Investigating the Implementation of Whole Language: Strengths and Weaknesses

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Abstract

The Whole Language/Phonics debate has been raging in California since the 1980s. However, there has been no real determination about which method is best for teaching reading to our students. Yet the Whole Language method has lost the recognition and respect of the educational community because the program was not implemented by all teachers the way it was intended. The purpose of this study is identify the strengths and weaknesses of the Whole Language, and to determine if it is an effective method of teaching early literacy to first grade students. From the literature it appears that while Whole Language does have benefits, it cannot stand alone in the teaching of early literacy.

Five professionals in teaching early literacy skills were interviewed in person or by email. They were asked if they teach the Whole Language approach. They were asked to give an opinion on what they felt were the strengths and weaknesses of the approach.

Responses indicate that professionals felt that the approach was strong with regard to the use of high quality literature and the way in which children were motivated to read. They all felt that the approach did not include sufficient explicit phonics instruction.

Introduction

I watched my younger brother struggle with reading almost his entire life. He never enjoyed reading and became extremely frustrated easily over reading assignments. When my brother started kindergarten in 1995, the reading program being used was a strictly phonics based program called as "Dekodiphukan," or "Decode-if-you-can" (Baratta-Lorton, 1985). This program used symbols to represent letters and sounds. By the time my brother reached second grade, it was apparent that he had not yet learned to read and needed to receive pull-out services in order to get him to grade level. I feel that had a reading program been used which did not focus strictly on decoding and phonics skills, and created a more holistic approach to reading, my brother may have been able to learn how to read.

During my student teaching in a second grade classroom in 2006, I encountered similar reading issues with my students. Reading was difficult for them and it had become a chore. When working with students one on one, I observed them struggling to decode simple words and understand the meaning of what they were reading. They would become frustrated and give up easily, simply saying "I can't do it." These students were being taught to decode and were only using basal texts to work on their decoding skills. Unfortunately, they were not being exposed to the wonderful children's literature which is available. Based on my knowledge of teaching and reading, I suspected that high quality literature might have provided avenues for student engagement and activated prior knowledge that might have been important in getting them to care about what they read. From this the students might have developed a love of reading which would have furthered the advancement of their reading skills.

Statement of Problem

Whole Language has been disregarded as an effective teaching method. It has been suggested that the use of a Whole Language literacy program demonstrated no vast improvements in students' ability to read and comprehended grade level texts. Others argue that such programs were judged too quickly based on low test scores during the beginning of its implementation. The Whole Language approach to literacy is about creating an environment in which learning is authentic, learner centered and connects with the learner's culture and prior knowledge. Whole Language engages the whole child and creates a reader who is able to understand the concept of reading in its entirety. The debate over which method is best to teach reading to students continues today and there is no clear answer. The problem is that it has been difficult to determine whether the Whole Language approach to reading is indeed an effective method and should be practiced in schools today or whether the low test scores were an accurate indicator of the programs failure.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to examine the Whole Language approach to reading and explore its strengths and weaknesses as evidenced in the literature. Children taught to read using the Whole Language received low tests after the first years of the implementation of Whole Language. However, it was never determined whether the program was judged too quickly based on student low scores or whether these scores were an accurate indicator of the program's inadequacies. Some Whole Language advocates claim that teachers were implementing what they believed to be "Whole

Language" practices; however, they were leaving out the key component of direct instruction. These teachers were not including the decoding/phonics instruction and students were not learning to read. Children were not learning to read from "Whole Language" teachers. Therefore it was assumed that Whole Language was not a successful approach to teaching reading, and that Phonics programs were the answer. The purpose of this study is to investigate Whole Language practices in order to evaluation their strengths and weaknesses.

Research Question

Whole Language fell out of favor in the educational community after students taught using this method received low test scores. However, some aspects of Whole Language were very successful. What aspects of Whole Language are effective in teaching reading? Whole Language refers to a philosophy of teaching reading in which learning is fostered in authentic environment. In order for a reading teaching philosophy or method to be effective it must help the students acquire the necessary skills to be successful readers, such as fluency, comprehension, decoding, and create a love of reading.

Theoretical Rationale

Whole Language is a Constructivist learning theory. This means that it "…is based on the idea that children learn by connecting new knowledge to previously learned knowledge" (Reyhner, 2003, ¶11). Whole Language methods are based on theories and research. This research includes psychological research from Piaget and Vygotsky and functional-linguistic research from Halliday (Goodman, 1989, p. 16-17). John Dewey

also contributed his ideas of reflective teaching and learner centered learning to the theory of Whole Language. These individuals have in one way or another "…shown that human competence in oral and written language grows as language is used for real purposes" (Wagner, 1989, ¶8) and that "The development of writing and reading is fostered by meaningful social interaction, usually entailing oral language" (Wagner, 1989, ¶8).

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development is a major contributor to the Whole Language theory. The Zone of Proximal Development is "…the difference between what a child can do with help and what he or she can do without guidance" (Pathways, 2007, ¶1). In the Whole Language approach to teaching reading, adults lead by example and provide students with the support they so they are able to develop the ability to read on their own. (Pathways, 2007, ¶1). Vygotsky also believed that "…children learn best when what is to be learned is functional and relevant, indicating that learning to read would be better approached as a whole-to-part or whole language process which encourages understanding and pleasure in the written word" (Stone, 2007, ¶1).

Another essential part of Whole Language instruction is taken from Piaget. Piaget believed that learning is a social process and that learning should come through interactions with the environment (Blumenfeld, 2007, ¶11). This idea is supported by Vygotsky's concept of collaboration and that learning takes place in the collaborations "…between students and teachers and between peers" (Blumenfeld, 2007, ¶12).

Dewey's contribution to the Whole Language theory stems from his belief that learning is based on experiences. He also recognizes that "Experience is an individual process", however, "…experiences overlap" (Ziniwicz, 2007, ¶5). This is essential to the

Whole Language method because students have to be interested in and actively engaged in the learning process based on their experiences. If their learning is based on and connects to their prior learning then their learning will be more successful. And this of course, is the goal of Whole Language.

Assumptions

As I began to develop this project, my assumptions were that Whole Language provides a students with a complete understanding of language, especially how to read. I assumed that Whole Language was unfairly received and disregarded because people judged the results too quickly without carefully considering all of the different factors that caused students to have difficulty reading. I also assumed that teachers did not understand how to implement the Whole Language program correctly and that they did not intentional leave out the decoding portion of the program.

I believe that Whole Language received this reputation because teachers did not clearly understand Whole Language programs and were not implementing it correctly. Perhaps teacher failure to implement the program correctly contributed to low student test scores. People may have judged these scores too quickly without enough investigation of what was really happening. I hypothesize that Whole Language is indeed an effective method for teaching students to read.

Background and Need

The debate over the most effective method of teaching reading to our students is nothing new. It has been argued throughout much of the twentieth century (Cromwell, 1997, ¶8). Since Whole Language was introduced to California in the late 1980s, the

argument has seemed to be primarily between this "new" method and the more tried and true Phonics based approach to teaching reading. There have been several reasons for this debate. One reason is that the phonics based approach is highly structured and systematic, while the Whole Language approach can appear to be more "disorganized" (Cromwell, 1997, ¶12). Another issue with Whole Language is that it "…puts a heavy burden on teachers to develop their own curriculum" (Reyhner, 2003, ¶8) using Whole Language techniques and methods. This means that if the individual teacher is unable to successful create a strong curriculum, the students are more likely to fail. However, it does leave more room for creativity and the teacher to base his or her curriculum on the students' individual needs. Yet, as the International Reading Association (IRA), who is known as a proponent of the Whole Language movement states, "Early, systematic, explicit phonics instruction is an essential part, but only part, of a balanced, comprehensive reading program" (Cromwell, 1997, ¶9). This means that teachers need to include phonics instruction as part of their Whole Language curriculum.

Another reason for this debate is standardized test scores and research results. Advocates of the more traditional phonics based methods point to higher test scores received by this method (CELT, 1991, ¶3). However, it has been argued that much of this research is flawed, and "…even the best research does not indicate that teaching phonics intensively produces any advantages on standardized tests beyond the primary grades" (CELT, 1991, ¶3). While the Whole Language approach received lower scores and could provide little research to support its claims of success after its first few years of implementation. Thus, the Whole Language approach quickly fell out of favor in the educational community due to these scores and lack of research.

In this debate about early literacy programs, Phonics and Whole Language have always been viewed as two separate entities. However, Dahl, and Schafer (2000), reported that Whole Language classrooms need to include phonics/decoding skills in order to be successful. The two methods need to work together as part of one program in order to create successful first grade readers. Therefore the issue becomes not whether phonics should be integrated, but how it should be integrated into Whole Language classrooms.

Review of the Literature

The great literacy debate between Whole Language and Phonics has been a topic of much concern in recent years. There are many influences in this debate, including politics, the implementations of these two methods, and the scientific research. The following review addresses the topics of Whole Language/Phonics debate. The first sub-heading, What is Whole Language, describes various definitions of Whole Language and the practices incorporated in a Whole Language classroom. Next, under "The Great Debate" subheading, background information on the debate is provided. Then The Implementation sub-heading describes how Whole Language was intended to be implemented. Other issues surrounding the implementation of "pure" Whole Language are discussed. The Research sub-heading section reports the effectiveness of Whole Language on reading performance in the first grade.

What is Whole Language?

Whole Language is a grass roots movement started by teachers which has its foundations in scientific research and theory. Yet, one of the major dilemmas surrounding

the Whole Language approach to reading is the difficulty in defining exactly what Whole Language is and what it entails. While there are many definitions available, there is one thing that they have in common: language should be taught authentically, should be learner centered and should empower students and teachers (Stahl & Kuhn, 1995, ¶6). Another important aspect of Whole Language is that "…theorists make it quite clear that whole language is not a 'method' or a collection of activities, but a philosophy that underlies all the teacher's instructional decisions" (Stahl & Kuhn, 1995, ¶7). In the Whole Language approach to reading it is essential that the teacher provide his/her students with the appropriate level of challenge in order for this approach to be successful (Stahl & Kuhn, 1995, ¶13). Some studies have shown that teachers too often allow their students to be entirely independent in the selection of their reading materials. This causes the student to select books that may be too easy, and do not providing an appropriate level of challenge. Thus the teacher must help the student select materials of interest which do provide the appropriate level of challenge for the student's reading ability (Stahl & Kuhn, 1995, ¶13).

In another definition of Whole Language, it is stated that it is "…a philosophy about curriculum-in both language arts and a broader, more general program-is based on recent research of how children acquire oral and written language" (Heineman, 1985, ¶1). Instead of being a set curriculum, Whole Language is again viewed as a guiding philosophy. It is "…the cognitive experience each learner has" (Heineman, 1985, ¶2). Once more, this definition is learner centered; how the learner interacts with his or her experiences in the classroom. It is the role of the teacher in a Whole Language curriculum to help the students engage in learning and to make sense of their experiences

(Heineman, 1985, ¶5). The curriculum in a Whole Language classroom can include, but is not limited to, "…the use of literature programs, big books, predictable books, discussion groups, authentic stories rather than basal readers, acceptance of adaptive spelling, and an emphasis on the writing process" (Danbury, 2007, ¶1). All of these elements, whether used individually or in conjunction with one another, help to create "…meaning centered learning" in which "Natural learning situations and whole-to-part learning" are essential (Danbury, 2007, ¶1).

While there are many definitions of Whole Language, most definitions include information on the students' experiences. In her definition, Grace (2007) states, "Whole Language is an umbrella term used to identify classrooms that engage students in effective, meaningful, and organized learning experiences" (¶1). She also includes that in this model, students and teachers are "co-learners who engage in authentic reading and writing activities" (Grace, 2007, ¶1). While teaching reading skills, Whole Language classrooms also teach other valuable skills, such as creativity and critical thinking. However, some of the reading skills being taught in these Whole Language classrooms are "…vocabulary development, comprehension strategies, study skills and work recognition skills" including the use of "…synthetic and analytic phonics" (Grace, 2007, ¶3). As a philosophy, Whole Language includes many aspects, including phonics, all of which are based on the learners' experiences and needs.

Many definitions include reference to the use of phonics in the Whole Language philosophy. According to Watson (1989) Whole Language is an approach to teaching language in which "…all the systems of language – semantics, syntax, and

graphophemics (call it phonics if you must) – are maintained and supported by pragmatics (language in natural use)" (p.133).

"The Great Debate"

A major literacy policy specifically regarding Whole Language was created in California by Superintendent of Education, Bill Honig in the late 1980s. He based this major reform of California education on Mary Clay of New Zealand's program called Reading Recovery (Davenport & Jones, 2005, p.46). Honig was attracted to this program because it used "'great books'" and encouraged reading skills by exposing students to this rich literature (Davenport & Jones, 2005, p.46). Honig called this new policy "Whole Language". However, in 1994 test results showed that Honig's reforms were not successful in raising test scores and there was a decline in California's reading scores (Davenport & Jones, 2005, p. 47). Then in 1995, Marion Joseph, a former member of the state board of Education in California and chief aide to the former California state School Superintendent Wilson Riles (The Merrow Report, 2004, ¶8), pushed for and succeeded in creating a back to basic movement. This was the beginning of the Whole Language versus Phonics debate (Davenport & Jones, 2005, p. 47).

The politics around literacy has continued to be divided between Whole Language and phonics. Whole Language began to gain popularity in a time when testing and accountability was also becoming a big issue. When statewide test scores began to show that students were not learning to read using Whole Language, it began to fall out of favor. Many other literacy policies have been created and implemented; however, none have been able to produce the desired results of a truly literate population. A

compromise needs to be made and a policy created that will improve the ability of our children to read (Davenport & Jones, 2005, p.57)

Implementation

Whole Language, as originally designed in New Zealand, did not entirely exclude phonics/decoding skills. An Early Literacy specialist provided information that strongly supports the teaching and use of decoding/phonics skills in the Whole Language environment. According to this source, it is the combination of great literature, text rich experiences, and decoding skills that produce successful readers. It is only when both methods are used together that students learn to enjoy, value, understand and read.

When implemented as it was intended, Whole Language "…involves instilling a love of literature, problem-solving and critical thinking, collaboration, authenticity, personalized learning and much more" (Krashen, 2002, ¶4). The Whole Language philosophy is based around the concept that "…we 'learn to read by reading'" (Krashen, 2002, ¶2) and that the direct teaching of phonics/decoding skills are only useful when it serves to help the student make the text more understandable. In his article, Defending Whole Language: The Limits of Phonics Instruction and the Efficacy of Whole Language Instruction, Krashen (2002) reviews previous studies on Whole Language and discusses his interpretations of the results. He begins with a discussion about what Whole Language is and what it looks like when implemented as it was intended. He claims that "Whole Language advocates argue that when whole language is defined correctly, when it includes real reading, students in these classes do better on tests of reading comprehension, with no difference on skills tests" (Krashen, 2002, ¶7). Krashen (2002)

then goes on to examine the problems with teaching phonics "rules". He uses studies

conducted by Clymer (1963, 1966) and Johnson (2001) to argue that English phonics

rules are extremely complicated and there are many exceptions that it makes it "…a

hopeless endeavor" (Krashen, 2002, ¶10). Krashen (2002) uses examples and statistical

data to show that these rules only work a low percentage of the time and teaching these

"rules" is not useful to teach students when they are learning to read because there are so

many exceptions.

Krashen (2002) then moves into his review of eleven studies conducted on Whole

Language. He reevaluated the findings of these studies and found that despite the

original authors' conclusions, Whole Language did indeed produce results which were

greater than those of strictly phonics/skills based programs. In several of the studies,

Krashen (2002) believes that the results were reported inaccurately and the results were

in favor of Whole Language. From Krashen's (2002) review of the research, he

concluded that "…when real reading is considered as the core element of whole

language, and when details of studies are examined closely, whole language does very

well in method comparison studies" (Overall Discussion and Conclusion, ¶1). Research

on this issue has actual produced results which favor the Whole Language approach to

reading when it is implemented correctly.

The Research

Dahl and Scharer (2000) found that often phonics was taught as a natural part of

Whole Language programs. More importantly, when it was taught in this way, first grade

students reading success increased. In their study, the researchers observed and analyzed

eight first grade classrooms which all used Whole Language programs and were of diverse populations. The teachers of these eight classrooms wore microphones to record their lessons, interviews were conducted, and the researchers and two outside consultants made weekly observations. The students were given four tests, two decoding and two encoding. These were given as a pretest at the beginning of the study and as a posttest at the end of the study. From this study, Dahl and Scharer (2000) were able to conclude that phonics is an integral part of Whole Language programs and that Whole Language is effective in teaching students how to read.

Similar results about the effectiveness of Whole Language were found in Reutzel and Cooter's article (1990). This study was conducted specifically "…to determine the comparative effectiveness of whole language and basal reader approaches on children's reading achievement at the end of the first grade…" (p. 253). The researchers used 91 first grade students; 53 from a Whole Language classroom and 38 from a basal-reader program. A pretest and post measured the progress made by the students in the respective classrooms. When the pretest and posttest results were compared, Reutzel and Cooter (1990) found "…significant differences favoring the whole language classes over the basal classes on total reading scores as well as on the vocabulary and comprehension subtest scores at the conclusion of first grade" (p. 256).

Despite these results, the researchers cautioned that their results depended greatly on the description of the program itself and that different Whole Language programs might not produce the same results. The Whole Language classrooms used in this study had similar characteristics. These characteristics included a print rich environment, a reading routine which involved shared reading experiences with the teacher, book centers

in which students could read independently, receive help from older students or follow along with a book on tape, writing centers in which students work either independently or collaborative and an activity center in which students were encourage to read big books, words from the classroom word bank or read in pairs (Reutzel & Cooter, 1990, p. 254). Phonics and decoding skills were integrated into the daily routine in these classrooms. Based on the results from their study, Reutzel and Cooter (1990) provided additional support for the use of Whole Language in the teaching of reading and reading skills in first grade classrooms.

While research comparing Whole Language and phonic approaches to reading is fairly sparse, a few studies have been conducted. One study conducted by Freppon and McIntyre (1999) compared students from a skills based approach to reading to students from a Whole Language classroom. Six students were the participants of this study. These six students were all low-SES, white, urban Appalachian children in the first grade. They came from two different school settings and were paired based on their reading abilities in order to be compared. These students were given pretests in September and posttests in May in order to determine their reading skills and development. The researchers also took field notes for two hours, twice weekly and tape-recorded reading samples. These reading samples were then analyzed by an outside party who was a reading expert to obtain less biased information. From this data, Freppon and McIntyre (1999) concluded that "…children from the constructivist-based-whole language background had more strategy use and more positive stances than their comparison cases. A reasonable inference is that the intellectual environment of this classroom had an effect on the children's learning" (¶66). Another conclusion that Freppon and McIntyre made

from their research is that "…Whole Language philosophy and practice are congruent with factors such as positive, personal agency beliefs. Such beliefs underpin learners' strategic action and literacy stance" (¶67). While these findings clearly support the use of Whole Language, the researchers do caution in their limitations section that each individual classroom represented a particular instance of a type of instruction which may not be present in every Whole Language classroom (Freppon & McIntyre, 1999, (¶73).

Further research on Whole Language conducted by Stahl and Kuhn (1995) noted that it was how the Whole Language program was implemented that would determine the level of success of the students. In their research Stahl and Kuhn (1995) compared Whole Language instruction with an approach to reading that was matched to the individual learning styles of the students. From their research, Stahl and Kuhn (1995) stated that while Whole Language programs were not found to demonstrate a significant overall advantage; they did appear to have some specific strengths (¶10). Some of these strengths include creating a strong concept of print, word recognition and better attitude toward reading. According to Stahl and Kuhn (1995), "Struggling readers in the whole language school did not feel like failures, suggesting that their attitude might have been better, even though their relative achievement was lower" (¶13). They also noted that while phonics instruction should be included in any high quality Whole Language program, it should not be isolated from other aspects of the curriculum (Stahl & Kuhn, 1995, ¶12). Another strength of Whole Language is that it exposes students to a variety of texts read aloud by the teacher, which in turns encourages vocabulary growth which is necessary in order to become successful readers. While Whole Language does have

many strengths, these researchers found that it may not work for all students and that individuals needs should be taken into consideration when planning curriculum.

Methods or Procedures

Sample and Site

The sample for this study was small, consisting of five professionals in the field of reading/early literacy. These professionals were interviewed via email or in person at their respective school sites. The same ten questions were presented to each of the individuals and all of the questions were answered to the extent possible according to the experience of the individual professional.

Access and Permissions

Each of the professionals interviewed was contacted and asked to volunteer their time and responses through email. The interview questions were provided in advance in order to help maximize the interview time. The participants were informed of their rights and filled out the Consent to be a Research Subject form as part of the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) process.

Data Gathering Strategies

The participants were given the interview questions in advance through email correspondence. Due to time constraints and conflicts, some participants chose to simply return the interview questions with their responses through email. However, some participants were available for face-to-face interviews.

Data Analysis Approach

After the interviews were complete, they were reviewed and analyzed for common themes. The responses of the participants were compared question to question in order to identify any common themes. These common themes were then identified and analyzed in greater detail.

Ethical Standards

This study adheres to Ethical Standards in Human Subjects Research of the American Psychological Association (Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 2007). Additionally, the project was reviewed and approved by Dominican University of California IRBPHS, number 5061.

Results or Findings

Description of Site, Individuals, Data

Interviews were conducted with five professionals in field of reading/early literacy. All of these professionals have had a great deal of experience with Whole Language and know its strengths and weaknesses. Some of the interviews were conducted through email correspondence, while others were conducted face-to-face at the professional's elementary school.

Analysis on Themes

Interviews with experts in the field of reading/early literacy yielded similar results to the literature on Whole Language. Five experts in the field of reading were interviewed; three were practicing elementary school teachers who have since become

college professors of Early literacy, one is a current reading specialist, and one was a special educator teacher and is now a teacher of special education at Dominican University of California. All of these experts have worked with Whole Language methods and are well versed in its components, benefits and drawbacks. Yet, all of these experts have also worked with various other reading programs such as basal reading programs like Economy Phonics, Sullivan, Distar, Read Naturally, Zoophonics, Great Leaps, Open Court and Houghton Mifflin. All of these experts favor Whole Language over current scripted reading programs, but also understand that any method of teaching reading needs to be balanced with various techniques in order to reach all students.

While there are many benefits of Whole Language; however, the experts agreed that this method did indeed need to include an element of phonics/decoding instruction. However, one of the strengths mentioned by all of these experts was motivation and interest. The Whole Language approach to reading provided students with exposure to real and high-quality literature which pertained to their interests. Another benefit of Whole Language is it connected the students to the readings and helped them to feel successful. The experts agreed that students in Whole Language classrooms appeared to enjoy this method of learning to read and this enjoyment lead them to feel more successful and proud of their achievements. The test results also provided support of this and the Whole Language approach. When asked about the test scores their students received after being taught using Whole Language, the experts responded that their students received high test scores. They were also able to determine that their students were learning to read successful through observations of their reading and their writing.

When asked about what they personally liked about Whole Language, answers varied but all liked that Whole Language created an authentic reading experience. One expert emphasized the use of real and high-quality children's literature, while another mentioned how students' backgrounds and interests were incorporated into their reading experience, and yet another expert stated that the use of 'real' words was important and that it allowed students to use the words that were of interest and importance to them. Since Whole Language is an authentic and learner centered approach to reading, students were able to learn to read using what was interesting to them and this helped to motivate them and lead to successful readers.

While one expert mentioned that in its purest form Whole Language did not include explicit phonics instruction, it was always intended that phonics/decoding skills would be used as a last resort if the student was unable to read a word. Since Whole Language is "top-down" approach and uses contexts to identify words, decoding came only when context clues were not enough for the student and the student needed to move "down" to the smaller piece of the individual word. All of the experts interviewed felt that direct and explicit phonics/decoding instruction should be included as part of the Whole Language method. While individual Whole Language classrooms vary, when implemented as a balanced program, including the high-quality literature, motivation, and a phonics/decoding component, the program tended to create successful readers who embodied a love of reading according to these experts.

Discussion

Summary of Major Findings

From a review of the literature and interviews with experts, I have found that Whole Language programs are intended to include phonics. When they do include the teaching of phonics/decoding skills, Whole Language is an effective approach to teaching reading to first grade students. However, the effectiveness of Whole Language depends heavily on which Whole Language program is being implemented. Therefore the research is limited in a widely accepted definition of Whole Language and what these programs include. Research has been conducted on different Whole Language programs and has found them to be effective when they include the teaching of phonics/decoding skills. Further research that examines Whole Language programs being used when Whole Language "failed" would help to determine whether Whole Language was not being implemented how it was intended and that is why it fell out of favor with educators.

The debate still rages between Whole Language and Phonics advocates and further research is needed to show that the two are not entirely separate and produce the best results when used together in the intended implementation of Whole Language programs.

Comparison of Findings/Results with Existing Studies

The results of this study were consistent with the findings of the existing studies. In general, the existing studies concluded that while Whole Language does have its strengths and advantages, it is not a strong enough program to stand alone. Student

motivation, the use of high quality literature, and an authentic reading experience are all benefits of a Whole Language approach to reading. However, this study and all existing studies also found that the Whole Language approach is missing the key component of direct explicit phonics/decoding instruction. Without this piece, students were not learning to read as well and test scores were not as high as expected.

Limitations of the Study

One of the major limitations of this study was the size. There were only five participants and they were taken from a relatively small sampling pool. The participants were all of the same gender and were located in the same geographical region.

Implications for Future Research

Future research would benefit from the inclusion of a large participant population. This population should be more diverse in its gender, geographical region, and its background. While the findings of this study indicate that the Whole Language approach to reading has its strengths and weaknesses, not enough data was collected in order to make a definitive conclusion about the effectiveness of the Whole Language approach to reading.

Overall Significance of the Study

Even though this study was limited in its size, it still provides evidence that supports the benefits of the Whole Language approach to reading. However, it also provides evidence about the weaknesses of Whole Language and reasons why it is unable to stand alone as the only method for teaching reading in a first grade classroom. In order to teach reading using a Whole Language approach to reading, one must be aware of

these benefits and drawbacks. This study provides further information about these

strengths and weaknesses.

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