Instituting Whole Language: Teacher Power and Practice

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In response to calls for literacy education reform, many schools across the nation have begun to implement whole language classrooms. This reform has touched off a series of responses from educators regarding teachers' roles, power, and empowerment. Whole language teachers, as co-learners in a learner-centered classroom, assume that language, reading, and writing acquisition are parallel processes that grow out of pursuing meaning in social situations (Harste, 1989; Newman, 1985; Goodman, 1986; McCaslin, 1989).

Many traditional classrooms remain basal-based. They are largely curriculum-driven with teachers as managers of a scope and sequence of reading and writing skills. In these classrooms, teachers usually implement someone else's program to teach a prescribed set of language skill objectives. In so doing, these teachers abdicate their decision-making power in matters of literacy instruction to the authors of such materials.

Clearly, the roles of whole language teachers and traditional reading basal program teachers differ. On one hand, whole language teachers are empowered teachers in control of learning in their classrooms, while on the other hand, teachers in traditional, basal-driven reading programs are held
accountable for program dictates and objectives written outside their power. At the core of this issue is the role of the empowered teacher — that is, one who will be in charge of the classrooms.

The idea of power in education has been a "neglected" and "indelicate topic," according to Nyberg (1981), who furthers his point by saying "when power does become a topic [in education circles] it focuses on other people's power, rather than one's own" (p. 537). Consequently, when classroom teachers speak of power, it often involves, as Nyberg explains, "complaint about undeserved, misused, excessive... usurped, or dangerous power" (p. 537) usually leveled at administration, central office, or state departments of education. However, when whole language proponents speak of power, they refer to empowering teachers as the persons responsible to make literacy decisions that best facilitate their students' literacy learning (Clarke, 1987; Maeroff, 1988; Rich, 1988).

There are those in literacy education, however, who contend that teachers do have power and influence and exercise this power daily. Lipsky (1980) in his treatise on social institutions, presents the school as a public service institution in which teachers function as "street-level bureaucrats whose actions are the policies" and "who may be understood to make the policies they are... charged with implementing" (p. xvi). Cowin (1981) also depicts teachers as agents in control of power to evaluate others and create concepts that attribute motivation to others. In addition, Fraatz (1987) persuasively presents a model of power and influence exercised by teachers regarding reading instruction. She places teachers at the center of educational policy-making in their role as the power agent in charge of literacy instruction. Fraatz sees the highest level of power for reading teachers in their ability to plan and to set instructional agenda, saying "The teacher's right to plan
is at the heart of the structure of power in the classroom" (p. 31). Applying Fraatz's model of power, Thomas, Barksdale-Ladd, and Jones (1991) found that teachers of literacy do indeed have power over literacy instruction planning and need to become empowered in making decisions regarding literacy instruction. "It is this planning which allows teachers degrees of power and influence over student learning" (Thomas, et al., 1991, p. 386). On the other hand, literacy educators such as Shannon (1989) view teachers as deskilled in teaching and planning reading instruction who have "relinquish[ed] some or most of their control over reading lessons and their work" (p. 92).

Given these diverse views, we sought to investigate issues of power and empowerment regarding literacy practices in a school district struggling with instituting whole language. This school district came to us soliciting university collaboration in identifying some issues germane to instituting literacy reform. This paper, therefore, describes some of the issues and concerns regarding power and empowerment in one school district striving to institute whole language.

After an initial meeting with the entire faculty designed to explore issues in instituting whole language, we sought to investigate if teachers already have a good deal of the power necessary to implement whole language classrooms. We set out to survey their perceptions of power, as well as their professional background and personal literacy habits, to help determine some of the conflict in implementing whole language classrooms. Therefore, after total faculty consent, we surveyed the faculty in the following three areas: 1) teacher perception of administrative power in implementing certain literacy practices; 2) teacher professional training and personal literacy pursuits as personal empowerment issues; and 3) current classroom literacy activities.
Method

The surveyed population consisted of 100 kindergarten through ninth grade teachers charged with teaching reading and writing to students in a school district comprising six elementary schools and one junior high school. The school district is directly adjacent to a large northeastern metropolitan hub and serves a city population as well as a substantial suburban population. The area is influenced by a large university school of teacher education as well as several other colleges and universities with education departments. Over recent years it has enjoyed a reputation as a model district.

The survey consisted of two basic parts: 1) open-ended questions to ascertain teacher perceptions of (a) the power inherent in administrative constraints on whole language and (b) the empowerment factor involved in teacher's own person/professional constraints; and 2) teacher professional and personal literacy background along with their current roles in literacy instruction through classroom activities and practices they employed. The open-ended questions asked teachers to: 1) rank the three most important needs that their administration had power to address in order for teachers to create a whole language classroom; and 2) list the three specific learning and training experiences that they need personally for their role in whole language instruction. Teachers then indicated their professional training and experience as well as their personal literacy habits.

Teachers were also asked to indicate whether they employed eight particular classroom activities that we had selected as being easily accomplished in any classroom, regardless of administration, texts, or materials and were viewed in the literature as empowering and sound literacy practices. They included: 1) sustained silent reading; 2) reading with
students during sustained silent reading; 3) reading aloud to students; 4) having students write (compose) daily; 5) writing with students; 6) sharing writing with students; 7) having writing related to reading; and 8) having students share and read each other's writing.

Data analyses are descriptive. We have tallied the responses for the two open-ended questions, and we have described and discussed teacher demographics, professional and personal literacy behavior, and classroom activities. These results provide a profile of one school district's K-9 teachers and their roles in literacy education.

Results

Population. Women comprised 85 percent of this teacher population. Teachers had taught an average of 16.9 years with 30 percent holding bachelor degrees, 58 percent holding master degrees, and 12 percent holding reading specialist degrees. Forty-three percent of the teachers reported that they had had an undergraduate course in integrating reading language arts from a whole language prospective, while 35 percent indicated a graduate course in this approach. On the average, teachers reported spending less than 1 hour (.87 hour) per week reading professional journals.

Perceptions of administrative constraints on whole language. Teachers identified three constraints: 1) class size; 2) time; and 3) evaluation/grading requirements. Although all teachers named these three constraints, teachers identified other constraints peculiar to grade level. Teachers in K-5 ranked the next constraints in this order: 4) lack of curriculum guide, resources, and articulated guiding philosophy; 5) mandated standardized testing; 6) lack of support system, and 7) lack of parental understanding/awareness. The constraints listed by the 6th-9th grade reading teachers involved lack of 4)
staff development with inservice programs especially designed to teach the writing process; 5) supportive building principals; 6) classroom aids; and 7) computers.

When asked to identify personal constraints on their roles in instituting whole language/integrative approach in their classroom, teachers identified the following top five concerns: 1) curricular expectations; 2) evaluation guidelines; 3) time to set program in motion; 4) motivational techniques for students; and 5) inservice help to address the writing process method.

**Teachers' personal literacy attributes.** Teachers responded yes, no, or very much to the item indicating enjoyment of reading. One teacher (one percent of this group) responded no (did not enjoy reading). The majority (77 percent) reported that they enjoyed reading very much, while the rest (22 percent) reported that they enjoyed reading. The results for whether or not teachers enjoyed writing were very different. The majority (52 percent) reported that they did not enjoy writing, while 32 percent said they did enjoy it and 16 percent said they enjoyed it very much. Teachers spent 8.99 hours per week on the average reading books, magazines, and newspapers. The same teachers spent 2.2 hours per week on the average engaged in writing activities.

We also analyzed the relationships between these personal literacy practices and selected classroom literacy activities. Information in Table 1 shows how much time (in weekly hours) particular teachers devote to these activities. Those teachers who spent more time in their own recreational reading appeared to also devote more classroom time to reading aloud to students and involving students in sustained silent reading than did teachers who spent less time in their own recreational reading. Teachers who spent more
time in personal writing than did other teachers had their students involved in more classroom writing time.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal Literacy Practices of Teachers</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reading aloud to Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those reading above average time</td>
<td>1.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those reading below average time</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those writing above average time</td>
<td>1.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those writing below average time</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Information in Table 2 shows relationships between these personal practices and whether or not teachers implemented certain classroom activities. We will first compare teachers who read more to teachers who read less. Teachers who read more also read along with students during SSR and incorporated writing activities that were related to reading. Teachers who wrote more involved students in daily writing, wrote with students, and had students read other students' writing. These same teachers included writing that was related to reading. We also asked teachers to indicate whether or not they enjoyed reading and writing. Because the great majority of teachers enjoyed reading, comparisons were possible only between those who said they enjoyed it and those who said they enjoyed it very much.
Table 2
Relationship of Teachers-Personal Literacy Activities and Percentage of Percentages of Teachers Who Implement Classroom Literacy Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers' Personal Literacy Practices</th>
<th>Activities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students Write Daily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers Write w/ Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers Share Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers Read During SSR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Writing Related to Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students Read Others' Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those reading above average time</td>
<td>47.1  60.6  44.5  84.4  84.4  62.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those reading below average time</td>
<td>53.8  53.8  53.8  63.8  80.6  76.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those writing above average time</td>
<td>48.3  64.3  50.0  81.5  74.1  64.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those writing below average time</td>
<td>46.4  52.1  50.7  68.6  85.3  62.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As indicated in Table 3, a higher percentage of teachers enjoying reading had writing related to reading, and had students read other students' writing. A higher percentage of teachers enjoying reading very much read along with students during SSR. Comparisons were also made among teachers who said they enjoyed writing, those who did not enjoy writing, and those who enjoyed writing very much. Results were mixed. There was a trend on the part of those teachers who did not enjoy writing: a) they had fewer students writing daily; b) they did not write with students; and c) they did not share their own writing with their students.
Teachers who enjoyed writing had the highest reported percentage for: a) writing with their students; b) having writing related to reading; and c) having students read other students' writing.

Table 3
Relationship of Teachers-Personal Response to Reading and Writing and Percentages of Teachers Who Implement Classroom Literacy Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Personal Literacy Characteristics</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students Write Daily</td>
<td>Teachers Write w/ Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers Share Writing</td>
<td>Teachers Read During SSR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Related to Reading</td>
<td>Students Read Others' Writing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Enjoy Reading**

- Yes: 47.5 42.3 50.0 52.9 94.1 60.0
- Very Much: 46.5 56.4 71.8 72.5 80.0 59.0

**Enjoy Writing**

- No: 46.0 49.0 41.2 71.4 81.6 59.0
- Yes: 56.2 73.0 64.0 67.0 96.0 79.2
- Very Much: 56.2 60.0 66.7 73.3 66.7 60.0

We also explored the relationships between selected classroom literacy activities and the following professional factors: 1) professional studies (whether or not they had taken an undergraduate and/or graduate course concerned with how to integrate reading/language arts with whole language emphasis); 2) teaching experience (above or below average years of experience); and 3) professional reading (above or below average time spent reading professional journals or related
sources). Teachers who had taken an undergraduate course (43 percent) in whole language or a graduate course in whole language (35 percent) reported that they spent more hours per week reading aloud to their students, devoted more time to sustained silent reading, and devoted more hours in the classroom to having their students write. Teachers with more years of teaching experience also devoted more classroom time to these three activities. Teachers who spent more time than average reading professional journals also reported more classroom time devoted to reading aloud to students, SSR, and student writing. Table 4 details how these professional factors related to whether or not teachers implemented the reading and writing activities. Teachers who had taken an undergraduate course or a graduate course were more likely to include the following six activities: writing daily, teacher writing with students, teacher sharing writing with students, teacher reading with students during SSR, having writing related to reading, and having students read other students' writing. Greater percentages for positive responses were evident, in particular, for teachers with graduate level training.

Years of teaching experience also appeared to be related to whether or not teachers included these activities. A greater percentage of the more experienced teachers reported that they included the activities, except in the case of reading with students during SSR. Teachers who spent more than average time reading professional journals also were more likely to include these activities. While all teachers saw these eight activities as part of their roles in literacy instruction, professional background and personal literacy habits made a difference in the time involved in these practices.

Discussion and implications

This survey represented a seasoned faculty averaging nearly 17 years teaching, with well over two-thirds holding master's degrees. Yet these veteran teachers in response to the
Table 4

Teacher Background Related to Percentage of Teachers Who Implement Classroom Literacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional Factors</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students Read</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Took Undergraduate whole language course</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes (a)</td>
<td>57.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No (b)</td>
<td>39.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Took Graduate whole language course</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes (c)</td>
<td>53.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No (d)</td>
<td>43.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taught years above average</td>
<td>50.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taught years below average</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spend above average time reading journals</td>
<td>52.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spend below average time reading journals</td>
<td>43.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(a) Represents 43%; (b) represents 57%; (c) represents 35%; (d) represents 65%

open-ended questions regarding constraints to whole language seemed to look to administration for the necessary impetus for whole language classrooms. They did not appear to view their roles as change agents for initiating whole
language reform. When teachers list grading, lack of curricular guides, and insufficient time as constraints to whole language, they seem to be lacking in an understanding of the concept of whole language. In addressing concerns like these, Rich (1985) has pointed out that there are no questions about where to find the time to read to the children and how to accommodate children's writing.

The reading teachers, however, for grades 6-9 ranked staff development and inservice as their fourth concern, indicating a need for growth in their knowledge base in whole language reform. They aptly put the onus on themselves and saw change within their ability to implement and as part of their roles. This group's acknowledgment of their need to know more about integrating whole language is encouraging. In the second open-ended question intended to get teachers to look at themselves and their personal and professional needs in implementing whole language, teachers turned to administration "to provide programs." On the one hand, teachers viewed the administrative requirements of grading, standardized testing, and departmentalized curricular concerns as barriers to whole language, while on the other hand they asked for administration to provide curricula, evaluation guidelines, and motivational techniques for students in attempts to implement whole language classrooms.

Given these responses by the teachers to the open-ended questions, it appears that this faculty does not see that the power resides within their roles as instructional leaders with a sense of professional responsibility to implement whole language processes. As instructional leaders with the ability to plan for and implement instruction, faculty have the power of knowledge on their side. Faculty have the power to provide curricula based on informed decisions, to evaluate with informed guidelines, and to motivate students with
knowledge they are responsible for obtaining in pursuit of their profession. The real issue then becomes empowerment, that quality to effect change based on knowledgeable choices. Barksdale-Ladd and Thomas (1993) point to a sense of confidence as a key element in their definition of empowerment indicating that an empowered teacher is an individual who has developed confidence in a personal knowledge of reading, teaching, and learning and is able to confidently make instructional decisions and take actions in delivering reading instruction based upon this personal knowledge.

The result of this faculty's personal literacy habits may also be a key to understanding individual constraints in initiating whole language when viewing personal literacy practices as part of one's professional background. As readers, this faculty averaged almost nine hours per week on personal reading with three-fourths indicating they enjoyed reading very much. However, as a group, these teachers reported spending only .8 of one hour per week on SSR. In that brief average time, close to three-fourths of the teachers engaged in reading when their students did, but those teachers who read above the group average reading time spent almost twice as much time engaged in SSR in the classroom. Even the percentages for those who indicated they enjoyed reading very much were higher for SSR than the percentages for those who indicated a "yes" response for enjoying reading. This finding indicates that teachers' roles in literacy instructional practices reflect personal literacy habits. The paramount issues in this case then may involve the recruitment, selection, and training of those who enter the profession. Not only should professional schools of education seek out the literate members of the literacy community, but those teacher educators must themselves be models of literacy in their reading and writing assignments, practices and habits.
Clearly, as role models for literacy, teachers who engage in SSR with their students and for longer periods of time show ownership and membership in the literacy community. Simply, teachers who themselves read more apparently have their students read for longer, more meaningful units of time. True to whole language principles is the reading of whole texts for unbroken units of time. In addition, a greater percentage of those teachers who personally read more also wrote with their students and devoted more time per week to students' writing. Teachers who are readers invest their classroom time wisely in their students' reading and writing/reading relationship. Whole language classrooms are marked by teachers who teach by example and teachers who participate with students in literacy events. Therefore, schools whose faculties are themselves readers, perhaps have a better understanding of what is involved in whole language classrooms.

In contrast, this faculty fared less well in writing with over half indicating that they did not enjoy writing. This personal attribute seemed to have a dramatic influence on teachers' classroom practices and beliefs regarding writing. Over half of this faculty did not have their students write daily. When students did write, 44 percent of the teachers did not write with their students, and for those who wrote with their students, 49 percent did not share their writing with their students. The literacy event of writing suggests communication and audience, yet in almost half of these teachers' classrooms, this aspect is missing. This finding also seems to suggest teachers are not aware of or not teaching the writing process as a process with its attendant components.

This faculty's concern with students' writing and how they can help students in their writing are supported by teachers' responses to the open-ended questions. Twice the
teachers listed inservice needs for writing instruction for both the administrative constraints and their personal constraints. It appears that this faculty may realize their needs in this area of writing instruction — an area self-reported as not one of their strengths. Bridge and Hiebert (1985) have provided a revealing study of teachers' perceptions regarding writing instruction concluding that "students seldom compose discourse level texts and rarely write for a real audience" (p. 169). This may hold true for this faculty as borne out in the responses to the survey and indication of help needed in instruction in the writing process. As might be expected, teachers who personally read more tended to emphasize reading activities over writing activities. Likewise, teachers who wrote more emphasized writing and sharing their writing with students. Whole language classrooms are reading and writing environments where teachers see their role as reading and writing with students in shared episodes. Large percentages of this faculty do not provide the needed setting for such experiences. Because whole language programs are not easily implemented and maintained even by teachers who invest time in providing literacy episodes, the challenge is even greater for teachers who do not participate in personal reading and writing.

The professional background variable of having had courses in integrative language arts/reading, appeared to have an impact upon teachers' classroom literacy practices. Teachers who had such courses invested more time in practices having students read and write. In addition, these teachers also shared in literacy episodes and provided audiences for students' writing. Research in the areas of language arts, reading and psychology have flourished in the past two decades with instructional implications for both undergraduate and graduate students. The teachers in this survey who took such courses indicated classroom activities
that reflected such coursework. This feature of the findings may also be part of a larger picture indicating that those teachers who are the professionally responsible ones are committed to furthering their professional growth through continuing coursework. Given the average years teaching experience and percentages of master's degrees held by this faculty, graduate courses and intense inservice are mandatory for whole language implementation. If the teachers in this survey are indicative of many faculties in this country, it is noteworthy to point out two encouraging aspects: 1) faculty did recognize their need for instruction in the writing process and asked for inservice, and 2) they did indicate benefits from taking courses in whole language approaches by responding positively to engaging in the activities on the survey.

Other encouraging outcomes point out that teachers who taught longer, who had graduate courses in whole language approach, or who spend more time reading professional journals overall tended to have classrooms which engaged students in whole language literacy episodes. It appears that veteran teachers can and do learn and practice new approaches. This has implications considering the ages of today's school teachers holding master's degrees. Professional journals also appear to be important in teachers' implementing and practicing whole language principles. Given the great strides in research in the past decades in the area of literacy (e.g., emergent literacy, writing process, whole language belief systems, readers' response to literature) it is imperative that teachers see their role in keeping up with the research in their field through reading the literature of their profession.

Some obvious implications prevail for those who prepare and those who hire teachers. Teacher educators must determine ways to assure that well-balanced literate persons are coming into the profession and being turned out as models
who can introduce our students into the literacy community by example. Moreover, once these teachers are hired, administration must provide and value time for teachers to grow professionally and develop through coursework, inservice, and teacher collaboration. The real power in literacy education is having knowledge of the reading and writing processes and their relationships as well as collaborating in the efforts to share this knowledge. Teachers' roles in good literacy instruction call for teachers first to look to themselves as the true leader in instruction in the classroom and second to be professionally responsible for the knowledge of the developmental process of literacy. It is this knowledge that truly empowers teachers in their role in literacy instruction.

The education of school administration personnel, principals, supervisors, and superintendents also should be scrutinized. Do we prepare this personnel as managers in educationally sound models that share decision-making? Or do our educational models present telling and dictating rather than negotiating and sharing as viable frameworks in our schools? If teacher-education instructors and administrative-education instructors adhere to an ex cathedra model of instruction then power and authority appear to set the tone for school administrators and their faculties. When power is perceived to be in the hands of one group (administrators), then the other group (faculty) see themselves as powerless to institute change. However, when empowerment is the issue, teachers, teacher educators, parents, students, principals, supervisors, and administrative personnel collectively share and negotiate change and learning.

References


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