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# **Whole Language Collaboration Project: Implementing Change In One Elementary School**

**Grace Shepperson  
Robert J. Nistler**

The purpose of this article is to describe the impact of the initial phase of a long-term inservice program aimed at restructuring one elementary school's literacy program. It focuses on observed changes that occurred as teachers became active participants in staff development sessions designed around effective change principles. Fannin Elementary School in Grand Prairie, Texas, is a multi-ethnic, urban elementary school situated in a neighborhood changing from lower middle socioeconomic status to low socioeconomic status. Nearly seventy percent of the children enrolled in the school qualify for free or reduced lunch. At least half of the population is non-English speaking and comprised of first generation immigrants from Latin America and Mexico. During the past two years, informal discussions among the Fannin principal, teachers, and other district personnel had focused on whole language approaches to literacy instruction for meeting the changing needs of Fannin's student population. Traditional skills-based instruction was proving inadequate in meeting the needs of these students.

Teale (1987) and Goodman (1986) suggest that reading and writing are processes for making sense out of

and through written language. Meaning, rather than isolated skills, is emphasized, allowing students to be actively involved and enthusiastic about learning. Mindful of these ideas, the principal and teachers were in agreement: that adopting a whole language philosophy toward literacy instruction, schoolwide, held the greatest promise for eventual success. After consultation with two university researchers, the "Whole Language Collaboration Project" was established to produce educational change. In December, 1989, this study of learning, language, teaching and curriculum was initiated at Fannin Elementary School.

### **The program**

From December 13, 1989, through May 3, 1990, fourteen 45 to 60 minute workshops were conducted with university researchers, 23 teachers and the school principal for the following purposes: 1) to identify current practices of teachers and administrators; 2) to study research-based, whole language strategies; 3) to select whole language literacy strategies to implement; 4) to provide for study and discussion groups to strengthen the knowledge base of the staff enabling the establishment of individual, grade level and whole school goals; 5) to establish collegial relations between university, district and school personnel. Teacher participation was voluntary throughout the entire project, and all classroom teachers chose to participate. In addition to the weekly sessions, the university researchers spent two half-days per week observing in classrooms to help foster a collegial learning environment and to determine what actually went on in classrooms at Fannin Elementary School.

### **Documenting current practices: Sessions 1-5.**

Initial staff development sessions were designed to identify current practices in order to facilitate the assimilation or accommodation of new knowledge at later stages of the

program. During these sessions, participants identified, through writing in personal journals, what they did at that time to promote literacy development in their classrooms. Accompanying reflections and follow-up discussions resulted in the compilation of lists of current instructional practices at individual, grade and school-wide levels.

During the first inservice session, teachers completed the "Stages of Concern" questionnaire (Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin and Hall, 1987). This instrument focuses on the concerns of individuals involved in change and is based on research identifying three categories of concerns: self, task and impact. According to Hord, et al., "When a change effort is in its early stages, teachers are very likely to have self-concerns. They will want to know more about the innovation (whole language), what it is and how it is similar to and different from what they are already doing" (p. 31). Survey results revealed high levels of "self-concerns." One teacher's journal entry represents these concerns:

*Right now, I am anxious to begin. I have been hearing Whole Language for quite a while. I feel I know so very little. Oh, I've gone to inservices and even to a Whole Language School... however, I've gotten bits and pieces. I just feel a little fragmented. I've tried to incorporate many ideas. But am I doing what and all I can? Will I influence my second graders positively? (second grade teacher, 1-16-90)*

Such concerns dictated the need to "...help teachers see how the innovation [whole language] relates to their current practices, both in regard to similarities and differences" (Hord et al., 1987, p. 44). The university researchers wanted to be assured that each participant was in control of personal development as well as a participant in the development of the group as a whole. Each teacher's voice was unique and important; each was at a different level in the process of learning about whole language. Time for indi-

vidual reflection as well as talk was vital to each teacher's development. Therefore, activities promoting talk among teachers provided opportunities for new understandings and beliefs to be confirmed or rejected, so that a common knowledge base could be established by all.

### **Establishing a knowledge base: Sessions 5-8.**

The teacher's initial expectations for this program were that the university researchers would conduct weekly "how to do whole language" sessions. They wanted to learn the strategies immediately so they could become whole language teachers overnight. The researchers knew that change takes time, and in order for teachers to become whole language teachers and for this school to become a whole language school, a common knowledge base had to be established among all participants. Whole language literacy instruction, a "philosophy of curriculum, of learning, of teaching, and of language" (Goodman, 1986, p. 69), had to be studied carefully and internalized by all participants.

Beginning with the fifth session, the teachers were guided through *What's Whole in Whole Language?* (Goodman, 1986). "Whole language: Not without a whole language teacher," the closing chapter in the book, was selected for initial study. This chapter discusses how a whole language teacher approaches literacy instruction. Information obtained from study of this chapter provided a means for each teacher to assess her current status in terms of an ideal. According to Hord, et al. (1987), "Change will be most successful when its support is geared to the diagnosed needs of the individual users. If change is highly personal, then clearly different responses and interventions will be required for different individuals. Paying attention to each individual's progress can enhance the improvement process" (p. 6).

Upon completion of Goodman's book psycholinguistics, the psychological study of how language is acquired, was explored as the basis for whole language instruction. Additional resources (Goodman, 1986; Canady, 1980; Newman, 1990; Ridley, 1990) served to broaden this philosophical base. In her discussion of whole language and whole language teachers, Newman (1990) states, "It requires that we engage in reexamination of our beliefs and assumptions about learning and teaching, and about using language to learn about the world" (p. 4). Emphasis in sessions now shifted from the personal and concrete to the abstract and theoretical.

After focusing on knowledge-based issues in sessions five through eight, the "Stages of Concern" survey was administered a second time. Analysis of results revealed that information concerns continued to be most prevalent. However, reflections in teachers' journals indicated a need for different information. This need for a shift from knowledge building to practical applications is illustrated in the following journal excerpt:

*The "Whole Language" teacher idea was intimidating and frightening. The unknown is always a little frightening. I now feel more comfortable with the concept of whole language. It makes more sense to me now that I've read some literature on the subject. Sharing ideas with other teachers also helps. I would like to implement more of this learning process but am still a little unsure of what I should be doing. Hopefully, by the end of the school year I'll feel more confident and begin using more of the whole language teaching methods (third grade teacher, 3-6-90).*

**Planning for instruction: Sessions 8-14.** At the end of session eight, participants were asked to provide a written response to the following question: Where are you now in relation to whole language/psycholinguistic theory? Participants' responses demonstrated varying levels of

understanding about whole language and its applications for the classroom.

*I have done a radical change in my approach in teaching language. I have gone from teaching from texts to using good books. I now try to incorporate all my subjects in a whole language approach. I am trying to build units in many different topics and trying to build vocabulary and oral language. I still want more ideas and would like all day help to create more books. I want to do many things and it makes me more creative (bilingual kindergarten teacher, 3-6-90).*

*I feel more motivated about whole language and my teaching practices in general now. I'm glad to have the approval of the administration and other teachers to work with whole language. I was thinking about how important it is to keep learning and restructuring what we need to know and what we already know. I need more input on implementation, resources available and how to be accountable for what the students know (fourth grade teacher, 3-6-90).*

Classroom observations, conducted by the university researchers, revealed few changes in classroom instruction during the initial year of the project. Use of student journals, time for sustained silent reading, and occasional use of trade books to replace basal stories were among the few observable changes. In some classrooms, no apparent changes occurred. Participants' articulation of their status as whole language teachers resulted in a change in the format of remaining staff development sessions. Grade level meetings, facilitated by the university researchers, replaced previous, school-wide sessions directed by them. The purposes of these meetings were to guide individual explorations into whole language instruction and to identify instructional themes/topics and accompanying children's literature by grade levels for the upcoming school year.

The final staff development session provided an opportunity for participants at each grade level to report on the

themes and supporting literature they had compiled. Participants discussed materials in regard to student interests, appropriateness for grade level, curriculum, quality of materials, integration across content areas and balance among genre. This discussion resulted in a school-wide plan to guide literacy instruction for the 1990-91 school year.

### **Evaluation of the program**

On August 23, 1990, a four-hour staff development session was held with the participants of Fannin's "Whole Language Collaboration Project." During the course of this session, the "States of Concern" survey was administered for a third time. Information gathered from these surveys indicates changing concerns of participants. In agreement with Hord, et al. (1987), self-concerns diminished from the outset of the program, while task concerns increased. Task concerns refer to time and classroom management, and they tend to become "more intense as final preparations are made for beginning use of an innovation and during the early stages of use" (p. 31).

During this session, participants were also asked to reflect upon their previous involvement in the program. They responded, in writing, to the following prompt: "Enacting change in Fannin Elementary: Implementing a whole language perspective." Participants' essays and results of "Stages of Concern" surveys revealed that change *seems* to be occurring at Fannin Elementary School. The following excerpts from one teacher's essay illustrate the initial stages in the change process:

*During the 1989-90 school year a major change began in the lives of about 30 teachers and 400 children. It started slowly and began snowballing as the months went on. The first meeting about implementing whole language into our classrooms was quiet and very "administrative." All of the teachers sat quietly and listened to people talking about*



*theories, literature, tape recorders and journals. It was overwhelming for the teachers...there were a handful of very enthusiastic teachers, but the rest were apprehensive, understandably...It was actually a gradual process for most of the staff, but in the spring other teachers began asking for help – for ideas. And they began offering them, too. It was a great thing that was starting to happen! Changing a traditional classroom into a whole language classroom is a slow, gradual process. But at Fannin Elementary it is happening. You can see it in the halls – lots of terrific work is displayed...And you can see change in the children. They are successful and they feel success. (I'm writing faster now because I'm excited just thinking about all of this.) And the teachers have changed. They are more receptive, open to new ideas. And they want to understand this thing called whole language. Fannin is changing. And it's a very exciting time around here!!! (second grade teacher, 8-23-90)*

## **Voices of teachers**

Researchers have identified factors associated with change in school programs (Oakes, Hare and Sirotnik, 1986; Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin and Hall, 1987; Henke, 1988). Researchers in the "Whole Language Collaboration Project" were aware of these factors and designed inservices which modeled these principles. In their journals, essays, concern surveys and conversations, participants' voices confirmed the efficacy of the following change factors.

***Change is a process, not an event.*** *It was comforting to Doris when she realized whole language as a way of teaching could not, would not happen overnight. It is a step-by-step process to be accomplished over a long period of time as the teacher is comfortable and ready for change (second grade teacher, 8-23-90).*

***Change is a highly personal experience.*** *I am experimenting lots more and I see that the kids are more relaxed and excited about reading, writing, etc. and that excites me!!...I know that I always have questions at the end of the day. That is something I didn't do in the past. I go home and reflect on the day and think about what worked, what the kids*

*liked, etc. I guess I go home at night and tinker with my thoughts (second grade teacher, 3-6-90).*

**Change involves developmental growth.** *We are implementing change gradually. Some teachers trained in whole language could implement this process more actively than those who resisted change...A lot of teachers resisted the new concept whole heartedly. Some used it exclusively. Those teachers who were successful used it exclusively...Slowly, ever so slowly some more were converted over to at least trying the whole language approach! Sometimes they were successful. Sometimes they were unsuccessful and very discouraged – even frustrated! These teachers would put it away and not use it again until they were encouraged again by the N.T. professors or a co-worker who was successful or wanted this teacher to try again; or learned more about it (whole language). They all can see that it would work – they aren't so sure how it will work (third grade teacher, 8-23-90).*

**Change is best understood as it directly affects classroom practice, students and preparation time.** *Last year was a year of change for Fannin Elementary and anyone coming into the building could see it. On the outside walls of each classroom were the writings, stories and thoughts of children being introduced to the whole language approach. They (kindergarten teachers) were excited about planning and integrating literature in all parts of the curriculum. They found that through the whole language approach their planning time was cut in half and their creative nature was nurtured by developing thematic centers for their classroom.*

## **Discussion**

At the beginning of the Whole Language Collaboration Project, it was apparent that many teachers at this school had learned traditional, skills-based approaches to literacy instruction and tended to be unfamiliar with how interactive, child-centered philosophies can be implemented in practice. Initially, these teachers felt somewhat threatened and overwhelmed when challenged to modify their practices to reflect a new perspective. By recognizing and documenting

initial teacher concerns, the university researchers were able to consider all interactions with teachers for how they might contribute to an ever-increasing level of trust. Establishing and maintaining trust became the foundation of this change program. The university researchers insured that teachers were always in control of their classrooms, and monitored the frequency and duration of interactions with the university researchers and their degree of participation in this project.

The university researchers' own commitment of time to this project aided in diminished teacher concern for the demands this program placed already full schedules. During this first year, university researchers were at the elementary school one and one-half days per week. Time spent at the school contributed to building trust among participants. The university researchers made regular classroom visits, were available for individual and small group consultation and conducted weekly scheduled inservices.

Oakes, Hare and Sirotnik (1986) contend that failing to include practitioners in any but a consuming role during educational research limits the potential of that research for affecting change. Collaborative projects, such as the Whole Language Collaboration Project, demonstrate one means of bringing practitioners into active roles during educational research whereby, given time and provided with support, theory can be more readily translated into practice.

In this project, participants were actively involved in their personal explorations into different approaches toward literacy instruction. Individual needs were addressed through spontaneous conversations in addition to scheduled conferences. Unscheduled conferences, lasting only several minutes, tended to address immediate concerns. In

contrast, scheduled conferences, lasting 45-60 minutes, were pedagogical in nature. Teachers and/or groups of teachers arrived at these conferences with notebooks and prepared questions.

Carnine (1988) states that: "Improving instruction in urban elementary schools requires...down to earth staff training programs that meet teachers' and students' immediate needs. These...would have to be massive and sustained – not one day workshops or brief add on activities that last a few weeks" (p. 60). The Whole Language Collaboration Project represents the type of training program which Carnine supports. During the initial year of collaboration between the university researchers and elementary school teachers, benefits which Lieberman (1986) associates with school-university collaboration were apparent. Lieberman believes that the collaborative process can: 1) facilitate reflection about teaching; 2) unite teachers and promote collegial interaction; 3) close the gap between doing research and implementing research findings; 4) give teachers an opportunity to assume new roles and gain a sense of empowerment; and 5) legitimize teachers' practical understanding and professional concerns (p. 31).

Change in teachers' attitudes and behaviors occurs *very* slowly, even if change is desired. Change is occurring at this school. For those teachers who possess little knowledge regarding whole language, this change is most evident in an increased awareness of the need to modify literacy instruction and a developing knowledge base which facilitates *planning* for changes in classroom instruction. For those teachers with some knowledge of whole language, time to plan with others, to share ideas and directly learn from their experiences has provided the encouragement to implement and follow through on instructional applications.

For teachers who might be considered prototypical whole language teachers, change is represented by a growth of confidence in personal philosophy and instructional practice combined with a developing ability to work with fellow teachers as one of a community of learners.

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