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ABSTRACT

A study examined the differences in first-grade students' attitudes about reading/writing when teachers taught by using ability grouping or when teachers taught by using whole language instruction. Two questionnaires were distributed to four teachers, one requesting information on use of reading/writing instruction in the classroom, and the other examining their knowledge about whole language. Twenty students were asked questions about reading/writing in their classrooms. Results indicated that even though the four teachers knew whole language techniques, some chose not to use this method of teaching in their classrooms. Results also indicated that 8 of the 10 students instructed in whole-language classrooms showed a positive attitude toward reading and writing, whereas all 10 of the grouped-instructed students showed a negative attitude toward reading and writing in their classroom. (Contains 13 references and a figure of data. The two questionnaires and a list of questions for students are attached.) (Author/RS)

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Effects of a Whole Language and Ability Grouped Reading/Writing
Program on First Grade Students

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Abstract

This study examined the differences in first grade students' attitudes about reading/writing when teachers taught by using ability grouping or when teachers taught by using whole language instruction. Two questionnaires were distributed to four teachers, one requesting information on use of reading/writing instruction in the classroom, and the other examining their knowledge about whole language. Twenty students were asked questions about reading/writing in their classrooms. Results indicated that even though the four teachers knew whole language techniques, some choose not to use this method of teaching in their classrooms. Results also indicated that a majority of students taught by a whole language method responded more positively about reading/writing in their classroom.

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Effects of a Whole Language and Ability Grouped Reading/Writing Program on First Grade Students

Whole language has become an increasingly popular topic among teachers. Many teachers feel very favorable towards its use in the classroom, while many are reluctant to use whole language. This reluctance may be due to reasons such as feeling inadequately "trained" to teach using whole language methods and/or feeling more comfortable using the traditional basal ability grouped method. This study was designed to compare whole language versus ability grouping in the classroom and its effects on students' attitudes.

Purpose and Rationale

New insights about student attitudes concerning reading and writing instruction may be gained by studying classrooms using different methods of teaching. This study sought to examine student and teacher attitudes and teacher knowledge when using a whole language reading/writing program with one group of students and a grouped learning environment with another group.

It was assumed that when teachers used a child centered, noncompetitive, detracked environment in the classroom with student needs as a top priority, student attitudes would reflect more positively toward learning to read and write (Routman, 1991; Atwell, 1991). Conversely, it was assumed that when

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teachers used a teacher centered environment with ability groups using workbooks and worksheets, student attitudes would reflect more negatively toward learning to read and write. This study was designed to explore those issues, with attention to the effect of teachers use of whole language teaching methods on student attitudes. '

Literature Review

The struggle of many educators to produce a whole language educational base has been and continues to be a subject of great debate (Goodman, 1992a). The concept of whole language has enabled many teachers to establish a noncompetitive environment where students were given the power and opportunities to be successful learners (Goodman, 1992b).

Whole language is a concept based on a way of thinking about how children learn oral and written language (Eisele, 1991). When learning to read and write, children were allowed to practice and were not penalized for making mistakes. Rather, mistakes were perceived as potential learning experiences. This learning came from whole meaningful experiences (Eisele, 1991; Cullinan, 1992). Children learned by example and did their best thinking when it was something meaningful to them (Atwell, 1991).

The goal of whole language instruction was to support and create literate, confident learners. Students negotiated

meanings and took risks to meet their own needs without the fear of making mistakes (Moen, 1991). All student reading and writing attempts were applauded (Atwell, 1991). With support through observation, providing materials and structure, and giving ample time for using knowledge gained, students made sense of their learning and were able to grow. This learning was not found in textbooks or worksheets but was generated by real meaningful experiences (Atwell, 1991; Calkins, 1986).

A variety of instructional materials were used because of the integration of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking. These materials helped students expand beyond their prior language knowledge and use by allowing them opportunities for exploration into many areas of study (Moen, 1991).

Teachers accommodated all types of learning styles by providing activities on many levels so that all students were able to experience some degree of success (Eisele, 1991). When students weren't learning to read or write, it was because the information given wasn't appropriate and/or was seen as inadequate or not important to the learner. When tasks such as phonics worksheets, workbook pages and weekly sets of spelling words were given, students experienced great difficulty due to a lack of meaningful context (Routman, 1991). With whole language instruction, students spent more time engaged in language learning from and with others instead of waiting for

the teacher to show them the "correct way" or to "give the right answer" (Moen, 1991).

In a whole language atmosphere, students were more involved in the learning process by taking responsibility for their own learning and by making decisions about their work. The students learned to work independently and cooperatively without the teacher's direct guidance. Teaching was based on what the student knows and not on what was found in a teacher handbook (Powell & Hornsby, 1993). Routman (1991, p.25) stated, "As long as publishers' programs are determining how and what we teach, the materials--and not the teacher and students--are controlling instruction."

A review of literature indicated that language-rich classrooms with a relaxed atmosphere were observed when students were involved in tasks without excess pressure and where students and teachers interacted as necessary. Language acts were always integrated with other subject areas. The classroom atmosphere encouraged cooperation and interaction rather than just individual or competitive efforts (Gillet & Temple, 1986). Teachers and students were involved in real reading and writing. Curriculum and materials were interesting, relevant, and meaningful to the learners; and the environment promoted social interaction and collaboration (Routman, 1991). Students were allowed to voice reactions to their classmates about books they were reading. This shared time got students involved in

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listening to others read and sharing knowledge, and it also got them involved in decoding words (Thompson, 1991).

With a whole language classroom, many benefits were gained. Students were able to browse at and choose trade books of interest to them. Students were able to discuss their readings with the teacher and peers or respond in writing, such as a journal. This method allowed more of a cooperative learning environment where students were actively engaged in their own reading and writing. Students were encouraged and allowed to read on their own instructional level (Hagerty, 1992). Only when students chose their own books did they get a true sense of the benefits of being a real reader (Atwell, 1991).

Along with reading, students took control of their own writing. Like reading, only when students became personally interested in their writing did they flourish as writers (Calkins, 1986). Writing was found useful for providing practice in printing, spelling, and word recognition. Writing helped students see more clearly the many uses of print (Mason & Au, 1986). Reading and writing, as useful tools, must make sense to the learner in order for it to be a more enjoyable way to acquire knowledge (Powell & Hornsby, 1993). Atwell (1991, p.44) asserted, "Genuine authorship or genuine reading or genuine conversation is inseparable from genuine thought."

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Subjects

This study included twenty (20) first-grade students and four first-grade teachers from an elementary school. The students ranged in age from five to eight. The subjects were chosen from classes of eighteen to twenty-two members where students were placed heterogeneously. Five students were randomly selected from each of the four different classrooms. All types of readers (nonreaders to readers) were found in each group.

Two of the four teachers used the traditional basal reading texts with ability groups for several years. They also used phonics worksheets, workbooks, and weekly "teacher-made" spelling tests. The other two teachers have used whole language reading/writing programs for several years. Consequently, this was a ready made research arena for the comparison of whole language and ability grouping.

The four teachers range in years of experience from two years to twenty-two years. Through prior discussions, all four teachers in this study indicated they were familiar with such terms as "basal" (textbook series used by schools to teach reading by placing students in groups according to ability level), "real" books (trade books), and "whole language" (theory for teaching reading and writing according to student need).

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Procedure

The elementary school involved in this study was selected because of the teaching techniques used by teachers to teach reading and writing. Four teachers were selected based on their beliefs and approaches to teaching reading and writing. Twenty students were randomly selected from a total of approximately eighty students in the four teachers' classrooms.

Three survey instruments were developed for this study; two for use with the teachers and one for use with the students. The two questionnaires were administered to all four teachers. The first questionnaire (Appendix A) examined teachers' knowledge about whole language instruction. The second questionnaire (Appendix B) asked teachers to respond to specific questions about reading/writing programs used in their classrooms. Items for the two teacher instruments (survey questionnaires), were developed from a variety of sources including issues raised in literature on whole language teaching and the researcher's personal experiences and interests.

The two teacher questionnaires (Appendix A and B), were administered in March of 1994. The questionnaires included clear directions about how to fill out each one. As the teachers read over the questionnaires, questions such as where and when to turn in the questionnaires were answered. The questionnaires were collected after five days.

A written survey instrument was used to examine teachers'

knowledge and attitudes about whole language. After the questionnaires were returned, the responses were studied to establish teacher knowledge and the use of whole language or ability-grouped instruction in the classroom. Teacher attitudes and beliefs about whole language were also assessed. After all data was reviewed, teachers were interviewed as necessary to obtain information about individual student achievement levels or student enthusiasm for learning. Information on teacher attitudes, obtained through the surveys, was taken into consideration when evaluating answers to the questions asked about the students.

Items for the student survey (Appendix C), were designed to solicit student responses regarding their feelings and beliefs as they may relate to their attitudes about their own reading and writing abilities. Five students from each of the four classes were picked at random, by drawing the names from a container from that particular class. Although, most students learn to read many words by the mid-point of first grade, this study employed verbal questioning techniques to make sure each student would be able to respond without difficulty. Each of twenty students were asked the questions on Appendix C using one-on-one oral interview methods. Interpretive analysis was used to gather student meaning. Examples of probing questions: Do you think you are a good reader? Why or why not? Each student was given ample time to answer, and notes were taken

on responses. Responses from the students were evaluated to establish if patterns occurred in their answers. Conclusions were then developed about student attitudes based on these student responses.

Conclusions were made based on teachers' experience using whole language or ability grouping and how this affected students' attitudes concerning reading and writing. Other factors, such as home environment, number of members in the family, or whether the child receives help at home were not being considered in this study. Although, these factors may affect student attitudes, they were beyond the scope of this study. Subsequent studies may be expanded to include these factors. This study was designed to look at and draw conclusions based on the school environment.

Results

Teachers' understanding of the meaning of whole language may vary. The results from the written survey instrument (Appendix A) made by the four teachers participating in this study, can be seen on (Figure 1). For example, all four teachers disagreed with Statement 4--Phonics is not used in the whole language classroom.

All four teachers agreed with: Statement 2--Whole language involves the integration of listening, speaking, reading, and writing; Statement 3--Whole language programs require the use

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Figure 1
Comparison of Teacher Responses to Questions on Whole Language

Teacher	Question Number									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
A	X	O	O	X	O	X	X	O	O	O
B	O	O	O	X	O	O	X	O	O	O
C	O	O	O	X	O	O	X	O	O	O
D	O	O	O	X	O	O	O	O	O	O

Legend
O=agreed
X=disagreed

of a variety of materials that allow students to learn through a natural, language-rich environment; Statement 5--Students read independently, in an environment of sustained silent reading, with "real" books of their choice; Statement 8--Whole language teachers make use of a variety of strategies and techniques; Statement 9--In a whole language classroom students are encouraged to use various methods in their oral and written language; and Statement 10--Language is best and easiest learned when it is whole and in meaningful context.

Responses were varied for three questions. These included: Statement 1--Whole language is a basic theory of teaching stressing the teacher's important role and a language-centered view of curriculum; Statement 6--The success of the whole language program depends on the whole language teacher; and Statement 7--Basals, workbooks, and skill worksheets are

acceptable to the whole language teacher.

The definition of whole language used for this study was a philosophy which emphasizes that language (reading, writing, listening, talking, and thinking) should not be separated into fragmented bits and pieces, but is best learned through use in realistic settings that have meaning for the learner. These results showed that all four teachers had some knowledge of whole language based on this definition. However, only two teachers used this method of instruction in the classroom. The other two teachers were knowledgeable about whole language but had chosen not to use it in the classroom because of time required for planning and implementation.

Teachers' actual use of whole language instruction in the classroom was measured with the second survey in Appendix B. Although ten areas of classroom instruction techniques were included on the survey, the results indicated that the teachers fell into two distinct groups. Two of the teachers used whole language techniques such as no reading groups, no teacher-made spelling tests, no phonics workbooks or worksheets, and allowed students to write about what they found interesting and then share this with their classmates. The other two teachers used mostly ability grouping and teacher generated instruction, such as phonics workbooks and/or worksheets, and teacher-made spelling and writing topics.

Students' perceptions of reading/writing in their classroom

was measured with a one-on-one survey instrument (Appendix C). Overall, all twenty students interviewed liked reading and writing by their own definitions of each. Nine out of ten of the students taught by grouped instruction thought that reading was what they did in their groups with their reading books. Ten out of ten of the whole language-instructed students thought reading was what they did with all kinds of books, either alone or with a friend.

Eight of the ten students taught by grouped-instructed methods thought that "writing" was "copying from the board". Nine of the ten whole language-instructed students thought writing was what they did in a journal or in writing a story. All twenty students considered themselves to be good readers and writers for various reasons. For example, several reported they believed they were good readers and writers because someone told them. Another student believed himself to be a good reader "just because I know I am".

None of the ten grouped-instructed students named reading or writing as something they found enjoyable (fun) or exciting in their classroom. The students responded that they believed that playing centers or going outside for play was enjoyable (fun) or exciting. The group-instructed students did not mention reading and/or writing as something enjoyable (fun) or exciting, nor did they mention reading and/or writing as something they did not like. During the interviews, their main

concern seemed to be that they liked playing rather than reading/writing instruction. Two of the students said that "copying from the board was boring", while one student did not like reading from "those reading books".

Eight of the ten whole language-instructed students named reading and/or writing as something enjoyable (fun) or exciting in their classroom. None of the ten said they did not like reading and/or writing in their classroom.

Discussion and Conclusions

After interviewing the twenty students used in this study, conclusions about student attitudes were made based on what the children found enjoyable (fun) or exciting in their classroom. Results indicated that most (80%) of the ten whole language-instructed students showed a more positive attitude toward reading and writing in their classroom; whereas, more (100%) of the ten grouped-instructed students showed a negative attitude toward reading and writing in their classroom. This was also shown by student definitions of what reading and writing means to them in their classroom and how it is used.

Students taught in group-instructed classrooms saw writing as copying material off the board. Students taught by whole language perceived writing as something they themselves did using their own creative thoughts to write what's of interest to them instead of copying teacher-generated topics and material.

This supports Calkins' (1986) observation that students achieve a greater sense of their own potential by empowering them with the learning experiences gained from whole language.

Many of the group-instructed students in this study stressed the point that they found play more enjoyable (fun) or exciting than reading or writing. Probing questions indicated that "play" was something they found fun or exciting. These students have not been included enough in the active involvement of the learning process in their classrooms; rather, they sit much of the time. They found an outlet for their natural energies in playing centers or outside playground activities. An advantage of whole language instruction is that it involves children in natural activity, rather than just sitting to learn as a teacher "feeds" them knowledge (Atwell, 1991; Routman, 1991).

The results of this research showed that being knowledgeable about whole language does not always lead to the use of it in the classroom. All four teachers were knowledgeable of whole language, but only two of the teachers in this study used this method in their classrooms. Two teachers chose not to teach it as indicated in the results.

The latter decision occurred due to time needed for planning and implementation of a whole language classroom. Even though it takes increased time to prepare to teach with whole language, this study indicated the additional effort may be worthwhile

due to the benefits of students showing more positive attitudes.

Teachers need to be informed by teacher workshops and/or presentations of the potential benefits of whole language instruction. Training on how to make better use of planning time would also be helpful.

Based on these results, conclusions were made that the type of reading/writing instruction a teacher uses does have some effect on student attitudes toward reading and writing. This study and studies done by others (Atwell, 1991; Routman, 1991; Calkins, 1986) show that there is a clear relationship between whole language instruction and a positive attitude toward reading and writing.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire 1

DIRECTIONS: Below are some statements about Whole Language. Read each statement carefully and place a check next to each statement with which you agree.

- _____ 1. Whole language is a basic theory of teaching stressing the teacher's important role and a language-centered view of curriculum.
- _____ 2. Whole language involves the integration of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.
- _____ 3. Whole language programs require the use of a variety of materials that allow the students to learn through a natural, language-rich environment.
- _____ 4. Phonics is not used in the whole language classroom.
- _____ 5. Students read independently, in an environment of sustained silent reading, with "real" books of their choice.
- _____ 6. The success of the whole language program depends on the whole language teacher.
- _____ 7. Basals, workbooks, and skill worksheets are acceptable to the whole language teacher.
- _____ 8. Whole language teachers make use of a variety of strategies and techniques.
- _____ 9. In a whole language classroom, students are encouraged to use various methods in their oral and written language.
- _____ 10. Language is best and easiest learned when it is whole and in meaningful context.

Appendix B

Questionnaire 2

DIRECTIONS: Mark your answers by circling the appropriate letter.

1. In the classroom I use:
 - a. 3-4 reading groups
 - b. 1 large reading group (flexible grouping)
 - c. no reading groups
2. In the classroom the students:
 - a. read from the appropriate level basal
 - b. never read
 - c. self-select reading material
3. Students are allowed to read:
 - a. in their assigned reading group
 - b. during silent, buddy, or independent reading time
4. Students are grouped according to:
 - a. reading level
 - b. no groups
 - c. other (specify) _____
5. Students have teacher-made spelling tests:
 - a. weekly
 - b. spelling is student generated according to need for writing activities
 - c. other (specify) _____
6. Students share their readings and writings:
 - a. often/everyday
 - b. occasionally
 - c. seldom/never
7. For student writing assignments or tasks:
 - a. topics are teacher selected
 - b. students have freedom of choice
8. Students write in a journal or write a story:
 - a. often/everyday
 - b. occasionally
 - c. seldom/never

9. Students work on phonics worksheets:
 - a. often/everyday
 - b. occasionally
 - c. seldom/never
10. Students use a basal workbook to read and practice skills:
 - a. often/everyday
 - b. occasionally
 - c. seldom/never

Appendix C

Student Questions

1. What does the word reading mean to you?
2. What does the word writing mean to you?
3. How much time do you spend reading in your class everyday?
4. How much time do you spend writing in your class everyday?
5. Do you like reading?
6. Do you like writing?
7. Do you think you are a good reader?
8. Do you think you are a good writer?
9. What are some things you find fun or exciting in your classroom?
10. What are some things you don't like in your classroom?