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Priscilla L. Griffith
University of South Florida

Janell Klesius
University of South Florida

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A Whole Language Flight Plan: An Interview with Three Teachers

**Priscilla L. Griffith
Janell Klesius**

Implementation of a whole language program is many times a solo flight for a teacher. In preparation for a flight the pilot (teacher) must be aware of obstacles that may be encountered and must have a vision of the intended destination. This knowledge will enable the pilot to chart a safer course and prepare for any turbulence en route, thus increasing the chances for a successful journey.

The purpose of this descriptive study was to provide teachers who are planning to implement a whole language program with some suggestions for a flight plan. We interviewed three whole language teachers to collect the information. Specifically, the following areas were the focus of the interviews: a) support for the whole language program, b) decisions about curriculum and evaluation, c) development of vocabulary and comprehension, d) strengths and weaknesses of whole language, and e) preparation for whole language instruction.

Background information

The three teachers selected to participate were implementing whole language programs at kindergarten, first, and third grade level in three central Florida counties. They were selected as participants because they adhered to the whole

language philosophy as exhibited by their instructional program, they represented a range in years of experience teaching whole language (one, two, and four), and they worked with children from varying socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds.

Betty was a first grade teacher of low to middle socioeconomic status (SES) children. After learning about whole language at a state leadership conference on reading, she initiated a whole language program at her school. It subsequently became part of a pilot study for her county. While Betty had integrated literature into her reading program during previous years, this was the first year that she had not been required to use a basal reading series. Betty had 13 years of teaching experience.

Alice taught kindergarten children from minority and low SES homes. A number of the children's parents did not read English and all of the children in her class were on free or reduced-price lunches. This was Alice's fourth year as a teacher and as a whole language teacher.

Carol taught third grade and in contrast to Alice's class, not any of her students were eligible for free-or reduced-price lunches. This was Carol's seventh year in the same school and her second year as a whole language teacher. She had a total of 13 years teaching experience. She taught language arts/reading to her homeroom class, but math, social studies, and science were departmentalized. Carol taught social studies.

Support for the whole language program

- *How did you get the approval of your principal to implement a whole language program?*

During my second year of teaching I taught first grade level, and my principal supported my decision to teach without basals. Even though it went well, she was hesitant at the beginning of the year to just let me go. She came in a lot; I gave her articles to read and she took a university reading course. My current principal was formerly the assistant principal at that school, and he hired me as a kindergarten teacher because of my whole language program. *Alice*

I came when the school opened seven years ago, and my principal has gained respect for me as a teacher. I think before you can do something out of the ordinary you have to prove excellence in the ordinary to get credibility. *Carol*

• *What kind of support has your principal given you?*

He's supportive about anything I want to do as far as attending workshops and conferences. He is complimentary of my program. *Alice*

My principal has been over to see the program, talks to the children, and listens to them read. Also, during a parent meeting she commended my work in reading. *Carol*

I have been bothered by the fact that the principal, who in previous years was frequently in and out of my classroom, didn't come in this year until he came to evaluate me in February. I have wanted his reaction to the program, but he just stayed away. *Betty*

• *What difficulties have you encountered implementing a whole language program?*

As a kindergarten teacher I implemented a whole language program the first year I taught. The principal thought I was doing things that kindergarten children were not ready to do.

I persisted all year and tried to educate him, but it wasn't accepted. Finally, I decided to interview for another position.
Alice

I've had some criticism from peers, because I was not teaching skills. *Carol*

Lack of materials has been my biggest problem. I only had basal materials and language textbooks, no big books, or multiple copies of children's literature. *Betty*

Decisions about curriculum and evaluation

• *Does your school district have a set of basic skills that a student must master before being promoted? If so, how do you teach those skills?*

I have it in my head, all the skills. Just as I know my children, I know what I'm accountable for, so I can do a lot of spontaneous teaching. Teachable moments are where I "plug in" skills. When I taught my first grade my children's standardized tests performance was as good or better than the performance of children in the traditional classes. *Alice*

I have included skill development in the natural course of writing or reading. The knowledge seems to stick with the children better now than it ever did before. We just worked on question sentences, because a story we were reading lent itself to writing questions. *Betty*

As a result of the peer criticism, I have given the basal reading level tests all year. All my children have passed. I'm not concerned about their performance on standardized tests. I don't have their tests results yet, but I have confidence that the children will do well. *Carol*

How do you decide which units to include in your program?

I reviewed the county objectives in social studies and science and then planned units to cover those objectives. For example, a number of objectives dealt with plants, so I planned a unit on plants incorporating language arts objectives and children's literature. *Betty*

When I choose themes, I take into consideration the children's prior experiences and the materials that I have available. I select themes that are broad, so the children can become involved in the planning activities. Children's interests are wide and varied; often we have a theme and we also have mini-themes that small groups work on cooperatively within the class. *Alice*

This year I have based my themes on literature and I've also made an effort to integrate literature with social studies units. *Carol*

• *How do you determine students' grades?*

It's very subjective, but I must have numerical grades. The children know when I am going to grade them because I tell them, "I want you to think about your language skills; I'm going to take a language grade today." I'd rather not have to grade children. But, I don't think we're going to see that in reality, so I do what I have to do. *Carol*

Development of vocabulary and comprehension

• *How do you develop new vocabulary?*

We learn new vocabulary through children's literature, big books, and units. We studied different environments, not just farms or seasons, but wild and nocturnal animals. I try to create situations that expose my children to new words. *Alice*

We've done a number of book innovations. As we plan the innovation, we discuss the new nouns or verbs we will use in our story. Students write to each other, to me, and to story-book characters. I think their vocabulary is enhanced with our dialogue journals. The wonderful thing is that I know they "own the vocabulary," because it is included in their writing. In a unit approach, the number of words they are exposed to is much greater than when I used basal readers. *Betty*

- *How do you handle comprehension instruction?*

Comprehension is constantly going on in a whole language classroom. The children transfer story meanings onto paper with drawings that tell the sequence of events. They role play. Each time a story is presented to them in a different way, their understanding increases. *Alice*

My children do book talks; I conference with them about their books; and they include in their dialogue journals the setting, plot, and characters of the book they are reading. I teach comprehension strategies such as Question-Answer Relationships and ReQuest in social studies. *Carol*

Sometimes my students prepare a mural of a literature story they have read in a small group. In planning the mural, they must retell the story to determine how to depict the events. Frequently, they write about stories they have read. Sometimes they retell the story by drawing and writing answers to story grammar questions: Who? Where? What was the problem? How was it solved? *Betty*

Strengths and weaknesses of whole language

- *What specific strengths do you see in your program compared to more traditional methods of teaching reading and the other language arts?*

The children learn what reading is about and that we read for different reasons. Every child is a winner. Children succeed at their own level without any stress. They know there is a purpose for coming to school. Their purpose right now is to learn about the jungle — we're reading and writing about wild animals. This week they're "turned on" to learning about hippos. In whole language classrooms the children feel like they're learning for themselves more than for a grade or to get their good work put up under a smiley face. *Alice*

My students' attitudes about reading, writing, and school in general are different. Their enthusiasm for writing is wonderful. They don't feel like failures in first grade. *Betty*

I've had no criticism from parents. I believe the reason is because their children are reading and writing. The children don't get upset when they select a book that is too hard; they just take it back and get another. I think it eliminates the stereotyping of some as slow readers. If some children finish an activity that may take the others longer, they automatically take out a book and start to read. They read between math problems, and the science teacher has said that they read between science activities. *Carol*

• *What do you see as potential weaknesses of a whole language program?*

Weaknesses could result if teachers were not using materials, managing time, or organizing the classroom well. The children need to become active participants, and to master their own language in order to want to come to school and learn all that they would like to learn. *Alice*

I don't have the security of knowing that I have taught every skill the children are going to be required to know. At the

beginning of the year, I found a child who told me he had read a book, but when I conferenced with him, I could tell he hadn't read it. I thought, "Oh gosh, maybe this really isn't going to work." I had to find ways to overcome that, so I had a sixth grader partner read with him. They took turns reading to each other. They did that for about two months, and gradually he became able to read by himself. *Carol*

I believe it requires more time for planning; however, I'm not spending as much time grading papers. In many ways it is a different use of my time. Instead of grading, I spend time locating appealing literature for the units I am planning. *Betty*

Preparation for whole language instruction

• *How did you learn to implement a whole language program?*

My undergraduate program in early childhood was based on whole language and the writing process. At a pilot school, we saw it put in practice while we were learning the theory. *Alice*

I worked with a university consultant, our reading supervisor, and two reading specialists in the county to develop a literature-based reading program. Also, I had taken a children's literature class at the master's degree level and became excited about using literature with children. *Carol*

• *How would you recommend an individual go about preparing to be a whole language teacher?*

Professional reading and going to workshops are helpful if a teacher is not in the position to study at a university. Mostly, I would say learning from peers and reading, reading, reading — educational journals with articles about whole language, literacy, and the writing process. *Alice*

I think your appetite is whetted by attending workshops or conferences on whole language. Avail yourself of information on different ways children learn to read. *Carol*

• *What suggestions, cautions, and warnings do you have for a teacher just beginning a whole language program?*

A teacher must know the curriculum, as well as know the children: their background, prior experiences, reading levels, and strengths. Know the philosophy of whole language and be familiar with child development. You will be asked to explain your program to peers, administrators, and parents. Start off slowly, don't get in over your head, and continue to learn while you implement new ideas and new activities. I would caution against believing that whole language is the answer to all that is wrong in education, and by all means, don't believe that whole language works for every child or for every teacher. You have to find your own niche, organize, and manage to fit your style of teaching, but know the basic foundations of whole language. *Alice*

Record keeping is important. If your program is criticized, you must be able to show in black and white that the children are learning. I also think you must have some training. You can't diagnose if you don't know what you're looking for, and you can't organize if you don't know what you need to organize. *Carol*

Conclusions

After interviewing these teachers we concluded they have a number of characteristics in common. First, they are all learners themselves. They read professional literature and children's literature, they attend workshops and conferences, and they enroll in university courses to stay current. Second, they believe that it is important to model reading and writing.

For example, Carol said, "I read while they're reading and on Fridays during sustained silent reading, I lie on the floor and read with them. At the beginning of the year, my husband came in and read the newspaper in a bathtub located in our class library (clothed, of course)." Third, these teachers are risk-takers. Initially, two of the three were the only teachers in the school implementing a whole language program. Furthermore, they create a classroom environment that is conducive to risk-taking. Fourth, they are in charge of the curriculum planning in their classroom. They do not depend on teachers' manuals to guide their instruction. Moreover, it was apparent all three were capable of assuming that responsibility. For example, Alice said, "I have it in my head, all the skills." Fifth, all three, through the use of children's literature and their own enthusiasm for learning, instilled within their students a love for reading, writing, and learning.

These teachers were test pilots in their school districts. They were, at times, blown a little off course. But before beginning their journey they knew they would encounter storms and the sky wouldn't always be friendly. They have now found a safe spot to land but will continue to explore their new environment.

Priscilla L. Griffith and Janell Klesius are faculty members in the Department of Education at the University of South Florida in Tampa, Florida.

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