not perfect classrooms. These teachers made the same kinds of mistakes that all first year teachers make. However, they were excited about the learning taking place in their classrooms, they had a

sense of ownership in the teaching and learning process, and they made great strides towards mastering the craft of teaching. Students in their classrooms learned the necessary skills while engaging in pleasurable literacy events. They read, wrote, talked about their stories, and shared their delight in books. This, perhaps, should be the final measure of an effective literacy education program.

## Conclusion

Teacher effectiveness might be enhanced if the principles and procedures of reading and writing workshop were adopted for training teachers at all levels of experience. Short mini-lessons, learning logs, experimentation with new forms, feedback and revision, reflective dialogues, and regular conferences could all be used to help us all become better teachers and teacher educators.

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## APPENDIX
## Interview Questions

1. What were your literacy beliefs prior to starting this first year. Have they changed? How?
2. What literacy perspective did you leave college with?
3. What have you learned about teaching?
4. What have you learned about literacy?
5. What have you learned about schools and school systems?
6. What would you have liked to know prior to this first year of teaching?
7. What have you learned about management?
8. What have you learned about organization?
9. How has management and/or organization issues affected that way you teach literacy?
10. How has peer acceptance or support affected the way you teach literacy?
11. How has the school requirements/mandates affected the way you teach literacy?
12. What has been your greatest joy or triumph?
13. What has been your biggest disappointment?
14. What literacy things do you do well?
15. What literacy things do you want to get better at.
16. What was your undergraduate training/philosophy related to literacy? (Example: Did you leave with a whole language perspective?)
17. What forces shaped the image of literacy and teaching that you brought to this job.
18. What didn't college prepare you for?
19. How do children learn?
20. What shaped your literacy perspective?
21. What things impressed with or critical of in your school/district?
22. What literacy ideas seem to work with your school/district?
23. What things are you impressed with or critical of with your basal?
24. What things seem to work with your basal?
25. How do you teach writing? What was your image coming in to this year? What is reality?
26. How do you teach reading? What was your image coming in to this year? What is reality?
27. What have you learned about literacy this year?
28. What have you learned about teaching reading and writing?
29. What have you learned about teaching in general?
30. How do you assess and evaluate? What was your image coming in to this year? What is reality?
31. How do you deal with management issues in your classroom? What was your image? What is reality?
32. What is your role as a teacher?

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