1998

Whole Language Fact Sheet Series: On Research on Whole Language Education

Constance Weaver

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Weaver, Constance (1998) "Whole Language Fact Sheet Series: On Research on Whole Language Education," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 10.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1434>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

SLATE STARTER SHEET

Fact Sheet Series

Whole Language Fact Sheet Series: On Research on Whole Language Education

Whole language and research on whole language are both clearly in their beginning stages. —Diane Stephens, 1991

Background

We hear and read in various places that whole language education is not supported by research. However, that is simply untrue, even though research on whole language is still little beyond the beginning stages. In fact, whole language teaching and learning is supported by three different kinds of research: research into the reading and writing processes themselves; naturalistic studies of how children learn to speak their language and to read and write in it; and research comparing children's learning in whole language classrooms with other, more traditional classrooms. Research in learning theory and in learning styles also supports whole language education. Here, comparative research is the focus, since that is the kind most widely understood.

Children becoming independent readers, writers, and learners

Not all of the comparative research studies include standardized tests. Though such tests are not very good assessments of children's strengths and needs, the results of studies including such tests are generalized here. A much fuller description of these research studies can be found in Weaver, 1994. All the located studies involved children in preschool, kindergarten, grade 1 or grade 2. Three studies involved two grade levels, and two of these were two-year longitudinal studies involving children deemed to be at risk of educational failure. So far, these studies suggest the following conclusions:

- **Children in whole language classrooms typically do as well or better on standardized reading tests and subtests (though the differences are seldom statistically significant).**

For example, the whole language kindergartners in Ribowsky's study (1985) scored better on all measures of growth and achievement, including the tests of letter recognition and letter/sound knowledge. In the Kasten and Clarke study (1989), the whole language kindergartners performed significantly better than their counterparts on all subtests of the Metropolitan Readiness Test, including tests of beginning consonant sounds, letter/sound correspondences, and sounds and clusters of sounds in initial and final positions of words.

- **Children in whole language classrooms seem to develop greater ability to use phonics knowledge effectively than**

children in more traditional classrooms where skills are practiced in isolation. For example, in Freppon's study (1988, 1991), the skills group attempted to sound out words more than twice as often as the others, but the literature-based group was more successful in doing so: a 53 % success rate compared with a 32% success rate for the skills group. Apparently the literature-based children were more successful because they made better use of phonics in conjunction with other information and cues. (For another relevant study, see also Cunningham, 1990).

- **Children in whole language classrooms seem to develop vocabulary, spelling, grammar, and punctuation skills as well as or better than children in more traditional classrooms.** For example, see Elley's 1991 summary of studies on learning English as a second language; also Clarke, 1988, on spelling; and Stice and Bertrand, 1990, which included spelling. In addition, see Calkins, 1980; Gunderson and Shapiro, 1988.

- **Children in whole language classrooms seem more inclined and able to read for meaning rather than just to identify words.** For example, when asked, "What makes a good reader?" the children in Stice and Bertrand's study (1990) reported that good readers read a great deal and that they can read any book in the room. The children in the traditional classrooms tended to focus on words and surface correctness; they reported that good readers read big words, they know all the words, and they don't miss any words.

- **Children in whole language classrooms seem to develop more strategies for dealing with problems in reading.** For example, the whole language children in Stice and Bertrand's study (1990) typically described six strategies for dealing with problem words, while the children in traditional classrooms described only three.

- **Children in whole language classrooms seem to develop greater facility in writing.** For example, in the Dahl and Freppon study (1992), a considerably larger proportion of the children in the whole language classrooms were writing sentences and stories by the end of their kindergarten year.

• **Children in whole language classrooms seem to develop a stronger sense of themselves as readers and writers.** Take, for example, the Stice and Bertrand study (1990): When asked, "Who do you know who is a good reader?" eighty-two percent of the kindergartners in the whole language classrooms mentioned themselves, but only five percent of the kindergartners in the traditional classrooms said "me." During the first grade year, when the children were asked directly, "Are you a good reader?" seventy percent of the whole language children said yes, but only thirty-three percent of the traditional children said yes.

• **Children in whole language classrooms also seem to develop greater independence as readers and writers.** In the Dahl and Freppon study (1992), for instance, passivity seemed to be the most frequent coping strategy for learners having difficulty in the skills-based classrooms. But in whole language classrooms, those having difficulty tended to draw upon other learners for support: by saying the phrases and sentences that others could read, by copying what they wrote, and so forth. That is, these less proficient learners still attempted to remain engaged in literacy activities with their peers.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

Calkins, L. M. (1980). When children want to punctuate: Basic skills belong in context. *Language Arts*, 57, 567-573.

Clarke, L. K. (1988). Invented versus traditional spelling in first graders' writings: Effects on learning to spell and read. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 22, 281-309.

Cunningham, A. E. (1990). Explicit versus implicit instruction in phonemic awareness. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 50, 429-444.

Dahl, K. L., and Freppon, P. A. (1992). *Learning to read and write in inner-city schools: A comparison of children's sense-making in skills-based and whole language classrooms*. Final Report to the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U. S. Department of Education, Grant Award No. R117E00134. Part

of the data described here is reported in an article by Dahl & Freppon that is included in the 1991 Yearbook of the National Reading Conference (papers from the 1990 conference).

Elley, W. B. (1991). Acquiring literacy in a second language: The effect of book-based programs. *Language Learning*, 41(3), 375-411.

Freppon, P. (1988). An investigation of children's concepts of the purpose and nature of reading in different instructional settings. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Cincinnati, Ohio. This study is reported in a 1991 article by Freppon: Children's concepts of the nature and purpose of reading in different instructional settings. *Journal of Reading Behavior*, 23(2), 139-163.

Gunderson, L., & Shapiro, J. (1988). Whole language instruction: Writing in 1st grade. *The Reading Teacher*, 41, 430-437.

Kasten, W. C., and Clarke, B. K. (1989). *Reading/writing readiness for preschool and kindergarten children: A whole language approach*. Sanibel, FL: Florida Educational Research and Development Council. (ED 312 041).

Ribowsky, H. (1985). *The effects of a code emphasis approach and a whole language approach upon emergent literacy of kindergarten children*. Alexandria, VA: Educational Document Reproduction Service. (ED 269 720).

Stahl, S. A., McKenna, M. C., & Pagnucco, J. R. *The effects of whole language instruction: An update and a reappraisal*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Reading Conference, Charleston, Dec. 1-4, 1993. (ED 364 803).

Stephens, D. (1992). *Research on whole language: Support for a new curriculum*. Katonah, NH: Richard C. Owen.

Stice, C. F., and Bertrand, N. P. (1990). *Whole language and the emergent literacy of at-risk children: A two-year comparative study*. Nashville: Center of Excellence/Basic Skills, Tennessee State University, (ED 324 636).

Tunnell, M. O., & Jacobs, J. S. (1989). Using "real" books: Research findings on literature based reading instruction. *The Reading Teacher*, 43, 447-477.

Weaver, C. (1994). *Reading process and practice: From socio-psycholinguistics to whole language*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Prepared for the Michigan English Language Arts Framework (MELAF) and copyright © 1995 by Constance Weaver, Western Michigan University. May be copied for distribution.