EXPLORING TEACHERS’ EXPERIENCES WITH CHANGE RELATED TO THE WHOLE LANGUAGE MOVEMENT:
A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

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Abstract

This qualitative study contributes to understanding about teachers’ experiences with change. As teachers attempt to navigate the curricular initiatives that continually come and go, their work is affected and their attitudes are shaped. Employing the methodology of narrative inquiry, teachers’ personal stories about their experiences during the rise and fall of the whole language movement in reading instruction during the 1990s were explored. Experience-centered narrative analysis illuminated the impact that this tumultuous period in educational history had on four Massachusetts teachers who lived through it. Recognizing that people create their own realities based on their interpretations of their experiences, in-depth interviews and a review of documentary evidence revealed teachers’ personal understandings of the “Reading Wars.” The bodies of literature relating to the history of reading instruction, the forces that shape reading policy, and teachers and change were interrogated through the lens of change theory and of self-efficacy theory. Key themes emerged from the teachers’ stories, including: whole language as a failed initiative; teachers’ agency as instructional decision makers; the pendulum of change; the importance of leadership, and relationships with colleagues. Too often, teachers’ voices and viewpoints are absent from educational reform initiatives, leading to failure and disillusionment. This study honors teachers’ perspectives in order to create new knowledge about the relationship between cycles of educational change and teacher efficacy.

Key words: Teachers’ experiences, teachers and change, teachers’ self-efficacy, teachers’ sense of agency, whole language controversy
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Chapter I: Introduction

Problem Statement

Throughout the history of education, debates have raged about the very nature of teaching and learning. Those who believe that learning occurs naturally through student-centered inquiry have been locked in ongoing battles with those who advocate skills-centered instruction by an expert (Kaminsky, 1993). Perhaps the most well-known instance of this type of polarity is the dispute of the 1980s and 1990s between proponents of whole language and those of phonics-based instruction (Pearson, 2004). So contentious was this era that it is often referred to as “the reading wars.” The cycling of trends and fads in reading instruction had a long and powerful history, culminating in the reading wars of the 1980s and 1990s. This tumultuous time shaped a generation of teachers, many of whom are still in the field attempting to navigate continuing reforms in the teaching of reading. This study was designed to investigate how teachers feel that they are affected by the polarizing disputes and contradictory messages about how we should teach our students to read in an ever-changing landscape that is shaped by social and political forces. Faced with disparate viewpoints and mandates, and lacking a historical perspective on the political and social forces at play, teachers may feel at the mercy of the pendulum’s swing and may become ever-more immune to change, ever less self-efficacious. Teachers’ opinions are seldom sought, and there is much that can be learned from them.

Significance of the Problem

Children’s successful acquisition of literacy is viewed as essential to their overall academic success (Reutzel & Mitchell, 2005), so it is therefore of paramount importance that teachers of reading are capable and confident. It has been well-documented that the single most important factor in the education of successful students is not the particular reading methodology
used but rather the preparedness and attitude of the highly effective teacher standing in front of them (Bond & Dykstra, 1967; Greenwald, Hedges & Lane, 1996; Pressley, 2006). Achievement data show that student gains are much more influenced by teacher qualification than by other factors, such as class size and class composition. Having access to an effective teacher instead of an average teacher for 5 consecutive years has been shown to essentially close the performance gap between math students from high and low income households (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2001). The “teacher effect” on student improvement is unparalleled. However, pendulum swings between student-centered and teacher-directed literacy approaches and elusive mandates can create in teachers either a sense of helplessness or of cynicism, impeding their ability to be those highly effective teachers that their students need and deserve. Feelings of loss of control and a sense of victimization are noted among teachers who are continually expected to change their practice to no apparent end (Eisner, 2004). Without an opportunity to voice and make meaning of their experiences, teachers struggle to understand how best to meet students’ needs and to persist in a challenging landscape of educational reform.

Also at stake as reading pedagogy and policy evolve is the credibility with which schools are viewed by the parents of students and by policymakers. If schools appear to be ungrounded and prone to faddism, future initiatives may not garner the public support they require to take root and thrive (Wolfendale & Bastiani, 2000). Today, stakeholders expect schools to provide greater transparency, making current initiatives and their rates of success public information. In order for improvement efforts to be perceived by community members and by teachers as credible and worthy of support, clear direction must be evident, and commitment from teachers must be secured. Teachers’ attitudes toward change and sense of agency in the face of the demands of reform must come to light.
Research Question

To investigate this problem of practice, I explored the following question:

How did teachers’ experiences with the rise and fall of the Whole Language philosophy of reading instruction during the 1990s affect them and shape their attitudes toward change?

Theoretical Framework

This proposed study of the ongoing history of reading instruction and teachers’ roles and attitudes within it was informed by change theory and self-efficacy theory. Change theory emphasizes the implications of change for the stakeholders and change agents who promote or oppose the change process. Self-efficacy theory emphasizes how a person’s experiences and attitudes influence how he or she perceives and responds to different situations and phenomena.

Change theory. In probing teachers’ responses to change, Fullan (2001) cites seven core elements that lead to sustainable change: a focus on motivation; capacity building, with a focus on results; learning in context; changing context; a bias for reflective action; tri-level engagement; and persistence and flexibility in staying the course. Tri-level engagement is defined as what happens at (1) the school and community level, (2) the district level, and (3) the state or national level, and the “permeable connectivity” or mutual influence that must occur within and across these three levels. The reading wars have seen reform efforts rooted in only one or two of these levels fall short, again and again. NCLB and the recommendations of the National Reading Panel (NRP) dictate most of what we must do in classrooms today, and so we must wonder to what extent teachers are empowered in this top-down process. This study considered to what extent the absence of Fullan’s above core elements and the absence of what Fullan calls “change knowledge” contribute to the fleeting nature of practice and policy in reading instruction and teachers’ response to it.
Pressured by external prescriptions and the threat of sanctions, schools are compelled to act with haste, imposing reform after reform. This attempt to avoid negative consequences is contrary to what change theory posits: teachers must feel motivated by and have a personal commitment to a reform if it is to be successful. Goals that are set hastily or without teachers’ voices are not likely to be reached (Fullan, 2001, 2003, 2005; Hargreaves, 2003). Teachers’ motivation to engage with and persevere with novel approaches must come from within:

A common administrative and legislative delusion and conceit is that reform can be imposed, even forced, on teachers without any regard for their values or inclusion of their voice. Historically, this pattern of forced implementation has enjoyed little or no success. Reviewing the impact of numerous innovations in education over many decades, McLaughlin (1990) concludes that “you cannot mandate what matters to effective practice” (Fullan, 2001, p. 128).

It therefore follows that neither can you mandate what matters to teachers. Teachers judge the quality of a reform based on its feasibility in the classroom and its potential to benefit their students and to make their jobs more doable.

Teachers’ individual experiences and perceptions shape their responses to reform. Some teachers may support the change and attempt to implement it, but are hindered by constraints of time and by feeling overwhelmed (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Other teachers see no need for change, believing that their current approaches are effective enough. They may voice this attitude, or, more likely, may pay “lip service” to the reform while maintaining the status quo within the confines of their own classrooms. Because teaching requires continual action and choices, Darling-Hammond (1997) asserts that individual teachers must act and choose in ways that uphold the change model, or no change will occur at the classroom level. In a profound
assertion of change theory, Fullan (2001) points to the strong correlation between the number of ill-fated initiatives to which teachers are exposed and those teachers’ resistance to and skepticism toward future initiatives. This study explored to what extent this dynamic may have been at play as teachers responded to the changes heralded by the whole language movement.

Change theorists caution that even reforms which start out encouragingly and with strong teacher participation often peter out after a year or two, as exhausted and disillusioned teachers revert to previous practices (Hargreaves, 2001). Teachers too often are people to whom change is done, rather than people by whom change is done (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Darling-Hammond (1997) stresses that, “most people are motivated much more by the opportunity to make a difference and the satisfaction of doing well than by extrinsic rewards and sanctions… and that a sense of efficacy grows when people are able to control and influence their work” (p. 151). Teachers who are empowered to make important decisions are more likely to feel committed and to hold themselves to high standards (Hargreaves, 2003). When teachers feel pressure to comply with a reform, but lack technical and personal support, they have been found to withdraw, as evidenced by high teacher turnover, teachers leaving the field, and early retirements (Fullan, 2001). When teachers’ perspectives are honored and their experience valued, however, trusting relationships grow.

Accordingly, the importance of strong leadership is a clear theme in change theory as well. A healthy environment that includes relational trust and “culture of disciplined inquiry and action” (Fullan, 2003, p. 45) rather than a coercive atmosphere strictly overseen by a disciplinarian is essential for optimal “academic productivity” (Fullan, 2003, p. 42). Such a leader demonstrates a personal commitment to valuing the experiences of and understanding the views and needs of each teacher (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Low levels of relational trust cause
teachers to protect themselves and their classrooms from outside influences. Gaining teacher commitment to sustained improved practice is a tremendous and ongoing challenge for educational leaders.

Hargreaves et al. (2001) point to how deeply teachers rely on their own experience to make sense of their work in an ever-changing field. Teachers temper their implementation of reforms with their knowledge of the realities of the classroom and how their students actually learn. They rely heavily on their professional judgment, and any change initiatives are filtered through their views and understandings of working with children:

Teachers need to be able to see the reasons for change, grasp the point of it, and be convinced it is feasible and will benefit their students. These reasons must be explicit and compelling in policy, and they must also be ones that teachers have time and opportunity to figure out for themselves, alone and together (Hargreaves et al., p. 118).

Change theorists agree that the ways in which teachers perceive themselves and their work play a powerful role in the success or failure of change initiatives. “Regulations cannot change schools; only teachers…can do that” (Darling-Hammond, 1996, p. 228). The reading wars of the 1980s and 1990s saw teachers embracing or rejecting change in impassioned ways. As a dramatic iteration of the pendulum’s swing between progressive and skills-based education, the rise and fall of whole language and the lingering effects thereof can be understood more fully through the lens of change theory.

**Self-efficacy theory.** In examining the history of reading initiatives, the influence of teachers’ perspectives on their worth and capacity must be considered. The focus of self-efficacy theory is the “belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1977, p.193). The theoretical foundation of
self-efficacy is found in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997). Social cognitive theory holds that individuals are capable of intentional pursuits of courses of action, or agency, and that agency operates through triadic reciprocal causation. In reciprocal causation, agency results in future behavior as a function of environmental influences, our current and past behavior, and internal personal cognitive, affective, and biological processes. The assertion that “individuals are capable of exercising a degree of control over their thoughts, feelings, motivation, and actions” (Pajares, 2003, p.7) is at the core of self-efficacy theory.

Over several decades of writings, Bandura proposed that self-efficacy beliefs are the major mediators for and predictors of behavioral change. By interpreting and evaluating their performance in a given situation, people’s future actions and behaviors can be determined. Bandura holds that behavior is better predicted by the belief that individuals have regarding their own capabilities than by what they are actually capable of doing. Those who believe that they have the capability to be successful make more and longer attempts to achieve the desired outcome. Self-efficacy “is concerned not with the skills one has but with judgments of what one can do with whatever skills one possesses” (Bandura, 1986, p. 391). Perceptions of one’s self-efficacy affect a person in either a positive, empowering way, or in a negative, demoralizing way.

Self-efficacy theory distinguishes between outcome expectancy and efficacy expectancy. The degree to which the individual believes the environment can be controlled is outcome expectancy. The conviction that an individual is personally capable of successfully executing actions that will result in the desired outcome is referred to as efficacy expectation (Bandura, 1986). Efficacy expectation predicates an individual’s undertaking of a specific action, making him more likely to engage. Once engaged, he is more likely to persist with the task to
completion, and thereby affirm his positive self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the critical precursor to behavioral change as it determines the initiation of coping behavior. Self-efficacy theory informs current views of motivation (Graham & Weiner, 1996) and also suggests that, because agency is mediated by efficaciousness, self-efficacy beliefs influence choices, effort, and persistence (Pajares, 1996).

Teacher self-efficacy is described as a teacher’s belief that he possesses the ability to influence the learning and achievement of all students, including those who may be considered unmotivated and difficult (Bandura, 1977; Hoy, 2000). Teachers with stronger efficacy tend to display effort, persistence, enthusiasm, and confidence. They use teaching time differently, engaging students for longer periods of time. They demonstrate warmth and responsiveness to all students (Ashton, et al., 1982). Efficacious teachers tend to seek improved teaching methods and experiment with instructional materials (Allinder, 1994; Stein & Wang, 1988) and to exhibit higher professional commitment (Coladarci, 1992). Efficacious teachers identify the creative processes they use to adjust their instruction to target student needs as one of the primary joys in their jobs (Darling-Hammond, 1997). It is therefore not surprising that teachers’ efficacy has a direct effect on student achievement in the classroom (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Dembo & Gibson, 1985; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998).

Bandura (1977) identifies four sources of personal efficacy: performance accomplishments; vicarious experiences; verbal persuasions; and emotional arousals. Performance accomplishments make the greatest impact on self-efficacy beliefs as they directly link an individual to the successful completion of a task. Vicarious experiences create in an individual the belief that he too may be successful in what he has seen another do. Verbal persuasion may help an individual overcome doubt, but it is not enduring. Emotional arousal
may help a phobic overcome anxiety and fear. In general, self-efficacy will increase with repeated successful experiences and will decrease with failure. Efficacy beliefs increase when teachers view themselves progressing in teaching, which in turn helps to increase success in future teaching accomplishments. Efficacy beliefs can decrease when teachers experience setbacks in their work, leading to a lack of progress in their future work.

Thus, self-efficacy is a predictor for teachers’ potential to change their behaviors. Smylie (1988) contends that teachers’ efficacy acts as “a professional filter through which new ideas and innovations must pass before teachers internalize them and change their behaviors” (p. 148).

The preceding section on teachers and change theory is replete with this theme. Teachers’ sense of agency and ability to persist in challenging times must be severely compromised as the pendulum swings and reforms come and go. Teachers are often described as resisting change and clinging to their preference for autonomy. This aspect of the teacher ethos dovetails with the elements of teachers’ self-efficacy. For teachers, the workings of their school organization and its change initiatives are beyond their control; but, within their own classrooms, they can control, create, problem-solve, and make what they believe to be are sound decisions for their students (Schon, 1987).

The concept of teacher autonomy can be seen as related to teacher efficacy theory, highlighting how important it is to teachers to be able to apply their professional judgment in the classroom. Teachers’ tacit knowledge about the nature of the community, the needs of the students, and the effectiveness of various practices through the years is a valuable resource for decision making in their schools, and teachers resent when their knowledge and experience are discounted. However, teachers do cite reasonable systems of accountability as reinforcing their sense of responsibility for the accomplishments of their students. Thus, as Fullan (2001) and

Bandura (1997) argued: “People regulate their level and distribution of effort in accordance with the effects they expect their actions to have. As a result, their behavior is better predicted from their beliefs than from the actual consequences of their actions” (1986, p. 129). Beliefs have an effect on people’s effort, determination, or flexibility when encountering problems and the way they cope with anxiety they experience when dealing with challenges. There is a high level of stress and anxiety associated with change and the fear of losing control. This can lead to low efficacy and which hinders an individual’s engagement in future change initiatives. By contrast, teachers who feel listened to and supported by the administration tend to have higher efficacy beliefs (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). This study explored how teacher efficacy was affected by the ascent and demise of whole language. Self-efficacy theory is key to understanding the role that self-efficacy played in teachers’ responses to the great reading debates, for research has revealed that, “When all is said and done, what matters most for student learning are the commitments and capacities of their teachers” (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 293).

Chapter II: Review of the Literature

Change theory and self-efficacy theory informed the investigation of the three questions posed to interrogate the existing relevant literature. The first question, how can the whole language/phonics debate be understood within the broader context of the history of reading instruction, reflected the historical nature of this inquiry, as I sought to examine and understand teachers’ roles in and attitudes toward the reading wars over time, drawing upon elements of both change and self-efficacy theories. The second question, how do changes in reading policy
evolve, and how are they understood and received by classroom teachers, also was illuminated by both change theory and self-efficacy theory. Change theory helped me to understand how top-down or bottom-up change initiatives have been experienced differently by teachers of reading. This second question reflected the importance of teachers’ self-efficacy as change agents empowered to make decisions in their actual practice. Self-efficacy theory undergirded my examination of the relationship between teachers’ perceptions of their role or voice in an initiative and their investment in implementing it. The third question reflected the study of teachers’ receptiveness or resistance to change as illuminated by change theory. Self-efficacy theory also informed this third question as teachers may perceive an ongoing debate as confusing or frustrating and therefore have trouble persisting in their work. I explored the literature with my theoretical framework illuminating the way.

History of the Reading Wars

My first question I posed to the literature was: How can the whole language/phonics debate be understood within the broader context of the history of reading instruction? In order to explore this question, I studied the body of literature on the debate between whole language and phonics proponents as a chapter in American education’s history. Existing research revealed that reading education bears a heated history that extends two hundred years and that has come to be known as “The Great Debate” (Chall, 1967) or “The Reading Wars.” A lack of consensus on philosophy and methodology created cyclical pedagogical shifts between polarities and resulted in a lack of sustained progress. An examination of this pattern illuminates the whole language/phonics debate by situating it in its historical context. The tenets of change theory undergirded this investigation of how and why teachers embraced or rejected whole language. In
keeping with the canon of self-efficacy theory, teachers’ perceptions both influenced and were influenced by this volatile period.

The 1980s and 1990s were an extremely volatile period in the history of American education as controversy raged around the reading methodologies known as whole language and phonics. Whole language and direct phonics instruction are competing emphases to beginning reading instruction which became the vortex of a major rift and media frenzy that divided teachers, administrators, parents, and politicians. The mere mention of the term whole language still evokes strong emotions in both its supporters and detractors. Explicit instruction in phonics consists of systematically practicing and mastering the rules of the sounds-symbol relationships of the letters of the alphabet. Such practice is sequential and teacher-directed. Whole language, by contrast, emphasizes the holistic nature of reading and writing as language processes through which strategies are learned through the enjoyment of authentic literature (Harris & Hodges, 1995). The whole language/phonics controversy can be seen as a recent iteration of the pendulum’s swing between progressive, student-centered approaches and traditional, teacher-centered models which emphasize skill mastery. When whole language swept the nation in the 1980s and 1990s, it was perceived as the latest round in a long and unresolved battle from the past (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2000).

Progressive education has been aspired to for centuries. Emphases on experiential learning, integrated curriculum fueled by choice and authenticity, cooperative problem solving, and education for social responsibility are hallmarks of progressive education. In *Emile* (1762), Jean-Jacques Rousseau held that children develop knowledge through an innate script that leads them to competence. “Do not give your pupil any kind of verbal lessons; he should receive them only through experience” (p. 265). In keeping with this progressive view, whole language
philosophy contends that children’s maturation will allow them to learn to read and write as naturally as they learned to speak. Teachers assume the role of facilitators because direct instruction is viewed as unnecessary, unproductive, or even harmful (Smith, 1978). Whole language is at its core a progressive educational viewpoint.

By contrast, in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, John Locke (1693) recommended a “method of teaching children by a repeated practice, and the same action done over and over again, under the eye and direction of the tutor, ’till they have got the habit of doing it well” (section 66). This statement reflects a traditional viewpoint and is in keeping with the proponents of direct and systematic phonics instruction. Phonology as a code that must be mastered through teacher directed drill and practice in order to learn to read is reflective of this rule-based learning and is contrary to whole language’s developmental and meaning-based focus. The longstanding debate between progressive and traditional educators is one of polar extremes and of a swinging pendulum as each school of thought has its turn at the helm. The history of reading instruction in the United States reflects this cyclical pattern.

Through the middle of the nineteenth century, phonics was the primary mode of reading instruction (Adams, 1990). Students’ learned letter sounds and letter combinations in order to decode words, sentences, and then stories. In 1828, Samuel Worcester introduced an alternative method involving the use of a primer in which students learned to recognize whole words based on their length and overall shape. According to proponents of this whole-word approach, this is similar to the efficient way in which skilled readers decode (Hempenstall, 1997) and should therefore be emulated by novices. After using visual memory to identify a word based on its configuration, students were taught to rely next on the secondary cues of pictures or the surrounding context to decode words. In this technique, phonic analysis was to be used only as a
last resort because the way in which it removed words from their meaningful context and reduced them to individual sounds was harmful to the overall reading process (Chall, 1967).

The whole word, or “look-say,” method remained the conventional wisdom for generations. It was not until the first two decades of the twentieth century that research began to be conducted on the relative merits of different methods of teaching reading. Some of these early findings which lent support to the whole-world approach triggered the publication of several reading texts, or basals, that were adopted for mass use as cities’ populations boomed in the 1930s and 1940s. Because students encounter between 3,000 and 4,000 new words in grades 2-3 and a staggering 10,000 new words in grade 4 (Share, 1995), the ability to read unfamiliar words is essential. It was believed by proponents of the look-say method that, despite the lack of systematic word attack instruction, children would deduce an understanding of phonics that would aid them in decoding unfamiliar words. While many students did seem to develop a working understanding of the alphabetic principle incidentally, many others did not. Memorizing words by sight according to their size and configuration and using context cues were not effective enough strategies for many students. At-risk students in particular did not intuitively develop the hoped-for generative strategy for decoding novel words (Spear-Swerling & Sternberg, 1994) and struggled to become literate.

In 1955, the whole-word approach came under fire. Rudolph Flesch published Why Johnny Can’t Read, and it quickly became a national bestseller. Flesch argued that the decline in reading aptitude in the working class was due to the ineffectiveness of the whole word method and suggested that it must be recognized as a threat to democracy. His criticisms struck fear in the hearts and minds of Americans by alleging that there was a conspiracy to disempower lower socioeconomic groups: “The American dream is, essentially, equal opportunity through free
education for all. This dream is beginning to vanish in a country where public schools are falling down on the job” (p. 132). Flesch blamed the universal acceptance of the look-say approach for high levels of illiteracy and urged an immediate return to phonics instruction. When the 1957 Soviet launching of Sputnik incited public uproar over American education’s inadequacies, Flesch’s book reached an even wider and more concerned audience. Parents began to express opinions on educational matters and to demand accountability from the public schools as never before. Researchers, publishers, and politicians focused on reading instruction. More diverse reading materials were published including those which emphasize phonetic code, and courses on reading pedagogy became more common in teacher preparation (Hempenstall, 1997). The stakes were higher, the opinions were impassioned, and more information was needed about how children actually learn to read.

It was in this context that Jean Chall published her seminal work, Learning to Read: The Great Debate, in 1967. In it she revealed the findings of her study of 300 classrooms which used various instructional approaches. She concluded that the systematic teaching of phonics is the more effective approach not only for at-risk children, but for all children. A higher regard for phonics based approaches took root among researchers. Although Chall’s findings were disputed by some who cited methodological flaws, a new standard was set for the design and rigor of educational research studies as a result of The Great Debate. A spate of large scale research studies began as the United States Office of Education funded twenty-seven projects in response to high public interest in the question of reading methodologies. These studies were synthesized by Bond and Dykstra (1967) and confirmed Chall’s conclusions about the importance of phonics instruction. They also noted, however, the effectiveness of a balance between code-based and meaning-based emphases.
The issue of children’s “readiness” for reading became a new and important focus of interest following the Bond and Dykstra research. Reading readiness was found to be a better predictor for reading success than intelligence (Stanovich, 1994). The findings revealed that meaning-based approaches were as effective as phonic-based approaches for children who had high levels of reading readiness but were less effective for low-readiness students. The notion that effective reading instruction was not a one-size-fits-all matter was radical. Chall (1979) continued to investigate the role of phonics in learning to read. She posited that through early, direct, and systematic instruction, children can master the phonic principles of decoding so that “the knowledge and skills acquired are usually sufficient to become self-generative. That is, further growth can be achieved with practice on one’s own” (p. 47). The Commission on Reading issued its report, *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, in 1985. Adding to the growing body of evidence, it too advocated explicit instruction in phonics for young children. However, it also cautioned against too much phonics instruction, recommending that the focus be on rules that govern the most basic and regular sound-symbol correspondences. In addition to foundational phonics instruction, the Commission on Reading recommended explicit instruction in comprehension and repeated opportunities to read connected text (Anderson et al, p. 38). This validated the work of proponents of meaning-based approaches and suggested the need for a balance in instructional emphases. Similarly, Marilyn Adams’ seminal work, *Beginning to Read* (1990) stressed the need for phonics in early reading instruction, but urged an end to either/or posturing in the reading wars. These credible calls for moderation and balance in practice went largely unheeded as the polarizing phonics/whole language debate erupted and divided the educational community.
Whole language, a grassroots teaching and learning movement, began to spring up among progressive educators throughout the country in the 1970s and 1980s. It stirred feelings of hope and empowerment in teachers of literacy and tapped into the legacy of Deweyan democracy. Whole language embraced constructivist pedagogy, placing the child at the helm of his own learning. It grew from tremendous shifts in educational thinking. Psycholinguists of the 1960s and 1970s argued that reading is more a language process than a perceptual process and must be taught accordingly (Goodman, 1986). A tenet of the whole language approach was that reading and writing should be taught in the same holistic and natural ways that children learn to speak. Cognitive psychologists placed meaning and understanding at the center of reading, as the all important purpose for reading, not the result of it. Thus, accuracy in decoding was less important than comprehending the main idea of texts. Sociolinguistic theory in the 1980s (Paulston & Tucker, 1997) and critical literacy theory in the 1990s (Giroux, 1988) proclaimed that all literacy is grounded in human transactions and thus literacy instruction must be highly personal and interactive. Literacy is not neutral, but rather is dependent upon and situated in social contexts of meaning. The importance of the reader’s prior knowledge and personal experience was emphasized. Other guiding principles of whole language were the importance of authenticity (in texts, tasks, and tests) and of curricular integration – both within the language arts and between the language arts and other curricular areas (Pearson, 2004). Whole language advocates insisted that children should be choosing, reading, and responding to authentic literature and naturally acquiring skills along the journey. This progressive stance demanded a complete divergence from direct, rule-based drill and practice: “The rules of phonics are too complex and too unreliable to be useful” (Smith, 1992 p. 438). On the rare occasion that whole language proponents acknowledged any place at all in literacy education for phonics instruction, they
asserted that word analysis skill development should only occur in the context of reading authentic and continuous text (Weaver, 1988). Another defining and unprecedented aspect of the rise of whole language was the fact that the majority of its proponents were classroom teachers from the trenches of literacy instruction (Goodman, 1992). This grassroots movement nurtured whole language teachers’ self-efficacy.

Ken Goodman, one of the founders of the whole language movement, claims that whole language’s profound influence on how curriculum, materials, methodology, and assessment are viewed, “has helped to redefine teaching and its relationship to learning” (1998, p. 3). Goodman’s research in the 1960s into the reading process led him to listen to children’s oral reading of continuous text and to record their miscues, or errors. Miscue analysis serves as a window into the mind of the reader (Goodman, Y., 1995) as he or she transacts with a text. In professing the benefits of whole language, Goodman stressed its respect for each student as an active member of a culture and its respect for each teacher as a professional. Frank Smith (1971, 1973), a psycholinguist, also contributed significantly to the inception of whole language by positing that children learn to read only by reading rather than by dissecting language into its smallest phonetic units, as in explicit phonics drills. Whole language took root as a philosophy and methodology ready to flourish, resonating with teachers across the country and beyond.

As recounted by Carol Gilles, (2006), a classroom teacher who rose through the ranks of whole language experts, teachers learning whole language techniques in the late 1980s and the early 1990s were introduced to the work of Dewey (1938, 1943), Vygotsky (1978), Piaget (1959), Rosenblatt (1938/1976) and others that form the theoretical foundation of the philosophy. Gilles stresses the fluid nature of whole language and the way in which it naturally flowed into and merged with other educational initiatives. Whole language expanded to include writing as
researched by Graves (1981) and Calkins (1983). The emphasis on the holistic nature of language processes, the importance of the writing process, and the value of authenticity and choice made writing a logical companion focus for whole language reading teachers. Children’s early and inventive attempts at writing became recognized as mirrors into their ever-expanding knowledge of literacy. The fully entrenched use of basal readers came into serious question as Don Holdaway (1979) instead encouraged the use of “big books” or enlarged, easel-sized version of texts, to simulate the “lap reading” that very young children experience with their parents. The Report Card on Basal Readers, published through the National Council of Teachers of English (1988), fueled a growing dissatisfaction with highly scripted and contrived reading series and even linked the conventional use of basals to the agenda of corporate America (Goodman, Shannon, Freeman, & Murphy, 1988). The use of authentic children’s literature, or “trade books,” became much more prevalent in classrooms as many teachers happily put aside their scripted teacher’s manuals. For many whole language teachers, however, deviating from traditional methods was met with disapproval and skepticism from colleagues. Despite this, the whole language movement continued to spread, influencing many curricular developments and disciplines. Literature study, the integrated nature of the language arts, reading strategies, and the notion of classrooms as “communities” became areas of focus.

Because whole language rejected standardized testing, informal assessment practices such as running records, observational checklists, anecdotal records, and student portfolios and self-assessments became primary modes of evaluation. Yetta Goodman (1985) lauded naturalistic observations or “kid watching,” as opposed to traditional testing, as a powerful source of information about children’s thinking and developing literacy processes. Interest in critical literacy, cooperative learning, learning styles, inquiry, and cross-curricular thematic
teaching all grew as the influence of whole language branched outward. “Because whole language was not narrowly defined, it could expand with new ideas and practices…threads that wove the fabric of whole language” (Gilles, p. 6). Dewey’s vision of teacher as facilitator was embraced as a goal in whole language classrooms.

Ken Goodman’s landmark work, *What’s Whole in Whole Language?* (1986) synthesized the burgeoning thinking and research on whole language into what many teachers came to see as their most comprehensive professional resource. Principals hoping to introduce whole language practice in their schools purchased this book by the dozens for their teachers. Other professional books highlighting whole language began to flood the market, and of particular significance is the emergence of publications written by classroom teachers for classroom teachers (Gilles, 2006). The notion that teachers themselves can create professional resources and can improve practice through collaboration was a new and empowering aspect of the whole language movement. Self-efficacy swelled as teachers’ voices were heard.

Collegial support groups known as Teachers Applying Whole Language (TAWL) sprang up throughout the United States. “There was a small brigade of whole language advocates spreading the fertile ideas of whole language to teachers who were hungry for the professional knowledge needed to be informed decision makers in their own classrooms” (Gilles, p. 4). In an effort to galvanize teachers and seize upon this momentum, the Whole Language Umbrella (WLU), an organization of whole language teachers, was founded in 1989. The WLU’s first international conference was held in 1990 with over 2,100 educators in attendance and over 100 presenters. Alongside the whole language gurus, many of the presenters were classroom teachers who shared instructional strategies, samples of children’s work, and unbridled enthusiasm (Gilles, 2006). By 1993, there were over 120 TAWL support groups across the country. What
were initially isolated pockets of whole language advocates had ridden a groundswell of zeal to become a legitimate force in American education.

Opposition to whole language practices was also mounting steadily, however. In many of the nation’s districts, whole language was mandated. Despite the fact that a pillar of whole language philosophy was the importance of choice, many teachers were required to implement whole language practice with little or no proper training. For some, this was reason enough to resist the trend. Change theory attests to the resistance that mounts against unilateral mandates. Whole language had come to be seen as a movement of change and was contrasted with traditional pedagogy, leading to a sense of insecurity, defensiveness, or hostility in traditional teachers. Some teachers attended a workshop or two and therefore genuinely thought they were “doing” whole language. The capacity building which Fullan (2001) insists is a must for sustainable change was lacking. A profile of these inadequately trained teachers began to emerge as TAWL support groups complained of colleagues who penciled in their planbooks “whole language” for ten minutes per day. The true message of whole language as an all-encompassing philosophy that shaped every aspect of classroom life was becoming distorted and lost in translation as it diffused throughout the country’s classrooms (Gilles, 2006).

Concerned parents began to question whole language’s methods which so differed from their own educational experiences. Familiar spelling tests and practice sheets for diagramming sentences were absent in their children’s schooling. Much of students’ work was kept in school in portfolios rather than coming home for parents’ review. Fundamental Christian parents were particularly critical of whole language, spurred on by fears about the loss of authority, control, and tradition (Brinkley, 1998). Whole language came under increasing fire from political conservatives and from the media, who reduced the complex issues into frightening sound bytes
about “The Reading Wars.” According to whole language supporters, only 24% of the articles about the controversy that were published in five major newspapers between 1994 and 1997 cast a favorable light on whole language, a disproportionate stance given the prevalence of the practice at the time (Murphy, 1998). The age-old debate among reading theorists and classroom teachers continued to escalate as both proponents and opponents of whole language assumed highly polarized views. It has been argued that both sides cringed at each other’s rhetoric because, as whole language educators spoke in favor of “child centeredness,” skills-based educators heard and railed against “permissiveness” (Gee, 2001). The underlying ideological tension between progressive and traditional viewpoints boiled over and rose to the surface.

A serious setback to the whole language movement occurred in California in 1992. California had been considered at the forefront of the whole language movement. The 1987 California Language Arts Framework stated that instruction must be literature based, in effect advancing whole language as the state’s official literacy philosophy and approach. When the 1992 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test scores were released, California had performed abysmally, with fourth graders scoring last in the country in reading. Whole language proponents attempted to qualify this by pointing out that California had provided virtually no staff development in whole language, had the largest class sizes and immigrant populations in the country, and had suffered severe budget cutbacks in recent years (Freeman & Freeman, 1998). While California’s student performance was of serious concern, defenders of whole language insisted that the NAEP scores were being misrepresented. Krashen (2002) describes “The Plummet Legend” and argues that 1992 was the first year that NAEP test data were presented by state. He suggests that California’s poor performance in reading existed long before whole language was adopted, and that whole language was being unfairly being vilified in
what was a very complex and deeply entrenched problem. For example, California ranked last in the country in the quality of its school libraries and near the bottom in the number of books in homes (McQuillan, 1998), factors which certainly could have led to the poor performance. Whole language defenders attempted to counter the onslaught of criticism, but their voices were muffled and minimalized. In 1995, the California legislature unanimously passed legislation referred to as the ABC Law. The law states: "The State Board of Education shall ensure that the basic instructional materials that it adopts for mathematics and reading in grades 1 to 8, inclusive, are based on the fundamental skills required by these subjects, including, but not limited to, systematic, explicit phonics, spelling and basic computational skills…and that these skills and related tasks increase in depth and complexity from year to year… The poor performance of pupils who took the California Learning Assessment System (CLAS) and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests indicates that it is imperative that steps be taken immediately to ensure that all pupils in grades 1 to 8, inclusive, are learning to read, write, and compute." This language left little room for debate.

Whole language suffered another tremendous blow in 2000 when the National Reading Panel (NRP) published its meta-analysis of reading research which unequivocally validated the supporters of explicit phonics instruction. The NRP delineated the five crucial elements of successful reading instruction as phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension and highlighted the importance of systematically teaching each aspect. Whole language proponents disputed these findings because, in its study, the NRP had reviewed only "scientific research” which it defined as empirical and quantitative research. By excluding an enormous body of data, much of which lent support to whole language practices, the NRP had presented an incomplete argument. But once the NRP recommendations were included in the
Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (No Child Left Behind), whole language was virtually a pariah. Other states followed California in legislating the use of phonics. High stakes testing and accountability were paramount, and Reading First funding was contingent upon the use of NRP endorsed materials and basals. At this point, Ken Goodman’s allegations that NCLB was the work of a conservative agenda to privatize American education fell on deaf ears. Membership in the Whole Language Umbrella and TAWL groups plummeted. Whole language was discredited and the pendulum’s return swing complete.

Reviewing the body of literature which chronicles the history of the Reading Wars allowed me to build a significant knowledge base about the ebb and flow of changes in reading instruction and teachers’ role within that process. The commentaries and analyses highlighted the relationship between the whole language/phonics debate and the broader tension between progressive and traditional approaches to education. The tendency of both professional educators and the public to oversimplify issues and to take politicized and polarized positions led to a lack of constructive reflection, dialogue, and decision-making about reading instruction. Whole language was embraced by leagues of teachers who felt an unprecedented surge of efficacy, empowerment, and professionalism but then had to watch as the movement fell from grace and into disgrace. These insights supported this study’s aim to further understand through interviews the impact of the rise and fall of whole language on classroom teachers.

**Reading Policy**

In order to pursue my second research question, how changes in reading policy evolve and how they are understood and received by classroom teachers, I explored the body of literature on reading policy. My focus was on the role of policy in the whole language era of the 1980s and 1990s. Interrogating this body of literature through the lens of change theory helped to
reveal the complex forces that were at play during a highly volatile time in the history of education. Self-efficacy theory helped to illuminate the ways in which teachers experienced the instability of the time. In the wake of the “war” between proponents of whole language and phonics advocates, the federal government intervened in educational policy like never before.

Prior to the 1980s and 1990s, the educational policy arena was dominated by just a few professional educators’ organizations and policymakers (Mazzoni, 1995). The small, exclusive groups which historically influenced policy and that Heclo (1978) described as impenetrable “iron triangles” have given way to today’s policy networks that include committees of the federal government and myriad interest groups. Some hold that as interest groups have entered the educational policy arena, debate and discord have increased, and the influence of professional education associations has decreased. Others contend that it was the infighting of the educational community during the reading wars that required the presence of other stakeholders at the table. For better or worse, educational policy has indeed become a fixture of national interest.

A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform (1983) sounded the alarm that the country must immediately turn its attention to the deplorable state of its educational system: "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war." Fear and therefore increased scrutiny were unleashed by the dramatic language of this cold war report. In 1989, President George Bush put forth the following goal: “By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship” (Campbell, 1992, p. 40). In the way that President John F. Kennedy presented a bold challenge before a joint session of Congress to send a man to the moon by the end of the decade, President Bush sought to incite
action. However, the 1994 results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showing that 40% of American fourth-graders read below a basic level of competence and that the reading proficiency of twelfth-graders had declined from 1992-1994 cast serious doubt on the nation’s ability to reach President Bush’s noble goal. At this time, the number of students being referred to special education was increasing steadily, until in 1995, 10% of all school-aged children were classified as learning disabled (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1997) primarily because they could not read (Lyon, 1996). Concerns over this trend and its resulting spiraling costs of special education services led to a research agenda by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). NICHD-funded studies found that the common trait among disabled readers was deficient phonological processing and that these deficits can be remediated through systematic instruction in phonics in all but 1% of young children (Scanlon and Vellutino, 1996 in McGill-Franzen). Research findings such as this did not bode well for supporters of whole language.

Debates around the reading “crisis” became frequent, politicized, and polarized. According to McDaniel, Sims, and Miskel (2000), traditional participants in discussions on reading practice, such as the International Reading Association (IRA), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the National Education Association (NEA), were joined by many new voices. NICHD, the National Right to Read Foundation, and interest groups such as the Business Roundtable became vocal about reading policy. The media also became much more focused on and influential in “the reading wars.” In 1996, President Clinton presented literacy as a “critical national goal” and asserted that “all American children should be able to read on their own by third grade, every single one of them.” He proposed a voluntary national test in reading and promoted the initiative America Reads, in which community members volunteer to tutor
young children. Opposition from Congress arose as Republicans argued that a national test in reading would intrude into state and local authority. Also Black and Hispanic caucuses warned that such a test would discriminate against minority children. Those motivated by philosophical, ideological, political and financial interests were vying for power and consensus was elusive (McDaniel, Sims & Miskel, 2000). Interest groups with varying levels of clout tried to influence public policy around reading. Traditional education interest groups and policymakers found themselves having to grapple with greater policy alternatives and to consider the positions of vocal critics. It was a time of considerable disagreement both between and within groups, and “the education and reading policy environments appeared as constellations of interest groups and policymakers on various sides of the reading debates” (Coburn, p.3).

The controversy surrounding the whole language movement can be seen as the impetus that thrust reading into the realm of national policy. Allington (1999) observes that the “reading wars” of the early and mid 1990s were fueled by a much stronger political agenda than in previous eras. A sense of anxiety grew around the issue of reading achievement. The public was told of the dire consequences of failure in reading that ranged from social inequality to America’s diminishing international competitiveness. Perceiving the nation’s concern, political leaders placed reading high on their agenda. Between 1996 and 1998 lawmakers in twenty-eight states proposed over one hundred pieces of legislation prescribing phonics instruction.

At the national level, literacy legislation had also been increasing in number and scope. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, the federal government’s first attempt to shape local reading policy, was revised eight times through 1999. Through this act, Title I funding was directed to impoverished school districts, reflecting the position that the lack of equitable resources was the primary cause of low achievement among minority students. The
Reading Excellence Act of 1998 extended such funding to include professional development, tutoring, and family literacy programs. It also included criteria for what constitutes acceptable reading research by providing funding to state and local education agencies that used scientifically-based research to guide their activities. January 2002 saw the signing into law of the No Child Left Behind Act, the federal government’s greatest foray into educational policy. The ramifications of NCLB policy have been profound in terms of high stakes accountability testing and funding.

Thus, there has come to be a host of actors on the stage of reading policy interacting in formal and informal ways and through a variety of perspectives. McDaniel et al. (2000) identified 131 organizations which have been working to shape national reading policy. In addition to traditional policy players, this number includes many nontraditional and previously unengaged policy actors such as the business community, varied organizations that promote the rights of minorities, think tanks, the media, citizen groups, the learning disabilities community, and the medical community. These groups share the stage in attempting to shape reading policy and engage in wide-ranging activities such as promoting awareness of the importance of literacy, conducting research and presenting findings, developing reading standards and curricula, and testifying at Congressional hearings. They expand the reach of their positions by collaborating with others in the reading policy arena.

Interest groups are often active and well-funded as they strive to sway policy. Tactics for doing so include contacting legislators, testifying, and undertaking litigation. Email and social networking technologies allow groups more easily to mobilize their members (Mraz, 2000). Interest groups often form alliances with others that share their objectives in order to gain greater power. Their perceptions of the relative influence of other parties in the arena drive their
interactions. Networks within a community such as reading typically consist of a corps of experts that interact with each other as they move between public and private spheres of influence. These groups make demands of the political system and bring pressure to bear in order to serve the interests of their organizations. Policymakers respond to competing interest groups and their agendas based on each group’s apparent importance and power. According to Baumgartner and Leech (1998), individuals and organizations in the reading policy arena that are perceived to be the most effective and influential are those who are active and disseminate their viewpoint, interact with policymakers both formally and informally, and build coalitions with likeminded others in order to expand their sphere of influence.

A key instance of this process in reading policy is the tremendous influence that NICHD wielded regarding the use of quantitative research and experimental studies. Most policymakers now insist upon quantitative empirical research, and funding is linked to its use. Only the groups that had a strong empirical research base of experimental or quasi-experimental studies supporting their views were invited to testify at Congressional hearings on the Reading Excellence Act (McDaniel, Sims, & Miskel, 2000). There is still criticism from some members of the educational community who value qualitative research and feel their voices have been marginalized (Allington, 1999, Goodman, 1998), but this objection has been largely ignored by policymakers.

Literacy has perhaps permanently shifted from an issue of local and state concern to one of national interest. It is a congested playing field filled with competing interest groups vying for greater policy influence. Policy decisions must pass through several layers of “actors” to reach teachers. The term “system actors” refers to the various individuals and organizations that constitute state and local governance of schooling. The important role of nonsystem actors must
also be considered. “Nonsystem actors” include for-profit firms, such as publishers, vendors, and professional development providers; membership organizations, such as professional associations and advocacy groups; and nonprofit organizations, such as universities, research groups, and quasi-governmental agencies (Rowan, 2001). Nonsystem actors are a key mediating link between policy and practice because they promote and even alter policy ideas as they transmit them to teachers.

Coburn (2005) cautions that policymakers must recognize that there is a complex social and organizational web through which teachers connect with ideas about instruction, and that the formal policy system is but one part of this. Coburn drew on neoinstitutional theories of organizations to investigate how California teachers learned about and responded to the several major shifts in state reading policy from 1983 to 1999, the era of the “reading war” between whole language and phonics. Teachers connected to reading initiatives in different ways. The mechanism (how teachers learned of the initiative), intensity (duration and level of engagement), and content of those connections shaped how teachers responded to the policy messages. Coburn found that teachers’ connections with nonsystem actors were found to be more consequential and more often led to revised understanding and practice. Coburn attributes this to the fact that teachers’ connections with nonsystem actors tended to have greater intensity, greater proximity to the classroom, greater depth, and were more likely to be voluntary. Sustained interactions with high-quality professional development that included interaction with colleagues led to reflection, experimentation and shifts in classroom practice. By contrast, policy messages from system actors were significantly more likely to be ignored or rejected. Teachers perceived the documents and guides of system actors to be disconnected from the realities of the classroom. Reports, standards, and exhortations from policy actors were abstract and easy to dismiss.
Policy messages influence beliefs and actions in organizations in several ways: through regulative means as they are incorporated into formal policy; through normative means as teachers feel pressured to change their practice; and through cognitive means as the messages attain “commonsense” or “taken for granted” status (Scott, 2001). Organizational theorists (Laumann & Knoke, 1987; Moore, 1988) also highlight the vertical and horizontal interactions between the broad range of actors through which policy emerges. According to Coburn, teachers respond to policy messages in five ways: rejection or ignoring, symbolic response (changing the appearance but not the substance of their teaching), parallel structures (trying to reconcile or include conflicting messages), accommodation (interpreting or altering the messages in a way that fits their existing underlying assumptions), and assimilation. This spectrum of responses to new policy is consistent with the literature on the complexities of teachers’ responses to change (Smith, 2000; Spillane, 1999). The teachers in Coburn’s study rarely engaged with policy ideas in ways that caused them to challenge and change their underlying assumptions about the nature of reading instruction.

Based on her findings, Coburn makes recommendations regarding teachers’ response to reading policy and the process through which it is conveyed to them. Policy messages which address only surface issues result in only superficial tweaking of existing practice. Deep reflection on the underlying principles of how children learn to read is necessary for substantive change to begin. Messages and experiences that have greater closeness to the classroom and concreteness influence practice more meaningfully. Normative and voluntary messages indicating what teachers should do are better received than those with regulative pressure and sanctioning mandating what teachers must do. Because teachers’ connections with nonsystem actors are more intense, in depth, voluntary, and close to classroom concerns, teachers are more
likely to respond to policy messages carried by these nonsystem actors in ways that may involve
substantive change.

Scott (2001) states that as particular sets of ideas gain legitimacy at the local level as
“good” reading instruction, this influences the content and focus of what nonsystem actors offer
for professional development and instructional materials. The creation and adoption of textbooks
often follow suit. Coburn traces the relationship between what was perceived as “best practice”
and professional development topics in California during the whole language years. From 1983
to 1985, 60% of professional development offerings promoted basic skills instruction while 40%
promoted literature-based instruction. From 1989-1991, this had reversed to 40% focus on skills
and 60% on language based instruction. As whole language fell from favor, just 3% of offerings
promoted language based approaches from 1996-1999, while the remaining 97% promoted the
balanced literacy approaches to early literacy that were taking the forefront.

The sense that an approach represents “best practice” is often based on salience;
“everyone is talking about it” is a powerful force in teachers’ decisions to participate in
professional development on a given topic. As messages linked with particular literacy
approaches became increasingly prevalent and legitimate during “the reading wars”, colleagues
began to discuss and make recommendations to each other. Recommendations by trusted others
and a growing awareness of the prevalence of an idea led to teachers’ forming microcommunities
of practice. Administrators contracted with providers and purchased materials akin to the favored
messages and rejected others. As Coburn recounts, the whole language movement swept in
through a confluence of top-down state policy and a bottom-up teachers’ movement. Bill Honig,
California’s superintendent of instruction, sought to bring literature into classrooms through an
early form of statewide systemic reform when he authored the 1987 California Language Arts
Framework. Meanwhile, a burgeoning grassroots teachers’ movement spread through local teacher networks and universities. Thus, the whole language emphasis on early literacy became embedded in state policy as it was also taking root in districts across the state.

The balanced literacy initiative which replaced it, however, was a top-down reform built into policy by lawmakers and researchers with little input from local actors. Coburn’s interviews revealed that teachers learned of the state’s adoption of balanced literacy through widespread media coverage and through the increased focus on standardized testing. Because these teachers perceived both of these channels to be “long on reach but short on detailed information regarding the specific approaches” (p. 43), they felt confused about what to do in their classrooms. Without extended time to interact with policy messages having close connections to the classroom, the change process was hindered. Coburn highlights the importance of and long-lasting power of strong connections: “While elements of the state policy system may be coherent to varying degrees, teachers continue to be connected with ideas related to previous policy in their day-to-day work in schools” (p. 44). It is often the daily context of teachers’ work much more so than policy which drives their choices in their classrooms. Teaching may be too embedded in context for policy to have a sustained effect on it. Cohen and Ball (1997 as cited in McGill-Franzen) hold that instructional capacity is “the interaction of teachers with students around educational materials,” and that policy rarely influences all three components. Intended policy and enacted policy often differ greatly due to teachers’ knowledge, beliefs, and available resources. Cohen and Ball also view frequent shifts in reading policy as contributing to teacher cynicism about reform. Teachers’ sense of self-efficacy and agency are affected by continual and confusing shifts in policy and mandates about instruction.
According to Bandura (2001), perceived self-efficacy is critical in times of change or challenge: “Whatever other factors may operate as guides and motivators, they are rooted in the core belief that one has the power to produce effects by one’s actions” (p. 10). Mraz (2004) explored the perspectives of those involved in changing literacy policy. The study identified five domains which influence policy decisions in literacy: literacy professionals, selected policy participants, public sentiment, conservative voices, and research. Interestingly, while the policymakers surveyed indicated that literacy professionals did affect the policymaking process, the literacy professionals surveyed did not consider themselves as having had any influence in the process. Mraz noted that the educators surveyed expressed a sense of disempowerment: “Representatives of professional literacy organizations asserted that they are not regarded as scientists by policymakers and that when their opinions differ from policymakers’ opinions, their opinions are dismissed” (p. 25). Self-efficacy theory links the effects of such disempowerment to an inability and lack of desire to persist (Ozer & Bandura, 1990). By contrast, Mraz’s findings revealed that public sentiment was viewed as very influential in shaping literacy policy. Policymakers feel confidence in the merit of this, but literacy professionals fear that the media distorts information, over-representing some viewpoints and voices while omitting others. Conservative messages or “right-wing” agendas were perceived to have been more successful in making their voices heard by policymakers and the media in the uproar over whole language. Literacy professionals, by contrast, with their diverse members, were perceived as lacking unity and influence. Both policymakers and literacy professionals indicate that research is very influential in shaping policy, but, again, their opinions on which research merits attention differ sharply. Policymakers claim that the “scientific” research they use is of high quality, but literacy professionals are critical of policymakers’ refusal to consider qualitative studies that may
challenge the claims upon which policy decisions are made. Mraz recommends that communication between policymakers and literacy professionals must increase and improve. She highlights literacy professionals’ apparent difficulty in seizing the opportunities they do have to communicate with the media and to put forth a unified message. Educators tend to shy from political debates with wide audiences (Berger, 1995), and Mraz holds they should receive training in this skill set and become better informed and more savvy about the ongoing reading policy debate. The role of teachers’ lack of self-efficacy must again be recognized as a factor in this.

The question of whose voices are heard in literacy debates is a powerful one. Allington and Woodside-Jiron (1999) are critical of the research base that undergirds much of the literacy policy which has been so influential in affecting the tenor of state curriculum frameworks. Allington and Woodside-Jiron allege that the NICHD studies do not represent the complete knowledge base about how children learn to read. They claim that the research community must be vigilant against those who would ignore, distort, or exaggerate research findings in a legislative advocacy campaign. “The use of ‘research’ as a policy advocacy tool seems less dependent on the reliability of synthesis of the research than on the ability to place research summaries that support particular policy agendas into the hands of advocates and policymakers” (p.11). It has been alleged that NICHD had an inside track and that whole language proponents were therefore unable to make themselves heard. Allington and Woodside-Jiron cite the work of Benveniste (1977) characterizing the use of expertise in policymaking. Benveniste asserts that policy advocates consolidate a monopolistic position by promoting the appearance of an external professional consensus on an issue. This is often accomplished by securing the participation of select researchers whose opinions are not easily dismissed. “By selecting like-minded scholars as
the ‘experts,’ one can produce a research consensus document that can be used as a policy lever” (Benveniste, p. 153 as cited in Allington & Woodside-Jiron, p. 11). This allows the advocates of that policy agenda “lead time” because the consensus document can be widely disseminated before opposition can organize and dispute that interpretation of the research.

Advocates of whole language contend that the campaign against whole language mirrors this strategy. Key policy forums in California and Texas were dominated by a select few representing a single viewpoint which they claimed was a consensus of opinion among leading researchers. According to McGill-Franzen (1993), the events included the three agenda-setting factors that are most important in garnering broad political support: the call to solve problems associated with early literacy evoked a positive emotional response; the proposed solution involved a reasonable investment or redistribution of resources; and the new policy was linked to a powerful group (NICHD). A return to a phonics-emphasis in instruction was presented as a simple solution to a pressing crisis.

An awareness of how such pendulum-like swings in policy and practice are perceived by teachers was also emerging during this tumultuous period. The Consortium for Policy Research in Education concluded in the late 1980s that in order to transform teaching, the knowledge and skills of teachers must be enhanced. Policymakers and administrators had to abandon their assumption that changes in mandates and school structure would lead to particular teaching practices. Darling–Hammond (1990) noted that policies “land on top of other policies” (p. 240) and that teachers interpret new policy within the context of their prior experiences with policy, their beliefs, and their teaching environment. Spillane (1998) found that the individual beliefs, knowledge and professional affiliations of administrators and teachers were the most important variables in the variable ways that reading policy was enacted. “Teachers need opportunities to
learn from policy. But what they take from these opportunities depends also on what they bring to policy – their own knowledge and beliefs” (McGill-Franzen, p. 18). Reading policy relating to the whole language movement resonated with teachers in different ways based on their experiences and their personal philosophy about how and why children learn to read. Some embraced policy shifts whole-heartedly, while others recoiled at them.

Examining the literature on the landscape of reading policy before, during and after the whole language/phonics controversy of the 1980s and 1990s highlighted the enduring legacy of this turbulent period in education’s history. The lens of change theory highlighted the forces at play as top-down and bottom-up initiatives were adopted or rejected by classroom teachers. Teachers’ feelings of efficacy and agency were at stake as policy changes either happened to them or happened with them.

**Teachers and Change**

In seeking to understand the third question of the literature, how do teachers feel about change, the body of literature that focuses on how teachers perceive the change process and their role within it was probed. Education is under continuous pressure to evolve in accordance with ever-increasing expectations and with changes in pedagogy, in technology, and in society itself. Change is at once invigorating and intimidating, promising and painful. According to Senge (1990), the tension that results from change may lead either to creativity and energy or to resistance and “push back” against the reform. With millions of teachers in the profession, it must of course be recognized that individuals respond to change in different ways. However, in his book *Schoolteacher*, Lortie (1975, 2002) presents generalizations in describing the “ethos” of the teaching profession, or the fundamental attitudes and the distinctive character of the group. He details the ethos of teachers as emphasizing tendencies toward conservativism, individualism,
and presentism. These preferences reinforce each other and have deep roots, thus proving to be difficult to change. Teachers who demonstrate what Lortie calls a “dogged commitment to the past” (p.219) seem to instinctively recoil at innovation. In seeking to explain this behavior, he argues that many people who are attracted to teaching as a profession tend to favor the status quo. One attractor to teaching is “continuation,” meaning that some students are so attached to school that they choose to stay there for their careers. They likely approve of existing arrangements and routines, develop a conservative bias, and are therefore less likely to press for change. These entrants to the field identify with their own teachers, and have internalized their practices of old, either consciously or not. According to Lortie, teaching thus fosters a conservatism of outlook resulting in a “more of the same syndrome” (p. 232). Teachers practicing during the whole language/phonics debates of the 1980s and 1990s may have been influenced by the methods with which they had been taught to read. When the whole language movement gained momentum, deeply personal responses to change came into play.

There is a palpable tension between the occupational ethos as described by Lortie and the demands of change. Uncertainty, insecurity, and depression close many teachers off to change and the considerable effort it entails. There are many factors which contribute to resistance to reform. Teachers often are not sure how to assess their own effectiveness, and so they remain attached to what they see as the tried and true. Reform initiatives with vague, idealistic goals also serve to press these teachers back to what they know and to conservative, concrete outcomes. Also, if teachers feel that the supplies needed for the new approach are not readily available and that the support of leadership is lacking, they will not become enthused about undertaking challenging initiatives. They also may hesitate to try something new for risk of damaging their professional reputation when it fails. The erosion of traditional practices induces stress in these
teachers as they feel their power and control is being encroached upon. In addition, many change initiatives are perceived by teachers as frivolous and as not addressing the issues that really matter in daily instruction and classroom management, and so they are therefore not worth the time. Teachers prioritize activities and relationships rooted in the classroom over those of an administrative or organizational nature (Kennedy, 2005). Teachers’ concerns are almost universal in their focus on tasks and time and on relationships with students, parents and coworkers. Time is “the single most important general resource teachers have in their quest for productivity and psychic reward; ineffective allocations of time are costly” (Lortie, p. 177).

Teachers’ preoccupation with time is germane in understanding why teachers dismiss so many innovative techniques and trends out of hand: if the change will require the investment of time, it had better be well worth it.

This theme of teachers’ becoming invested or not in reform based on their assessment of the reform’s merit is thoroughly analyzed by Kennedy (2005). She contends that reform initiatives so often fail because teachers’ values differ from those of reformers. Her research led her to identify in teachers six broad areas of concern. According to Kennedy, teachers want to: avoid distractions and maintain momentum in instruction; cover required content; increase student willingness to participate; foster student learning; ensure that all students participate equally; and ensure that their own personal needs are met (p. 229). When teachers’ must choose one intention as their priority, it almost always is the first, to avoid distractions and maintain momentum. According to Kennedy, this reveals why many teachers choose to preserve the status quo rather than to risk the disruption that comes with new ventures.

Kennedy presents the argument that change is in part thwarted by the mismatch between the reform ideal and the circumstances of teaching. Initiatives may be impractical, failing to
account for the realities of classroom life. Children are restless, novice thinkers whose responses to activities and extraneous needs are unpredictable. Instructional time is frequently disrupted by a myriad of comings and goings, and complex lessons with complicated materials are often problematic for teachers. Kennedy found that many reform initiatives required of teachers long hours of preparation over evenings, weekends, and summers. These efforts ultimately exhausted teachers’ resolve to continue with the initiative. She suggests that reformers hoping for sustainable change should better align their ideals and objectives with the range of concerns that teachers hold and the realities with which they struggle. Changing recommendations in reading instruction are often met with teachers’ asking how they can make these ideals come to fruition in their classrooms. Both advocates and opponents of whole language evaluated the competing models of instruction based on the lived realities in their classrooms.

Another theme in the change literature highlights the phenomenon of teachers’ reinterpreting and modifying innovations to fit their beliefs and values. Kennedy (2005) cites instances of teachers’ embracing, tilting, or ignoring guidelines in accordance with the landscape of their existing beliefs. Hess (2006) observes, “When reforms are forced on schools, the school often has more influence in modifying the reform than the reform has in modifying the school…Schools are active communities of members united by a deeply etched culture that will resist the invasion of alien ideas and practices” (p. 179). In this view, teachers resist reform in the way that antibodies fight off a virus. Many teachers perceive change as an attack against which they must defend themselves. A mandated change often brings with it a sense of loss and a longing for the ways of the past. Traditional teachers also may feel defensive (Alvy & Robbins, 2004), for the heralding of change indicts the status quo as inadequate. In many instances, whole language approaches were mandated or were introduced with insufficient training. Change that is
implemented with little or no input from the teachers involved frequently falls flat. Orenstein et al. (2003) point to the detachment that voiceless teachers feel toward the reform process. DuFour and Eaker (2008) laud the transformation of schools into professional learning communities as a solution to this problem. A school culture that is conducive to collaboration and learning is more conducive to change taking root and growing. Without the proper environment, change often is not sustainable.

In this way, initiatives come to be seen by teachers as short-lived fads that one can simply ride out. Although teachers may feel obligated to participate in a reform, they only make minor changes in their routines. “[Teachers] aren’t really learning from prescriptions in the sense that they are gaining new knowledge or capabilities, but instead are merely adjusting to them in the way that a driver adjusts his route to accommodate construction along the highway…expecting that they would change at some point in the near future” (Kennedy, p. 216). Changes in curriculum may be viewed as requiring only cursory participation at most, for they are transient and therefore not worth the investment of time and energy. Farrell (2003) notes the “revolving door of school reform efforts” that come and go with funding cycles. Too often, schools begin an initiative but are not able to implement it with fidelity and sustain the effort over time, particularly when the funding dries up. Organizations have been found to return to their previous practices quite rapidly, demonstrating what Datnow (2005) calls “resiliency.” Reforms also gradually peter through programmatic fade which occurs due to lack of focus, resources, and/or staff turnover. Fullan (2007) underscores the impact of the phenomenon of short-lived change: “The more the teachers or others have had negative experiences with previous implementation attempts in the district or elsewhere, the more cynical or apathetic they will be about the next change presented, regardless of the merit of the new idea or program” (p. 93). In the context of
my study of the Reading Wars, this is a critical link to the notion of the swinging pendulum of curricular change. Veteran teachers have seen initiatives come and go and may have learned the logic in resistance. During the phonics/whole language controversy, teachers who had experienced earlier iterations of meaning-based reading approaches may have anticipated that whole language would fall out of vogue soon enough. As the historical literature reveals, it did.

Exploring the relationships between faculty members during the upheaval of the 1980s and 1990s is very important in the proposed study. In many cases, it was new, recently trained teachers who were espousing the merits of whole language. Veteran teachers may have resented this, as younger teachers had not earned the right to try to tell them how to teach. Hoerr (2005) found that teachers who felt needed and who were given the opportunity to share their expertise with others were more likely to collaborate. In many schools, however, veterans’ expertise was discounted, while change, embodied by new teachers’ zeal for whole language, was instead valued. Coupled with Lortie’s findings on seasoned teachers’ inclinations toward conservatism and autonomy, and Fullan’s assertion that experience with pendulum swings breeds resistance toward innovations, it is not surprising that the dynamic between veteran and novice teachers during the whole language debate was a strained one. O’Meara (2004) studied the attitudes of tenured teachers toward staff evaluation systems. Tenured faculty tended to view job performance assessment to have little benefit because their performance was already superior. Others viewed post-tenure review as a threat to their professional standing. In the 1980s and 1990s, many traditional teachers felt threatened, slighted, or insulted as neophytes preached the virtues of the latest and greatest model of literacy instruction. The whole language movement crumbled due external political pressures, internal inadequacies of leadership and message, and, I believe, the divisions that it created among teachers. The importance of teachers in the change
process cannot be overstated. As encapsulated by Fullan (2001), “All educational change depends on what teachers do and think” (p. 115). Whole language significantly shaped and was shaped by what a generation of teachers did and thought.

**Chapter III: Research Design**

The purpose of this research study was to clearly understand the perspectives and attitudes of individual teachers who experienced the changes in reading instruction associated with the Whole Language era of the 1990s. A qualitative research approach was therefore well-suited to this study, for its focus was on exploring teachers’ stories of their lived experiences during an important and tumultuous period of time in the history of reading education. Qualitative research has become a fruitful source of knowledge in the social sciences. Recognizing that personal experiences are essential to understanding the social world but are difficult to quantify, the qualitative research tradition emphasizes individuals’ stories, reflections, perspectives, and beliefs as foundational to meaning making (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Unlike quantitative research which involves the measurement and analysis of the strength of relationships between statistical variables, qualitative research seeks answers to questions that stress how social experience is given meaning. Including participants’ perspectives is therefore a hallmark of qualitative research (Maxwell, 2004), making the qualitative tradition compatible with this study of teachers’ experiences.

Qualitative research is characterized by naturalistic inquiry into real-world phenomena through research designs that are flexible and responsive to emerging paths of discovery. The qualitative researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Observations and interviews reveal detailed and descriptive data that are analyzed inductively as the researcher discovers patterns and themes within the participants’ shared experiences (Corbin & Strauss,
Shank (2002) describes qualitative research as “a form of systematic empirical inquiry into meaning” (p. 5), which adheres to rules agreed upon by members of the qualitative research community and is grounded in the context of experience. Shank contrasts the two ways of “seeing” in research: the “window” through which quantitative researchers observe a subject from the outside, and the “lantern” of qualitative research which “sheds light into dark corners” within the natural setting of the phenomenon being studied. Thus, qualitative researchers are “discoverers and reconcilers of meaning where no meaning has been clearly understood before” (Shank p. 11).

Qualitative researchers utilize various methodologies and theories to explore human experience, including ethnography (Wolcott, 1999), case study (Stake, 1995), grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), phenomenology (Moran, 1999), and narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Of these, narrative inquiry was the most conducive for understanding the meaning that participants attribute to their experiences with the Reading Wars and how those experiences have shaped their identities as teachers. Narrative inquiry was the optimal methodology for this study because of several of its key characteristics: the emphasis on participants’ stories as data, the in-depth exploration of the experiences of a small number of participants, the collaborative relationship between the researcher and those researched, and the provision for the changing and reflexive role of the researcher within the research process (Bathmaker & Harnett, 2010; Riessman, 2008; Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Narrative inquiry is well-regarded as a “multilayered and many stranded” form of qualitative research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xvii) in which participants’ stories serve as data that illuminate a social phenomenon or historical period as experienced and understood by the participants. In this case, it was employed to reveal the complexities of teachers’ experiences
and beliefs relating to the Whole Language era. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), “Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience…Simply stated, narrative inquiry is stories lived and told” (p. 20). Narrative inquiry emphasizes the role of “story” as a portal to understanding the nature and complexity of participants’ experiences in a socio-cultural and political context (Cole and Knowles, 2001). In-depth interviews gave voice to teachers’ perspectives on the uncertainty and discord of the “Reading Wars” of the 1990s and the evolution of their attitudes and dispositions during this challenging era. According to Riessman (2008), we study narratives because “telling stories about difficult times in our lives creates order and contains emotions, allowing a search for meaning and enabling connection with others” (p. 10). When granted access to a teacher’s stories, a researcher glimpses the teacher’s “private constructions of identity” (Riessman, 2008, p. 10) as well as the many facets of his/her understanding of the complexities of teaching and learning.

Personal narrative is considered a central means by which people make sense of their complex lives (Lu, 2005). Drawing on the work of John Dewey (1938), narrative inquiry posits that an individual’s experience is central to understanding. Narrative researchers study experiences and institutions with the understanding that actions and beliefs are grounded in personal and cultural histories (Conle, 2001). The aim of this study was to understand the participants’ beliefs and the context in which they originated, namely the Whole Language era of the 1990s. Thus, a small number of participants were studied in depth, for the purpose of narrative research is not to generalize the findings, but rather to illuminate the power of individual experience. Narrative researchers do not focus on terms such as “validity” and “reliability”; rather they strive to secure authenticity and trustworthiness, resonance and
reflexivity, and mutuality and rigor in the research and data analysis process (Clandinin, 2007; Cole & Knowles, 2001).

Relationships are at the heart of narrative inquiry, which is based in an open exchange between participants and researcher (Craig, 2009). Connelly & Clandinin (2000) describe narrative inquiry’s “collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus (p. 20)”. The rapport between the researcher and participants is crucial, determining the depth and breadth of the data gathered in the study. A feeling of trust toward the researcher is essential if a participant is to share her/his story. Trust can be fostered by the collaboration between researcher and participant which is a tenet of narrative inquiry. Through dialogic interaction throughout the research process, the researcher is actively involved in the outpouring of the participants’ stories. The resulting reciprocity (Lather, 1991), or the sharing of the researcher’s own experiences related to the phenomenon being studied, is another aspect of narrative inquiry which made it the most apt methodology for this research. The voices of the participants were honored as they were given the opportunity to reflect, to question, and to freely share their experiences and the meanings they have made of them. This study sought to delve deeply into the personal and powerful meanings of the Whole Language era from the perspectives of those who lived it.

**Research Question**

This qualitative study employed narrative inquiry to answer the following research question and, in doing so, to unpack and understand the experiences which shaped a particular generation of teachers:
How did teachers’ experiences with the rise and fall of the Whole Language philosophy of reading instruction during the 1990s affect them and shape their attitudes toward change?

This research question was particularly suited to the problem of practice because it addressed the profound ways in which the attitudes of teachers, without whom there can be no successful and sustained improvements in education, are shaped by the reform initiatives that continually come and go. A qualitative study employing narrative inquiry engaged the researcher and the readers in the lived experiences of the participants. Through personal and in-depth interviews the perspectives of teachers as they explored their understandings of the oscillations of the Whole Language era became known. Narrative analysis revealed the impact that a powerful change initiative had on these teachers’ attitudes and private constructions of identity. Without the informed and empowered voices of teachers in the dialogue, ill-planned initiatives of change such as the Whole Language movement will continue to create uncertainty, resistance, and disillusionment in teachers as the pendulum swings on. My research question was important in that it tapped into the many facets of teachers’ sentiments and was therefore promising fodder for narrative inquiry.

**Methodology**

This study used experience-centered narrative inquiry to explore the perceptions and attitudes of teachers who experienced the Whole Language movement of the 1980s and 1990s. In-depth interviews with teachers revealed their lived stories from this era. Gaining access to their perspectives and recollections brought to light the ways in which their understandings and attitudes were shaped by this tumultuous time in education. Documentary evidence from the period stimulated, supported, and contextualized the responses of the participants. Reflective
memos captured the outflow of the researcher’s ideas, insights and observations throughout the data collection and analysis process.

**Site and participants.** This study highlighted the experiences of teachers who were employed by the public school system of a small town in southeastern Massachusetts during the years when the philosophy and pedagogy of Whole Language emerged, gained popularity and acceptance, and then fell from grace. According to Patton (2001), the purpose of criterion sampling is “to review and study cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance” (p. 238). For this study, four participants were purposefully selected in order to represent the experiences and perspectives of those who were novice teachers and those who were veteran teachers in this district during the 1990s. According to Bogden and Biklen (2003), in purposeful sampling a researcher selects participants in a manner which facilitates the expansion of the developing theory. In narrative inquiry, a purposefully selected sample of a few participants yields deep data that is reflective of each individual’s unique history (Reissman, 2008). As a teacher in this district during the Whole Language period myself, I had a professional relationship with the participants. This connection did not interfere with the research process but rather fostered the type of trust that is a prerequisite to honest reflection and candor. Assurances of confidentiality encouraged the teachers to share their stories without fear of negative consequence or embarrassment.

**Data collection.** Narrative inquiry was chosen as the methodology for this study because its purpose is to determine the attitudes of the participants toward the Whole Language era and its impact on their development as teachers. In keeping with the practices of narrative inquiry, data was collected through interviews, historical documentary sources, and reflective memos. One-on-one interviews afforded the participants an opportunity for the introspection necessary
for making sense of their experiences, the principal source of information from which this study
aimed to draw conclusions. In-depth, semi-structured interviews (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) were
used to gather data that conveyed the impact that the Whole Language period had on the
teachers’ attitudes. Through the interplay of narrative inquiry’s open dialogue, the members of
the study had the freedom to express themselves without the limited answer options of a survey.
The time and location of the interviews depended on the participants’ availability and
convenience. One teacher was interviewed via Skype as she has relocated to North Carolina. The
duration of the interviews varied in response to the amount of information that the participants’
shared, but they ranged from one to three hours in length. Responsive interviewing, as advocated
by Rubin and Rubin (2012), is a specific model of qualitative, in-depth interviewing. It offers a
narrative inquirer a set of guiding principles through which to optimize the joint process of
discovery that is interviewing. The interviewer and the interviewee enter into an open and
trusting relationship as “conversational partners.” In responsive interviewing, flexibility of
design is a must as the interviewer processes the replies of the conversational partner and adjusts
the line of questioning to follow where the stories may lead in the pursuit of greater insight.

Leading up to the interviews, the researcher developed questions, which provided the
overarching structure for the interviews and aligned with the research question of this study.
Rubin and Rubin (2012) recommend preparing a research guide with main questions, possible
follow up questions, and possible probes, while still maintaining the flexibility to pursue an
unanticipated direction in the conversation. Main questions structure the interview to address the
research question. Follow-up questions assure thoroughness and credibility as depth, detail,
richness, vividness, and nuance are elicited. Probes are employed to manage the conversation,
keeping the interview essentially in line with the overall objective. In this study, questions were
formulated to gather information from teachers about their experiences during the Whole Language era and how these experiences influenced their viewpoints.

These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for the purpose of analysis. In addition to words spoken, DuBois (2006) counsels interviewers to notice and record aspects of the responses such as pauses, gestures, and pitch. His Transcription Delicacy Hierarchy highlights how attentive and sensitive an interviewer must be not only to what is said but also to how it is said. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to this resulting raw data of transcripts as field texts. Transcripts of the field texts were provided to the participants to allow them to confirm that their stories, experiences, and perspectives had been properly represented. Member checking, or respondent validation, is “the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 111).

Interview data was supplemented by the examination of documents preserved from the Whole Language era. Collecting data through varied sources is another effective means of reducing the risk that conclusions may be biased or invalid. Triangulation allows a researcher to acquire a more extensive understanding of the problem of practice and to be more confident that the findings of the research are credible (Maxwell, 2005). Corbin and Strauss (2008) refer to the wide variety of potential data sources as one of the “virtues” (p. 27) of qualitative research. They recommend the use of documentary sources, such as diaries, drawings, newspapers, and other textual items to complement other forms of data such as interviews and observations. Roulston (2010) cites historian William Moss as arguing that researchers must incorporate other forms of evidence to be used in conjunction with interviews in order to construct realistic accounts of history. Quality oral history relies on historical evidence that verifies the information provided
by interviewees. This type of validation can be found in laws and proclamations, photographs, journals or letters of eye witnesses, and accounts by journalists and historians. Rubin and Rubin (2012) laud the use of documentary analysis of transcripts, blogs, letters, minutes from meetings, and other forms of visual records, but caution qualitative researchers to view these artifacts not as literal renditions of facts but as people’s interpretations. Diaries and even budgetary summaries are almost certainly slanted to emphasize the accomplishments of their creators, so care must be taken. Documents are also helpful to an interviewer in planning an interview because they provide, partial though it may be, with key background information. Participants are more likely to discuss a topic in depth if they perceive that the researcher is prepared and somewhat knowledgeable in the subject. Also, as maintained by Rubin and Rubin, documentary evidence provides stimulating prompts for dialogue to develop. Asking an interviewee to recollect, reflect and comment upon a photo or a newspaper article effectively triggers rich discourse.

Roulston (2010) recommends this type of documentary evidence to address the concerns of methodologists who question the validity of qualitative interviews (Atkinson & Coffey, 2002; Hammersly, 2003). Critics contend that interview talk, because it is so heavily context-dependent, provides neither accurate accounts of what really happens in the world nor accurate representations of what the interviewees really think and believe. In the constructionist and postmodern conceptions of interviewing, it is asserted that a researcher simply cannot access the participant’s “authentic self” through discussion but instead glimpses a “locally produced subject” that is presented and “performed” in relation to the particular interviewer and context (Silverman, 2001 in Roulston, p. 59). Therefore, documentary evidence from the milieu of the Reading Wars, including personal correspondence, reports, and articles from the local media,
gave credence to the interviewees’ testimony. In designing a study such as this, it was critical to employ methodological triangulation through varied forms of data to bolster the credibility of the conclusions drawn through the research.

To this end, the use of reflective memos as a source of information was fundamental to quality data collection and analysis, both stimulating and chronicling the qualitative researcher’s new understandings. Corbin and Strauss (2008) extol the features of memos as reflections of analytic thought. They bring organization to the researcher’s generative ideas and emerging analytic scheme. In narrative inquiry, the interviewer is immersed in abundant data, and as Patton (2002) cautions, “Repressing analytical insights may mean losing them forever, for there’s no guarantee they’ll return (In Corbin & Strauss, p. 123). Reflective memos also bring transparency to the research process, validating that the researcher has obtained sufficient evidence to warrant the conclusions drawn, and providing the reader with “a way to retrace the steps of the researcher” (Roulston, 2010, p. 84). Data collection therefore consisted of in-depth interviews supplemented by document review and reflective memos, providing this study with abundant and credible information about the very personal dimensions of the Reading Wars.

**Data analysis.** There are different genres of narrative analysis which best correspond to varied problems of practice. For the purposes of this study, an experience-centered approach to narrative inquiry was employed to recognize the dialogical/performance nature of narrative interviews. Rooted in the work of Ricoeur (1984, 1981), the experience centered approach, as summarized by Squire (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2008), postulates that narratives: are sequential and meaningful; are definitively human; re-present and reconstitute experience; and display transformation or change. In experience-centered analysis, a story that is sequential and meaningful is understood in terms of its themes rather than its structure. The interviewer-
interviewee relationship carries meaningfulness, a dimension of narrative, which Ricoeur describes as the “intersection of the life-worlds of speaker and hearer, or of writer and reader” (Squire, 2008, p. 43). Meaning is also found in the paralanguage of the storyteller and in the larger narratives about values and issues embedded in the broader culture. Experience-centered approaches honor the connection between our stories and our very selves: “Sequential, temporal orderings of human experience into narrative are not just characteristic of humans, but make us human” (Squire, p. 43). Our stories can be seen as an attempt to restore our lives in response to change. The experience-centric view of narrative as transformation (Bruner, 1990) supports the selection of this approach for a study of teachers’ experiences with change. Experience-centered narrative research embraces the use of documentary evidence and semi-structured interviews, both central to this study. It highlights the progression of themes toward transformation and resolution, and adheres to the acceptance that interpretation may lead to multiple possible truths. In reflexively clarifying my positionality within the research process, it is openly acknowledged that the collection of participants’ stories could be sorted and analyzed in myriad ways yielding myriad analyses. In this study, which sought to understand the many ways in which changes in philosophy and pedagogy impact the teachers who must navigate them, deep and nuanced understanding was gleaned through narrative inquiry into their experience-rich stories.

Dialogic or performance analysis was key to the examination of data in this study. As detailed by Riessman (2008), dialogic/performance analysis is a powerful approach to interpreting oral narrative. It brings together central elements of both thematic and structural analysis and augments them with close attention to the context in which the talk occurs. Dialogic/performance analysis then digs even deeper in its privileging of context. Stories are “composed and received in contexts – interactional, historical, institutional, and discursive-to
name a few” (p. 105), and attention must therefore be paid to the nuances of the interview interaction. What is said, what is omitted, facial expressions, pauses, and sighs are all very telling to the perceptive researcher who practices dialogic analysis. Riessman incorporates the work of literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1984), which posits that the form and meaning of communication emerge between people dialogically and “in social and historical particularity” (p.107). Conceiving that any human voice is actually an interchange of between voices, Bakhtin (1984) wrote, “Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence” (p. 252). A central assumption of performance analysis is that we compose and project our personal constructions of identity in relation to others. Our stories are an attempt to persuade an audience of others who we are. Interviewing teachers about how their experiences during the Reading Wars molded their perspectives triggered narrative performances in which what was and wasn’t said proved very revealing.

Given the personal and professional relationships that were in play during the interview process of this study, it must be recognized that the participants and I influenced each other in what we expressed. Frank (2006, in Holstein and Gubrium) explains that to practice dialogic narrative analysis (DNA) is to “sustain a tension between dialogue and analysis” (p. 34) in that the researcher speaks with a participant rather than about him or her. There is a symbiotic relationship between people and stories, for “stories need people in order to be told, and humans need stories in order to represent experiences that remain inchoate until they can be given narrative form” (p. 36). Frank submits that our very sense of self is constrained both by our ability to tell our own story and by the stories that are told about people like us. The concept of group identity is very much shaped by the circulation of stories and speaks to the foregrounding of context in DNA. Teachers’ experiences and their dynamic responses and stances during the
whole language controversy were very much shaped by the professional communities of which they were a part. DNA attempts to explore how people “hold their own” in life and thereby imagines life as “a condition of vulnerability” (p. 39). This lens was very well-suited to a study of teachers’ attitudes and agency during a tumultuous time of change. The teachers involved in this study reflected upon experiences from two decades ago and co-constructed with me contemporary understandings of them. Dialogic analysis also contends that the readers of this study will bring their own positioned identities and cultural filters to the interpretive process, and will construct meaning from the teachers’ narratives accordingly. It was my responsibility as narrative inquirer to clearly link my interpretation and conclusions to the features of the text, achieving greater coherence through transparency. Dialogic analysis of teachers’ performed experience-centered narratives provided the means to elucidate the impact that the whole language epoch had on the teachers’ involved in it.

Once given access to teachers’ narratives, it was my privilege and challenge to aptly represent them through sound analysis. According to Saldana (2009), coding is a technique that organizes qualitative data in preparation for interpretation, serving as the transitional process between data collection and data analysis. Interview transcripts are read and segments within it are labeled with a “code” – usually “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 3). In Vivo Coding, also known as Literal Coding or Verbatim Coding, assigns codes from the actual language used by the participants. In Vivo Coding is especially suitable for studies that “prioritize and honor the participant’s voice” (Saldana, 2009, p. 75), as this study aimed to do. The process of In Vivo Coding is most congruent with an experience-centered approach to narrative inquiry. Coding is an iterative process through which the
researcher engages with the field texts and transcripts to gradually construct credible meaning. Coding aims to identify semantic and logical relationships between data items, and to select some for extended focus. The selection of codes is informed by the theories underpinning the research study, in this case, change theory and self-efficacy theory. Iterative examinations of the prevalence of codes leads to a recognition of patterns in the data, consolidating meaning and suggesting explanation. Rubin and Rubin (2012) recommend refining and linking codes into categories and categories into themes by working first within each category and then across categories. Here again, theoretical concepts are in play as themes evolve from the particulars of the study’s specific data to more abstract constructs and understandings.

The data amassed in this study was mined to illuminate the ways in which these teachers’ lived stories converged and yet also diverged in accordance with the teachers’ unique understandings. As the analysis unfolded, themes emerged from the teachers’ stories about their lived histories during the Whole Language era. These themes were considered against the backdrop of the key elements of change theory and self-efficacy theory. Conclusions were drawn as to the extent that the data confirmed, contradicted, or complicated the theoretical framework. The voices of these teachers were found to offer knowledge and wisdom about educators’ experiences during times of change.

Validity

The criteria for excellence in qualitative research differs from that of quantitative traditions. While experimental, quantitative research strives to measure the degree of causal relationships between variables and to generalize findings, qualitative research strives instead to illuminate and extrapolate understandings to similar situations. Qualitative inquiry yields a different type of knowledge than does quantitative analysis. The seminal work of Lincoln and
Guba (1985) is the foundation for this qualitative study’s standards for worth and rigor. The trustworthiness of a study is the touchstone for evaluating its merit. According to Lincoln and Guba, the notion of trustworthiness addresses the basic question: "How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences that the research findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to?" (1985, p. 290). They posit that a qualitative researcher in pursuit of trustworthiness must establish credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility is the naturalistic term which parallels the conventional term of internal validity, or the extent to which the findings accurately describe reality. The reader must have confidence in the truth of a study’s findings, recognizing, however, the qualitative assumption of multiple realities based on individual experience and interpretation. In this study, credibility was achieved through the triangulation of sources, using multiple data forms to adequately illuminate the phenomenon of teachers’ experiences stemming from the Whole Language era. Credibility was also attained through peer debriefing, a technique recommended by Lincoln and Guba, in which a researcher tests and defends emerging hypotheses to see if they seem reasonable to a “disinterested” or neutral peer. This process may help to uncover biases or assumptions on the part of a researcher and to help him or her to become better aware of his or her posture toward the analysis. Member checks were also employed to enhance this study’s credibility. According to Lincoln and Guba, member checking is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility. Providing the participants with the opportunity to confirm or correct how their reports were represented validated the analysis and also triggered some additional commentary from the participants. It was crucial to bolster the readers’ confidence in the truth of this study’s findings by employing these effective practices.
Research in the naturalistic paradigm also may achieve transferability. This dimension of qualitative research evaluation corresponds to the construct of external validity in the quantitative tradition and rests on the degree of similarity between the original context and related contexts. Lincoln and Guba contend that this is made possible through thick description and rich detail about the phenomenon of study which allow the conclusions drawn to be transferable to other situations and settings. I obtained such fruitful and resonant stories through in-depth and personal narrative interviewing. I have provided ample information for the reader to determine whether my findings are relevant to novel situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In order to be deemed trustworthy, qualitative research aspires to demonstrate dependability. As explained by Lincoln and Guba (1985), dependability is the qualitative researcher’s rendering of reliability. They suggest that the use of an inquiry audit, in which an external reviewer examines both the process and the product of the research for consistency, enhances a study’s dependability. However, it must be reiterated that narrative inquiry does not presume to identify the one, absolute truth surrounding a phenomenon, but rather to represent a plausible and cohesive interpretation of the participants’ experiences and views. In order for my findings to be regarded as dependable, transparency throughout the inquiry process was paramount.

A final element of trustworthiness relates to confirmability, or the degree of neutrality exhibited by the researcher. The extent to which the findings are shaped by the participants’ realities rather than by researcher bias or motivation is akin to the conventional research goal of objectivity. In the qualitative paradigm, however, personal involvement of the researcher in the process is not a flaw but rather is acknowledged and embraced. Subjectivity is considered unavoidable; thus, the qualitative researcher’s need for reflexivity. I was not a neutral and
objective inquirer into this topic but have, in fact, been greatly affected by my own experiences teaching during the Whole Language era. My emotions and views entered into the dialogue and influenced the direction it took. This duality of role that the qualitative researcher plays is aptly described by Riessman (2008): “Investigators carry their identities with them like tortoise shells into the research setting, reflexively interrogating their influences on the production and interpretation of narrative data” (p. 139). Narrative inquiry not only allows for personal interaction between researcher and participants; it calls for it, recognizing the researcher as a visible and valuable participant in the discourse. Because of the reciprocal influence between the researcher and the participants, the narrative researcher must clearly establish his/her personal experience with the phenomenon of study. As Sikes (in Bathmaker & Harnett, 2010) cautions, it “would be unethical to offer a version of someone’s life without making clear the nature of the gaze that is being brought to bear upon it…Reflexivity and honesty about one’s positionality and its role in sense-making are integral components of ethical practice” (p. 13). Corbin and Strauss (2008) posit that reflexivity is a valuable and even cathartic tool through which the impact of the presence, position, and perspective of the researcher are made clear, thus promoting rich insight through personal responses and interpersonal dynamics. I achieved confirmability by explicitly recognizing my own experiences with the participants and with the Whole Language era while emphasizing and delineating the evidentiary basis of the conclusions. Thus, the validity or the trustworthiness of this research study was earned through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Ethical qualitative researchers have an absolute responsibility to safeguard the wellbeing of the participants of their studies and ensure that they come to no harm as a result of the
research. To this end, approval from the university’s Institutional Review Board was secured prior to beginning the research process. When employing interview techniques, maintaining the participants’ confidentiality is critical. Participants were assured through the informed consent process that their names were changed and the name of the setting was withheld in any written documentation of the proceedings. However, given that qualitative studies contain detailed descriptions of the experiences of study participants, confidentiality breaches through what Tolich (2004) refers to as deductive disclosure, may occur. For example, a reader with knowledge of the school district could likely infer the identity of individual teachers based on traits such as age, gender, and number of years with the school district. There is at times, therefore, a conflict between conveying rich, accurate accounts of the participants’ experiences and protecting the identities of those participants. As Roulston (2010) cautions, “Researchers who are examining topics related to groups of which they are members, or to which they have close personal ties, need to consider the possible ethical issues concerning representation of participants that may arise during the reporting and publication phases of a study” (p. 99). The participants of this inquiry were valued as co-constructors of knowledge. As either a colleague or former colleague of the participants, I hold no authority over them and have no ability or desire to influence their job performance evaluations. The participants had the right to participate in the research, and the freedom to decline at any time. The collected information was stored on a password protected flash memory data storage device. The hardcopies of the transcripts including the signed consent forms were kept in sealed envelopes and stored in a locked cabinet, to which only the researcher had access. After 3 years have elapsed, these hard copies will be shredded and thrown away to protect the participants’ identities. By using member checking as a tool for establishing the study’s trustworthiness, the participants’ wellbeing was also preserved.
Participants confirmed that their perspectives were represented in a manner with which they feel comfortable. It was not the intent of this research to cause any embarrassment or hardship for the participants, but, rather, to help their highly important and knowledgeable voices to be heard.

**Conclusion**

If improved reading instruction for students is to take root and flourish, teachers must be recognized by local and national policy actors as essential to sustainable reform. Regrettably, teachers are often at the whim of administrators and other policymakers who remain unaware of or disinterested in teachers’ opinions and experiences with change initiatives in their classrooms. Too often, teachers perceive change as happening to them, rather than by them. Teachers’ stories of their lived experiences contain significant information which may reveal why fruitless and frustrating failed initiatives continue to plague education. Gathering rich information about the Whole Language era of the 1990s has generated new and more nuanced understanding of the impact of an unsuccessful reform on the teachers who lived it and of how that period’s swing of the curricular pendulum shaped their habits of mind. Rooted in a naturalistic, qualitative approach, this experience-centered narrative inquiry recognized that people create their own understandings and realities based on their interpretations of their experiences. In-depth interviews, documentary evidence, and reflective memos gathered throughout the process were analyzed with attention to the dialogic/performance nature of the interchange between conversational partners who have shared experiences. I was reflexive, explicitly considering and stating how my own experiences and opinions with Whole Language may have influenced data collection and analysis. The facets of trustworthiness of rigorous qualitative research were demonstrated through varied means such as triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking. The Reading Wars between proponents and detractors of the Whole Language philosophy and
approach was a turbulent and formative period for a generation of teachers. This study sought to set free teachers’ voices in order to learn from its legacy.

Chapter IV: Research Findings

The purpose of this chapter is to report and discuss the findings from the research conducted via interviews with four teachers who experienced the whole language era in their southeast Massachusetts public school district. The chapter begins with a brief review of the study context and defines terms associated with the study. Documentary sources that illuminate and validate the context are briefly described therein. The second section provides a brief summary of each of the four teachers’ stories. A note about the use of researcher memos is included following these summaries. The next section presents emerging themes within and between the teachers’ narratives in relationship to the research question as identified through an analysis of the interview transcripts. The final section presents a summary of the research findings.

Study Context

The most effective model and philosophy of early literacy instruction has long been a subject of wide debate. Some educators hold that children need much explicit instruction, drill, and practice in the sequence of phonetic skills, while others content that a holistic approach that emphasizes the meaning of language and honors the developmental individuality of children is superior. For the purposes of this study, phonics will be defined as, “a way of teaching reading and spelling that stresses symbol-sound relationships, used especially in beginning instruction” (Harris & Hodges, 2005, p. 186). Whole language will be defined as, “a constructivist philosophy and methodology that emphasizes the use of literacy skills and strategies in
meaningful and authentic contexts” (Harris & Hodges, 2005, p. 280). Pendulum-like swings between iterations of these two approaches can be traced through decades of education’s history.

The polemic of the 1980s and 1990s between proponents of whole language and those of direct phonics instruction was a critical time for reading and early childhood teachers in the field. Divisive rhetoric had a polarizing effect on teachers who were trained in and drawn to one methodology over the other. Although not exclusively, the lines of the debate tended to fall along teachers’ length of experience in the field, with novice teachers being versed in whole language pedagogy and veterans accustomed to using traditional phonics methods. This study examines the personal experiences of four teachers who were teaching in a small, suburban school district in southeastern coastal Massachusetts during this explosive period. The participants in this study all reported having strong recollections of the whole language debate as it played out in their district circa 1992-1996.

A review of documentary evidence from the era confirmed that the mid 1990s found this small district in a time of great contention. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), “viewing [such] documents in the context of a narrative inquiry constitutes something that might be called an archaeology of memory and meaning” (p. 114). Several documents retained by the participants and shared during their interviews reflect their emotional responses to the landscape of the reading wars and aid this inquiry in “looking for meaning and social significance” (p. 135) in teachers’ experiences. It is very interesting to note that the participants kept artifacts in their possession for these many years, a fact which reflects their import. An article from the town’s local newspaper published in 1992 portrayed whole language as the “new approach” to reading instruction being used in some of the district’s early childhood classrooms. Entitled, “New
technique lures pupils to read,” the report sharply contrasted whole language with phonics, and Julie spoke to the uproar from her students’ parents that resulted from it.

Another artifact from the era that was examined in the study was the recommendations section of a report submitted by a literacy consultant contracted by the district to evaluate its programming in the fall of 1993. The report praised the methods of two novice teachers, Lisa and a teammate, who were implementing whole language, and it suggested that other teachers in the district should observe in these classrooms. In her narrative, Lisa described the harmful impact of this report on the dynamic between novice and veteran teachers.

Additionally, Diane had archived in her files the results of a survey that was conducted by the school council in 1994. It delineated the staff’s responses as to the “positives” and “negatives” of the school’s climate. It indicated: the staff’s cognizance of a rift in their building between novice and veteran teachers; confusion and misinformation about the respective roles of phonics and whole language pedagogy; concern over a negative portrayal of the school in the local media; and the need for increased and improved communication among teachers. Diane was careful to point out the doodled sad faces, stars, and other marginalia that preserve the depth of her emotions at the time.

Also providing a glimpse into the climate in the district at the time is an article from the local newspaper published in May, 1996, entitled “Parents want school to use phonics.” This document unleashed strong responses from both Brenda, who felt the article was a fair representation of the era’s landscape, and Lisa, who was reduced to tears revisiting the “slanderous” news report. Written in the margin is the name and phone number of an attorney whom Lisa had considered calling when the story was printed, capturing the fear and anger felt at the time. These four documentary sources are particularly potent for this inquiry because they
were saved and shared by the participants themselves, providing snapshots into a formative period in their professional lives.

The goal of the present study is to explore the research question: How did teachers’ experiences with the rise and fall of the whole language philosophy of reading instruction during the 1990s affect them and shape their attitudes toward change? Extended dialogue about the rise and fall of whole language stirred strong recollections in all four of the participants. They described their experiences related to the unrest in their school and district among and between teachers, administrators, parents, and the media about the use of phonics or language-based reading instruction. This next section provides an introduction to each of the four participants and a summary of her unique experiences within the whole language era.

**Teachers’ Stories**

**Brenda.** Brenda had been teaching at the primary level in the school system for almost twenty years when the drama of the whole language controversy arrived at her doorstep. Based on her preservice training and her experience in the field, she strongly believed that phonics was an essential component in teaching children to read. Her first recollection of the term whole language is linked to a very popular conference for teachers of young children that was held in the region each year. When looking over the registration form to select which sessions to attend, she noted that all of them referred to whole language. She chose the three which seemed most interesting and relevant to her position, and she remembers the buzz of excitement in the air at the conference. Presenters spoke of children learning to read and write naturally, just as they had learned to speak, and of the teacher’s role being that of a guide and a facilitator rather than as a lecturer dispensing knowledge. She recognized some aspects of whole language as familiar, having been in use at earlier times throughout her career.
However, starting with the hiring of new teachers the following fall, more and more teachers joined the voice of the Reading Specialist in singing the praises of whole language. According to Brenda, in the next several years, professional development and program adoptions in the district became focused on whole language, and she distinctly remembers tension building between what she refers to as “the younger teachers and the traditional teachers.” She described herself as having been “in the middle” between the phonics proponents and the whole language proponents, because she used much more phonics in her teaching than the whole language teachers used, but much more thematic, naturalistic methods than the phonics teachers used. Brenda recounted novice teachers presenting to veteran teachers at workshops in the district and the poor reception that this received. She viewed herself as a teacher who was open to new ideas but who recognized “the handwriting on the wall” as “the latest fad was being crammed down people’s throats, especially by new teachers who didn’t even know what they were doing yet.” Brenda also cited the poor decision-making of the leadership as being to blame for presenting the new direction of the district in such an unwise manner. She appeared annoyed while recalling this time in which change was imposed teachers, and her choice of words reflected conflict, such as cramming whole language down teachers’ throats. Because “they knew how things came and went,” Brenda described with a dismissive hand gesture most veteran teachers going about their instruction as they always had until whole language “went away.” Brenda continued to teach in the district until her retirement in 2009. With a perspective gained through four decades of experience, Brenda reflected on the reading wars and on her career in general as a series of fruitless trends that cycled along the periphery of her consistently solid and balanced teaching. Referring to iterations of the phonics/whole language debate, she mused, “What’s old is new. Approaches come in and out of style every few years, just like the hemlines of skirts.”
Julie. Julie joined the district in 1990, after graduating from a teacher preparatory program which included whole language techniques. She saw herself as a whole language teacher, but one who understood the methodology as including both phonics and language-based practices. She described with a furrowed brow that she did not quite understand the furor of the debate until she landed in the very heart of it. In 1991, the local newspaper featured an article about “the new way of teaching reading” that the district was now using, and a photo of Julie reading to her class was on page one. She vividly described how the parents of her students were “flipping out because phonics wasn’t being used anymore.” She became agitated, speaking rapidly with widened eyes about the backlash that she endured. Finding herself at the center of a controversy, Julie felt frustrated that her teaching was misrepresented. She and the Early Childhood Coordinator welcomed visitors to come in and to observe how phonics was, in fact, very much a part of Julie’s whole language approach. While some parents were reassured, others remained highly anxious and resistant.

Over the next few years, Julie saw tensions grow between “newer and older” teachers who disagreed on the best way to teach early literacy, and yet, Julie insists, she never understood whole language and phonics to be mutually exclusive. She described with a sigh how she felt at times that she was the only one who could “see both sides.” Julie now looks back on the whole language era and her unwelcomed public role within it as “a completely unnecessary battle” in which teachers, parents and the media oversimplified different approaches to teaching reading into an “either/or debate.”

Throughout her career, Julie has seen continual changes and trends in what is considered to be best practice. She asserts that these different emphases do not mean, however, that “we should throw out the baby with the bath water.” From Julie’s perspective, a teacher must “pick
and choose what works” from the latest approaches as if “from a menu” and “add a few new things to the toolbox” of pedagogical strategies. She understands neither the teacher who is “constantly starting from scratch” nor the teacher who “refuses to change.” Julie’s hand gesture at this utterance signified her disapproval of a stance of stubbornness. Julie feels that whole language strategies have forever shaped reading instruction for the better, and yet she indicates with a distancing motion that, today, she would never use the term whole language to describe any of her own practice, for it has such a “negative reputation.”

Diane. Diane was in her 23rd year of teaching when the district fell into a state of contention over reading instruction in the mid 1990s. She states that she did not embrace the philosophy or practices associated with whole language, and, as a person who “likes to keep the peace,” Diane referred with head shakes and a grimace to the reading wars as “a big mess and a bad idea.” She indicated that, to her, whole language could be boiled down to two words: “no phonics.”

Her understanding of whole language came from in-service “little workshops” provided in her school and from her own observations of her second grade students who had been in whole language classrooms for kindergarten or first grade. She noted approvingly that the students who had been in traditional classrooms using explicit phonics instruction could spell much better than those who had been in classes with progressive or “younger teachers.” While Diane admitted that she admired the enthusiasm and energy of the whole language teachers, she believed that these teachers who were being held up as examples for the veteran staff to emulate were, in fact, ineffective. It was her sense that many veteran teachers were “insulted” when their teaching was devalued and portrayed as “the wrong way.” In Diane’s recollections, it was therefore both the message and the messenger that “turned her off” to the whole language school
of thought. Her posture and facial expressions hinted at the aversion that she still feels toward all that transpired during this era.

Diane also asserted that administrators should appreciate different styles of teaching because there are, after all, different kinds of students in our schools. Why, she asked with tears in her eyes, do we respect the individuality of children but not the individuality of teachers? As revealed through her demeanor and wording, Diane still feels hurt and angry over the turmoil of twenty years ago. She also indicated disapprovingly that innovations seemed to reappear every few years under a new name, and that those teachers who recognized this pattern learned that most trends “just go away” and were “not worth the time and effort” needed to implement them. This is not an attitude of laziness or stubbornness, she calmly explained, but it is instead akin to a survival strategy. “Teaching is very difficult, and we shouldn’t be expected to chase our tails if the next new thing is just a year away anyway. People who do that end up going crazy.”

Diane described the pressure that she felt as the principal tried to get her to change her teaching methods. She was told to attend certain “trendy” workshops and to take a course every year or so. She pronounced that the “humiliating” year she spent with the reading specialist assigned by the principal to work in her room for reading time every day was “like having a babysitter, or like being a student teacher with a real teacher watching over me.” Emphasizing the words “real teacher” in this way reveals how belittled Diane felt by her principal’s attempts to make her conform. She explained as if trying to defend her worth as a teacher how she still has a collection of letters written to her from students and parents thanking her for her kindness and the way she made learning fun. In her view, the lasting impression that she made on children’s lives “had nothing to do with phonics, or no phonics, or how much phonics,” but rather was “about caring for kids.”
Diane acknowledged with some sadness that her tendency to resist change in general contributed directly to her having to retire a year earlier than she would have liked to. In 2009 she was told by her principal that she should “do the right thing” and that “the time had come.” So, anticipating that staying would find her under constant scrutiny and pressure to use technology and other current instructional techniques, she put in her papers and ended her thirty-nine year career. It was clearly difficult for Diane to recall and discuss this, as she became flushed and teary-eyed. She described herself as a “good teacher” who knew that the timeless and simple attributes of “good teaching” transcend fleeting trends like whole language.

Lisa. Lisa’s tenure in the district began just as she graduated from college, freshly trained in the whole language approach. The progressive university that she attended was reputed to be on “the cutting edge of teaching” and on “the ground floor of the whole language movement.” She reflects on her early years as a time of unbridled enthusiasm and idealism when she hoped to “change the world.”

Speaking with high energy and clear pride, she portrays her first two years of teaching as the happiest and most empowering of her career. According to the tenets of whole language, by which she “lived and breathed,” Lisa provided a learning environment that fostered creativity and emphasized student “choice and voice.” She described with a broad smile and animated gestures how she and her students delved into authentic literature which had inviting, entertaining stories instead of the phonetically controlled vocabulary found in traditional basal programs. Together, they enthusiastically engaged in thematic, cross-curricular explorations of topics that “followed the students’ lead.” In daily Writing Workshop, which Lisa maintains was the hallmark of the whole language movement and the cornerstone of her own classroom, process writing invited children to learn to write as naturally as they had learned to talk. The
freedom to take risks without fear of correction empowered her young writers to craft stories, letters, poems, book reviews, and reports. While Lisa relived these days during her interview, she was beaming.

She recounted with clear appreciation being “trusted” by her principal so much that, provided she covered the same skills contained within it, she could deviate from the district’s “outdated and boring” curriculum. According to Lisa, “I put that red binder with the white lettering up on the top shelf and never looked at it again.” She laughed, “It sat there and collected dust!” On an “adrenaline high,” she couldn’t wait to get to school each day, where she identified herself as a “facilitator of her children’s journey.”

By her third year, however, she was at the heart of a very public controversy over the use of whole language, and she reports that she is still profoundly affected both professionally and personally by all that transpired. In 1993, she was elated to be sharing her knowledge and excitement with colleagues in her new school, district, and in neighboring towns as well, where she was requested to make presentations to staff. Her classroom was cited as a “pocket of excellence” by a highly regarded consultant brought in to evaluate the district’s literacy program. Lisa appeared very proud of having been so recognized by a literacy expert. The consultant’s report recommended that Lisa’s fellow teachers should observe her teaching in their efforts to improve literacy instruction. When no other teachers actually came to observe, she recalls having her first inklings of a growing tension in her school and district that seemed to fall along the lines between veteran and newer teachers.

In particular, Lisa described her acrimonious relationship with the twenty-year veteran on her team who taught with traditional, phonics-centered instructional methods. Although almost twenty years have passed, Lisa still became agitated when speaking about this conflict. Rather
than collaboration amongst teachers, there was competition, and Lisa became aware that her colleague frequently and secretly criticized her teaching to the parents of their respective students. She paused for water at this point in her interview, and then announced that, to this day, she feels “anger, hurt, and betrayal,” at a fellow teacher’s attempt to “sabotage” her. But the joy that Lisa felt in her classroom with her own community of learners served as “a refuge” from the stress of that rivalry. Also permeating her memories of this time are her feelings of true “partnership” and a deeply satisfying “feeling of community” with the other newer, younger teachers on the faculty. She smiled wistfully speaking of this collegiality.

Over time, however, she had to defend her teaching more and more to a growing body of skeptics and critics of whole language. She recalls with flushed cheeks how a group of second grade teachers wrote a letter to first grade teachers criticizing the lack of skills they were seeing in their incoming students. Parents were concerned that their children weren’t learning enough. Parents who had themselves learned to read and write through traditional first grade phonics worksheets perceived student work with “KidSpell,” or developmental spelling, as indicative of a lack of progress. Phone calls and conferences with her students’ parents were changing in their tone, and Lisa had to justify her use of whole language when articles in Time magazine and newspapers were discrediting it. The media’s increasing focus on the perils of whole language “really fueled the fire,” in Lisa’s opinion. Shaking her head as if still in disbelief after all this time, the underhanded “jabs” that were dealt by the opposing camp of teachers continued and actually escalated. In short, by 1996, whole language was “falling apart” both in her own school and across the country. Lisa sighed and shook her head, explaining, “It was like the floor was pulled out from under me.”
An article in the local media shone a harsh spotlight on the conflict in her team, and Lisa felt publicly attacked and humiliated. She felt “abandoned by the whole language gurus” who seemed to fall silent against the mounting public and political onslaught. Trying to redeem her credibility and safeguard her very “identity as a teacher,” she organized an informational meeting for first grade parents to explain the curriculum and highlight the quality instruction that was taking place. In preparing for the presentation, she recalls using white-out and changing any references in the handouts from “whole language” to “balanced literacy,” a much less loaded term. She felt conflicted about this at the time, as if she were “selling out” her whole language roots. Although this informational session seemed to help somewhat in quelling the parental uproar, Lisa realized that, “It was no use. Whole language was dead in the water.” She exhaled deeply as she explained that her principal saw this too, and the school began to distance itself from whole language rhetoric and to emphasize systematic phonics instruction. As she described with downcast eyes, Lisa gradually withdrew from the discourse and found herself staying very quiet at faculty meetings and workshops for the next few years. Her confidence was shattered and her voice was silenced: “I really didn’t know who I was as a teacher anymore.” She was clearly distressed with this pronouncement.

As the power and seeming permanence of No Child Left Behind became clear, Lisa sadly described how she considered leaving teaching. “It just wasn’t the same,” she whispered. “Following a teacher’s manual? Me? Really?” NCLB’s emphasis of quantitative data and scientifically-based research felt like “the end of the journey.” Lisa did not leave teaching, though, for she loves it too much. Because she had always believed that teachers must stay current, keep an open mind, and be ever willing to “look in the mirror” and evaluate the effectiveness of their own practice, she spurred herself on: “It was time to practice what I
preached.” To walk away from what she always knew to be her vocation, her true calling, because she didn’t want to change would have been “hypocritical; it would have been being like them.”

Today, it is Lisa who is the veteran of twenty years, but, unlike her “rigid and stubborn” foes of the 1990s, she prides herself on her thirst for constant growth and improvement. The rise and fall of the whole language movement was a watershed event in Lisa’s career and in the formation of her identity as a teacher and her attitudes toward change in general. Shrugging her shoulders, she describes herself as “older and wiser” now, and she recognizes that “so much went wrong back then.” With the benefit of hindsight, Lisa has come to see that the “anti-whole language” veteran teachers in her district may have had cause to feel insulted or threatened when their professional development was being delivered by very inexperienced teachers who hadn’t yet “earned their stripes.” In her own defense, Lisa qualifies, she was only doing what her principal, whom she admired greatly, was asking her to do. Although the role that leadership played in how this district experienced the Whole Language era was great indeed, Lisa admits with a self-incriminating frown that she was “naïve and overzealous,” and must have been “so annoying” to the time-tested teachers. This is due in fact to her lack of historical perspective: the veteran teachers had seen the pendulum swing and she had not. All of her training led her to believe that whole language was “the best and only way to teach….IF you cared about children.”

Lisa, now “humbled and mellowed a bit,” incorporates into her teaching what her years of experience have shown her to be “the best of the best” literacy practices. She does use “lots more” phonics now and concedes that some of her students in the 1990s certainly could have benefited if portions of her phonics instruction were presented more explicitly. Lisa firmly believes, however, that the legacy of whole language has shaped literacy instruction immensely.
“The teaching practices and the philosophy were sound,” but the movement was “disorganized and misunderstood.” Sitting taller, she states with pride that, “For our generation of teachers, whole language gave us KidSpell, and big books, and comprehension strategies, and authentic assessment, and I have to believe that they are here for the long term.” According to Lisa, the greatest problem of that contentious era wasn’t the discord around the role of whole language or phonics pedagogy, but rather was the refusal of many teachers to “open their minds” and their repertoires to “something new.” Lisa sees teaching as “the most important job that there is,” and holds that teachers’ have an “absolute obligation” to stay current. Although she now laughingly sees herself as “one of the old teachers,” she is determined to stay “young at heart and open-minded.”

**Researcher’s Reflexivity and Reflective Memos**

The doctrine of reflexivity argues that a narrative researcher is free to choose personally relevant issues of research, to draw on and make explicit personal experience, and to “enjoy the wisdom and companionship of his/her ‘subject’” (Bannister, 1981). It is crucial, however, to make transparent the ways in which the personal aspects of the researcher’s perspective shaped the data collection and analysis processes. As a teacher in the district and period of focus, I, too, experienced the rise and fall of the whole language movement. I have a professional relationship with each of the participants, and, while this was instrumental in securing their participation in the study the interviews, it was necessary to clarify to them that my own thinking on the whole language movement was continuing to evolve. This established trust with the participants, and we proceeded to have open and honest conversations about their experiences during the era, regardless of any tension or conflict that there had been between us in the past.
My reflective memos taken during the interview and transcription process and then expanded during analysis document my own personal responses and revelations. These copious notes also detail the participants’ paralanguage, for this was a rich source of expression. While an evidentiary trail of historical artifacts and memos on my developing construction of meaning support the findings outlined in the next section, the true strength of this study lies in its honoring of teachers’ voices.

Prominent Themes

Through the participants’ richly personal stories related to their experiences with the whole language debate, their views became illuminated. Reading the transcripts many times and with support from documentary evidence and reflective memos, I searched for and coded the threads, patterns, and tensions that wove throughout the stories. An experience-centered approach to narrative inquiry was employed. Participants’ stories were read multiple times as conveying meaning through their themes rather than their structure. The interviewer-interviewee relationship carries a meaningfulness that is honored through an experience-centered approach. Dialogic or performance analysis was also key to the examination of data in this study, privileging interactional, historical, and institutional context. Attention was paid to the nuances of the interview interaction, such as what was said, what was omitted, facial expressions, pauses, and sighs. As recommended by Saldana (2009), coding served as the transitional process between data collection and data analysis. Interview transcripts were read multiple times, and segments within them were labeled with “In Vivo codes” in order to “prioritize and honor the participant’s voice” (Saldana, 2009, p. 75). Semantic and logical relationships between data items were identified, and some were selected for extended focus. In line with Rubin and Rubin’s (2012) work, codes were refined and linked into categories and then into themes by
working first within each category and then across categories. For example, In Vivo codes gleaned directly from the interview transcripts included “new thing”, “trend”, “latest”, “back again”, “fad”, “craze”, and “in style.” These verbatim codes led to the theme “The pendulum of change.” Key concepts from the literature review coupled with constructs related to change theory and self-efficacy theory informed the discovery of the emerging themes. An example of the coding process can be seen in Appendix C, which displays the manner in which In Vivo coding was applied to excerpts from the original transcripts. Together with the paralanguage of the participants that dialogic narrative analysis privileges, themes emerged from the participants’ stories. These themes resonated with aspects of the theoretical framework. Reflective memos chronicle researcher insights that grew through this process. The table presented in Appendix C provides a snapshot of the analysis process that yielded the findings of this study. In the rest of this chapter, I explicate the themes that arose from the narratives of the teachers by “teasing out the salient rhythms, images, and metaphors” (Clandinin & Connolly, 1988, p. 25) that give meaning to their lived experiences.

**The whole language movement as a failed change initiative.** All four participants reacted strongly when asked about the whole language era, indicating with sighs, shaking of the head and rolling of the eyes that this difficult time was not education’s finest hour. The two teachers who were new to teaching in the early 1990s had been trained in the whole language approach and philosophy while in pre-service undergraduate programs in college. They entered the field seeing themselves as “whole language teachers.” This identity meant different things for the two women. For Julie, whole language represented a balance of language-based techniques and the more traditional, phonics based approach. In college, it was presented to her as an eclectic methodology that incorporated both direct instruction and naturalistic learning.
She reported, “I never thought even for a minute that whole language meant no phonics.” However, Lisa, who earned her Bachelor’s degree just two years later than Julie, understood whole language differently and seemingly much more personally as well. According to Lisa, “Whole language was everything. It was the ground I walked on. So when I got into my own classroom there was never any doubt, ever, that I would be a whole language teacher, through and through.” Lisa went on to describe the identity of a whole language teacher: “It meant that I gave my kids the most exciting start to reading and writing they could have. It meant no stupid, boring phonics worksheets. It meant immersing them in language and being their facilitator, not the Charlie Brown teacher droning on and on at them.” A stance that portrays whole language as anti-traditional and anti-phonics emerges from Lisa’s descriptions, but not from Julie’s. This is a significant contrast. Lisa was trained two years later than Julie, during which time the whole language movement had gained much momentum. She also attended a college which was a hotbed of whole language activity. The theme of widely different conceptualizations of whole language among teachers emerges as prominent in all four participants’ narratives.

Brenda and Diane, who were both veterans at the time of the reading wars, came to understand whole language not through a college program but rather through professional conferences, inservice trainings, and through word-of-mouth. Brenda, a veteran, like Julie, a novice, understood whole language as incorporating both traditional and progressive techniques. By contrast, Diane and Lisa, though decades apart in longevity, both had an “either-or” mindset about whole language. They believed whole language disavowed explicit phonics instruction, and this led Lisa to embrace it and Diane to spurn it. The general feeling of the four participants was that there was confusion about what whole language entailed. Lisa shared an interesting insight: “The thing that was so great about whole language was that it came from teachers, it
was ours. But that also meant it meant something different to everyone. It’s practically impossible for something like that to stay afloat.” Many teachers flocked to answer the call of whole language’s empowering openness, but then floundered from a lack of direction and support. “I loved that I could lead my kids down a thousand different paths, but then that is a big responsibility setting off on this, like, big journey without a map.” In Diane’s account, she mentioned feeling insecure about continually changing expectations: “Teaching is hard enough without having to play guessing games about what they want us to do now…whole language didn’t have enough structure to it.” A similar view was voiced by Brenda: “If something seems too loosey-goosey, teachers feel that is very risky, and they won’t buy in. We really don’t like when one week, it’s one thing, and the next week it’s something else. We want to hear what it’s about, and then we decide how we feel about it for our kids.” In fact, another prominent theme that clearly emerges from the views espoused by the participants is the importance of teachers’ sense of agency and empowerment to make decisions about instruction.

**Teachers’ agency as instructional decision makers.** Teachers’ preference for autonomy and control in their classrooms manifests in many comments made by the four interviewees. The upsurge of whole language techniques had teachers either celebrating the many new strategies that were available to them, or feeling overwhelmed at the prospect of taking on a new and challenging skillset. The prevailing thought voiced by the participants was that teachers “know best what is best” for their students and should have the latitude to make decisions about “what works and what doesn’t” in the context of their own classrooms.
Table 1

Illustrative quotes from Brenda

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<tr>
<th>Illustrative Quotes from Brenda</th>
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<tr>
<td>• We knew that kids need more phonics. Whole language was just one strategy, and they need a whole host of ways to read. So we’d supplement. I felt, I’ll do whole language, but I’ll still keep doing the things I used to do that really work.</td>
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<td>• Suddenly everybody had to be doing the same thing, and that doesn’t work, that doesn’t <em>ever</em> work, to try to make everybody the same. But whole language was the law of the land, whether we liked it or not.</td>
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<td>• I think that’s what a good teacher does. You build on what works, and then, what doesn’t work – you just let it go. It all depends on the class in front of you, and you have to make choices of how to use your time.</td>
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Brenda described a scenario in which she received a teacher’s manual in her mailbox in the school office. It had appeared with no explanation or training, but instead just a sticky note on the cover with her name on it. She took it home with her and skimmed through it, dog-earring the pages that “looked decent.” She felt no obligation to try to use the manual beyond that because she believes that a teacher should and, in fact, must “pick and choose what’s right for [her] kids. Brenda’s individuality as a teacher is essential to her identity, as she asserted several times throughout the interview opinions such as: “We shouldn’t have to be clones. *I* know what *I’m* doing. *You* know what *you’re* doing. We will both get our kids there, but maybe just in different ways.” Julie also spoke to teachers’ agency as instructional decision makers:
Table 2

Illustrative Quotes from Julie

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<th>Illustrative Quotes from Julie</th>
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<tr>
<td>• When they brought in the new series, I used it, but I went in the sequence of the old program, because I still remember wanting to hang onto that. It made more sense. I always do that: change a program around a little to make it work better.</td>
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<td>• Right away I knew it was part of my job to pull together the different parts of programs that would work best. I do try new things all the time, IF they make sense.</td>
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<td>• We do what works with the kids we have and the time we have. With the whole language and phonics stuff, I remember saying, ‘I like that, and that, but not that.’ I just picked up new strategies and added them to the mix.</td>
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Julie voiced her belief that teachers’ experience and knowledge of their particular students should be at the heart of classroom practice. Because “there just isn’t enough time in the day to do it all,” a teachers’ discretion is and should be the final authority on “what makes the cut and what doesn’t.” Julie shared many anecdotes about modifying curricula based on her assessment of lessons’ worth, likely effectiveness, and the ever-important availability of time. She merged materials and strategies from several different programs, as if she were “at a buffet.” She spoke of using the Alphatime curriculum but in the sequence recommended by the Lippencott program because her instincts told her it would be best received by her students this way. Julie indicated that the veteran teachers who mentored her in her early years all described and modeled teaching in this manner and that she learned very early on that she is the ultimate judge of what the learning experiences in her classroom will be. Similarly, Diane expressed the need for teachers’ power to choose what and how they teach:
Table 3

Illustrative Quotes from Diane

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<tr>
<th>Illustrative Quotes from Diane</th>
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<tr>
<td>• “I didn’t use whole language. I could see it wasn’t working. At first I tried to make some changes, but I knew it wasn’t going to work, to get rid of phonics. That’s the biggest part of reading. It was ridiculous. So I still taught the way I knew I needed to.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• “Some things are worth a try, of course, but it has to make sense with what we already know works with teaching kids to read. If I have seen it work, then that is what I am going to do in my room. And it’s okay if some people do it different. There should be different kinds of teachers just like there are different kinds of kids.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• “You don’t have to try every new thing in the book, and it’s confusing to kids – and parents – if we do. I knew I had perfectly fine ways of teaching, and I shouldn’t throw it all away.”</td>
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Diane’s interview included many stories of her dismissing a recommended curricular change. In some instances, she did this because the proposed approach “seemed silly,” particularly in regard to the amount of time it would take her to become familiar with it and to implement it. She confessed to having materials still in their shrink-wrap hidden away on the shelf of her closet years after they were delivered to her classroom. “Nobody asked me what I thought of them,” she explained, “and it was my classroom.” Other recollections of hers highlighted her sense that the “new” strategy in question seemed like “déjà vu” and not worth pursuing because it wasn’t likely to result in “some big miracle” in her students’ performance. For Diane, any technique affiliated with whole language lacked credibility and was “nixed” virtually outright. She contends that it was well within her discretion to do this because “the buck stops here.” Diane divulged that she sometimes felt overwhelmed or confused by a new approach, and that she must admit that she rejected some changes because she preferred to stick
with what she knew. Revelations like this indicate that a lower level of efficacy was at times driving Diane’s resistance to initiatives. By contrast, Lisa’s valuing of her empowerment to decide what her students need seems to stem from a strong sense of efficacy:

Table 4

*Illustrative Quotes from Lisa*

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<tr>
<th>Illustrative Quotes from Lisa</th>
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<td>• We [teachers] are smart, and we do know what we are doing, and we should have some say in what happens in our classrooms. I think I’ve earned the right to stand up and say that…So I asked the principal if we could try this instead, and she said yes. If she hadn’t, I probably would’ve closed my door and done it anyway.</td>
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<td>• That’s what teaching should be like: the excitement of trying to find what works best. With whole language, we were new and we definitely didn’t have all the answers, but at least we were trying to lead our children down that path, and that was so much more than what other people were doing. We were trying to push ourselves intellectually and professionally.</td>
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<td>• Teachers definitely want to feel like we can make choices for our kids. It’s all about staying current and looking for what’s best. It has nothing to do with age or experience. Good teachers keep trying to grow and add new tricks to their toolbox.</td>
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As highlighted by Lisa, change is not a threat but, rather, is an adventure. She fiercely safeguards her authority to make decisions about classroom practice because this sense of pursuit and discovery is definitive for teachers: “As teachers we *have to be* lifelong learners. It’s never the same day twice because we can always find new and better ways to help our kids.” She described several times in her career when she has simply refused to use materials because they conflicted with her own philosophy. “They will *never* get me to use phonics workbooks. Like, ever. I get it, I get it much more than I used to, first graders need drill and practice on phonics skills but I would sooner be shot than use those stupid books. They are developmentally inappropriate. Period.” For Lisa, the decision of what and to what extent to employ something
new in her classroom seems to be based on the extent to which the new technique or approach jibes with her heartfelt beliefs about teaching. If something resonates with her as sound and appropriate, she doesn’t hesitate to invest time and effort in learning it, and in fact she enjoys doing so. But if she philosophically disagrees with a practice, Lisa exercises her right and responsibility to spurn it.

This issue of teachers having the autonomy and decision making power to select, reject or modify changes in curriculum garnered the most emphatic responses from all of the participants. They spoke of teachers being valued and respected enough to be trusted to use their professional judgment for the sake of their students. Diane and Lisa both referred to the tendency of some teachers to give “lip service” to a pedagogical initiative but then to “close the door” and proceed with one’s teaching with no substantive adjustments. Diane mentioned the superficial changes that she implemented in her classroom while steadfastly maintaining the status quo: “They gave me an easel and a rug, and we sat on the rug, but I knew whole language was ridiculous, and I wasn’t going to do it. And as it turns out, I was right, wasn’t I?” She defends her decision to “ride out” whole language: “It didn’t make sense, and I knew it wasn’t going to last. And then, it just went away, thank God.” This comment provides a segue into another theme that permeates the stories of the teachers: the pendulum of change.

**The pendulum of change.** It should be expected that interviews with teachers whose careers spanned between 22 and 43 years would resonate with the many facets of experiencing change. Through decades in a field which is continually undergoing reform, teachers acquire insights and attitudes that stay with them and shape their future responses. The conceptualization of a swinging pendulum which oscillates between more traditional pedagogy and progressive methodologies is not only a recurring theme in the participants’ narratives, but it
undergirds much of what they believe about change in education. The teachers’ stories reflect a sense of being in constant flux. For some, this is simply part and parcel of the profession, while for others it can be very disconcerting.

One dimension of the change pendulum is the notion that “what’s old is new,” meaning that teaching philosophies and strategies come into vogue, then fade from use, only to be resurrected a decade or so later. Diane described this phenomenon: “…with whole language, that was all done before…like ten years before…we did this thing called holistic scoring, and then that went away…[innovations] always do, it seems. Every few years, something is ‘the new thing,’ the new approach that has all the answers. And everyone jumps on the bandwagon, or gets told to jump on. But that’s just the way it is.” Diane cites this pattern of futility to justify resisting change: “I might not have been into the newest things, but I was a good teacher. You know, good teaching is good teaching – it doesn’t go out of style.” She summarized twenty years of the district’s history with reading initiatives: “Cycles like that happened a few times for me, so I knew it was the same thing with a new name.”

Lisa admits that in the nineties she had no patience for colleagues who seemed closed off to change. Although she still disagrees with this mindset, with experience and maturity she has come to understand it: “People are skittish. People get gun-shy, and they don’t want to end up on the wrong side of a change that goes wrong. I think when something goes wrong, especially something as big as whole language, it scares you. It might be safer to just keep your mouth shut and let it play out. Some teachers get very nervous about change because it could make you look bad.” She now has a perspective gained through twenty years in the trenches that allows her to better understand the reluctance of some teachers to adopt changes. She reflects: “I used to love change and think it was, like, the thrill, you know, of being on the cutting edge of something new
and exciting. But now I can see why it is scary for some people. There is a lot at stake. It’s a lot of work. It’s a big risk, and, especially if you’ve been burned before, you’re reluctant.”

Julie reminisces about her first mentor, saying, “She had been teaching 35 years, but some of the stuff in her room, like a word wall and lots of singing, it was sort of like whole language, but from like her generation’s version of whole language. I can see now how the approaches come back through the generations. I can totally see now how teachers who had seen it come and go before were skeptical…it seems like we shouldn’t go jumping on board every new thing because it’s either been here all along, or it will go away because it doesn’t work…again…or still!”

Brenda also sees this as a powerful tendency affecting teachers’ responses to new curricular directives: “It is so silly saying this is the new thing. I mean, are you kidding me? I did that in the 70s. Teachers who had dug in and ignored whole language felt like they had been right, like it was smart to ride it out or just stay in the middle. You can pick up a few techniques but save face for when it fades away again. You understand this when you’ve been around for a while, but the people in charge don’t always seem to remember that.” This last comment leads into Brenda’s overriding concern about the manner in which leaders chose to present change to teachers during the whole language era. All of the participants, in fact, spoke to the importance of leadership as an element of organizational change.

**The importance of leadership.** In the participants’ district, much of the information about whole language was transmitted from novice teachers to veteran teachers. The leadership in the district endeavored to utilize the knowledge of staff freshly trained in the current methodology to provide professional development for all. From the perspective of the younger teachers, this was “exciting” and “thrilling,” while for the veteran teachers it was “insulting” and
“disrespectful.” Many of the teachers’ stories also related to their need to feel “heard” by leadership in a time of changing expectations.

Table 5

*Positive Comments on Leadership*

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<th>Positive comments on leadership</th>
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<td>• [The principal] was very supportive when we wanted to keep doing <em>Primary Phonics</em> along with whole language. We were appreciative that she listened to our opinions. - Brenda</td>
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<td>• The [most recent] assistant superintendent did a good job bringing new things to the district without offending experienced teachers…he asked us what we thought and he came into our classrooms. He also let us use lots of different approaches instead of all having to be doing exactly the same things – we know what works, and he let us have an opinion. - Brenda</td>
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<tr>
<td>• I actually felt so bad for [the principal.] She inherited this huge mess, this totally divided staff. She really tried to build trust and to listen to people. - Lisa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We were so blessed. We had a principal who trusted us and listened to us. - Lisa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• She was smart enough to know that you have to tread carefully with people and not piss them off or scare them off, or else your message is going down in flames. - Julie</td>
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Comments from the participants that indicate respect or appreciation for the administrators in their buildings or district relate to other themes that emerged from the interviews. Teachers looked with favor upon leaders who fostered collegiality within their faculty and those who allowed them to exercise agency as instructional decision makers. These teachers all described trusting and respecting their principal when and if their principal trusted and respected them. Teachers’ perceptions of their leaders during the whole language movement and beyond are closely linked to the manner in which the leaders presented ideas and training to their teachers. Brenda approvingly described a time when her principal accepted her choice to supplement the curriculum with additional phonics materials. She also highly regarded the
assistant superintendent who, unlike any of his predecessors, actually went into classrooms, spoke with, and, most importantly, listened to teachers’ opinions. Lisa sympathized with her principal’s “lose-lose situation” in which she showed “courage” by pressing onward for change despite the powerful resistance that she received from many staff members: “Her life would have been a lot easier if she had just left people alone, but those changes had to happen. She was trying to fight the tide and that must have really been awful for her, but she just kept calmly saying this was the direction we needed to go in.” Leaders who have conviction, who communicate well, and who listen to teachers’ voices earned high marks from the participants.

Their stories, therefore, revealed much disappointment and dissatisfaction with leadership that failed to do so:

Table 6

Negative comments on leadership

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<th>Negative comments on leadership</th>
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<tr>
<td>- They really tried to force us to do whole language. They didn’t take into account that what people were already doing was working just fine. -Brenda</td>
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<td>- When you’ve been teaching for over 20 years, you don’t want to be lectured to by someone brand new. –Brenda</td>
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<tr>
<td>- [Administration] jumps on this new thing, whatever it may be, and they ram it down people’s throats, and you can’t do that, because you just think that what you’ve been doing has been all wrong and you’re not doing what you’re supposed to be doing. It’s very bad for people to feel that way, so most people just stick to their guns and do it their way anyway. –Brenda</td>
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<tr>
<td>- When the next year came, they just didn’t order us any workbooks, and everyone was like, ‘Oh my God! What do we do? We don’t have a set thing to follow.’ That was very upsetting for the veteran teachers, and they actually got really mad. They felt that nobody asked their opinion. –Julie</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Some teachers were totally rattled and confused. And angry, very angry. They felt like what they had been doing was being disrespected. –Julie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- I tried to use all the materials, but there was too much. We never even used the books. I felt awful, like the town paid all this money, but it was ridiculous. Why do they do</td>
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that? Why don’t they ask us? -Julie

- Listening to a rookie tell me how to teach? - I literally have never felt so useless, and it was really insulting. -Diane

- It’s like they don’t have a clue what it’s really like, teaching. They make us jump through all these hoops, and we just can’t do it all. -Diane

The participants expressed deep frustration at feeling “unheard.” They feel that they should not only have “some say” in the decisions that affect their day-to-day work, but that their input should be valued as the voices of experts. They resent being, as Brenda described, “bulldozed, when they just tell us ‘from now on everyone is doing it this way – the end’.” This approach to leadership violates Brenda’s belief that she should retain the power to make decisions about her own classroom and her belief that teacher’s “shouldn’t have to be clones.” Many comments were made indicating that the conflict around whole language may have been less about the methodology itself and more about the way in which the message was conveyed to teachers. Leaders made decisions about how to present professional development about whole language, and, in some instances, novice teachers were asked by principals to teach their fellow, more experienced teachers about whole language. The participants indicated that this approach backfired, as the novice teachers came off as “arrogant” and the principals were perceived by the veteran teachers to “favor their little pets.” While the participants admit not having all the answers about how change should most palatably be introduced, they seem to agree that missteps were made by administrators as they tried to reform their schools’ literacy practices.

A sentiment expressed by Lisa embodies the mixed emotions toward leadership felt by teachers most personally involved in the whole language controversy: “[The principal] was really pushing for change, and she should have been, because the whole school was just so stuck and stale. She had us ‘share’ what we were doing, and that didn’t go over well. When the
veterans wouldn’t budge, she really shook things up and transferred everyone’s grade levels, and then the [expletive] really hit the fan. Unfortunately for us, we [new teachers] got caught in the crossfire. We never knew, starting out, that we were going to face such a battle. I think we were just very naïve. Thank God we had each other.” Here, Lisa voices another important aspect of teachers’ experiences with the dramatic reading wars and with change in general: the role of collegiality.

**Relationships with colleagues.** An interesting incongruity emerges when the participants’ stories are mined for the meaning of their experiences with fellow teachers. As revealed in the previous section on teachers’ preference for autonomy, these educators were unanimous in insisting that teachers should be empowered to make decisions about their own students’ needs. Several of the participants’ comments affirmed the notion that teachers may or may not buy into new programming, but that once they “close their classroom door,” they are going to do what they feel is best for their students and for them. In this respect, some teachers seek out isolation, for it is then that they have the most control over their work. Diane, in particular, seems to think of herself as island: “Of course I can be a team player, but it is my classroom. Out there, there is all of this pressure and confusion about what we should be doing, but I can close my door and then it’s me and my kids, and we’re fine.” Diane’s interview highlights the perception that some teachers’ sense of efficacy comes under siege during times of change, and so their own classroom, in which they are at the helm, provides them with refuge.

In contrast with this individual stance, teachers do work in groups through which they may gain support and understanding. Brenda recalls that in her first year of teaching, it was the veteran fellow first grade teacher who took Brenda under her wing: “I learned more from her than anyone else, more than in four years of college.” Julie also garnered much support from
colleagues: “I think that’s how we can do this job because it’s too hard otherwise. We share ideas and lessons and say, ‘Here, I tried this and it went really well – want a copy?’ or ‘Oh my God this lesson was a disaster. Don’t bother!’ I always need to have a team I can turn to.”

Brenda echoes this sentiment when revisiting the years of the whole language age: “We had a whole district full of teachers trying to learn something new. At times, it was great – there was so much sharing and growing. But it was handled so poorly, and teachers started turning on each other. The new teachers came across as arrogant, and the experienced teachers felt angry, or...threatened, even. It’s not a competition, but it all got so ugly. I had already been around the block a few times, so I tried to stay out of it at that point.”

Lisa’s experiences with colleagues during the whole language era reflect a spectrum of emotions. With likeminded teachers, she felt fulfillment, trust, and empowerment. She cried while she described her connection to fellow whole language teachers: “It was like having a soul-mate. A teacher who believes what you do and who supports you while you go on this amazing journey together. You need colleagues to bounce ideas off and to learn together. Those early years, the sharing, presenting workshops, it was like a high for me, like a drug. It was so exciting every day, and I felt like we were doing what we were born to do.” Lisa believes that this type of “sisterhood” between teachers was at the core of the whole language mission. She elaborated: “Whole language was about discovery and about constructing our own knowledge and learning. My kids saw that their teachers were in love with learning and helping each other, so they fell in love with learning too. We were just a huge community of learners, and I don’t think I’ve ever felt that way since.”

Rather than collaborative relationships, her interactions with the veteran teachers felt combative. When an article appeared in the local paper citing the rift between the new and
veteran teachers at the school, Lisa’s tense relationship with fellow teachers came to a head:

“They were attacking whole language, so they were attacking ME, because it was so personal
and everything I believed in and everything I was as a teacher and a person was being ripped
apart in the paper. [Rival teacher] put her (students’) parents up to going to the newspaper, you
know. She dragged us through the mud, and all because she refused to change or try to
something new. It’s still baffling to me.” Lisa realizes that she carries her early experiences,
both positive and negative, with colleagues into her teaching today. “Those years shaped who I
am. I have battle-scars, that’s for sure, so I feel myself trying to be more neutral, or subtle,
instead of coming on like a bulldozer. Teaching in tension, or competition, or even hatred – I
can’t do that again. And nobody should be put in that position. But I also won’t give up on what
I know is right for kids. I have to answer for my kids. Teachers who refuse to try something
new, that still frustrates me, but I can see the other side a little better now. But just a little,” she
concluded, laughing.

Summary of Findings

Recalling their experiences from the whole language era through in-depth interviews
evoked powerful feelings in the participants. Several themes emerged from the teachers’ stories
that illuminated their responses to living through a failed initiative. Those novices who
considered themselves whole language teachers saw their belief system falter and then crumble
due to confusion, polarizing disputes, and pressure from the media, policymakers, and families.
Those veterans who had been privy to the ebb and flow of curricular change were far less
surprised when whole language fell from grace. The theme of the importance of leadership in
the change process emerged from the teachers’ narratives. Administrators’ who arranged for
novice teachers to provide professional development to veteran teachers inadvertently
manipulated the novices and offended the veterans. Relationships among colleagues were volatile, as evidenced by the participants’ reflections. An undercurrent throughout all of the interviews pointed to the impact that the rise and fall of whole language had on teachers’ sense of efficacy and agency. The participants’ experiences during the mid 1990s have remained with them as they continue to navigate education’s continually changing landscape.

Chapter V: Discussion of the Research Findings

Revisiting the Problem of Practice

Teachers are the heart of educational reform. Sustained and significant improvement cannot occur without their accord and commitment. Therefore, understanding teachers’ attitudes toward change is essential. Experienced educators will have seen many innovations come and go throughout their careers. These trends often reflect the age-old debate between supporters of student-centered inquiry and teacher-centered instruction (Kaminsky, 1993). Developments in reading philosophy and pedagogy are infamously polarized, sometimes resembling a swinging pendulum between traditional and progressive approaches. Teachers are caught in the middle, confused or frustrated as “best practice” in reading continually shifts beneath their feet.

The highly charged dispute of the 1990s between proponents of whole language and those of phonics-based instruction (Pearson, 2004) embodies this phenomenon and merits study as a force which shaped the attitudes of a generation of teachers. The legacy of that contentious period in education’s history may be a sense of powerlessness or cynicism in some of today’s teachers who are attempting to navigate the ongoing reforms in the teaching of reading. The importance of teacher qualification and habits of mind in maximizing student success simply cannot be overstated (Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002), and exposure to fruitless initiatives has been found to create in teachers a sense of helplessness and disengagement (Eisner, 2004).
The experiences and voices of teachers who weathered the whole language clash offer crucial insights for those wishing to secure teacher support in future reform. Safeguarding teachers’ sense of efficacy and agency in the face of continuous change is key to lasting improvement.

**Review of Methodology**

This study was specifically designed to address the following research question:

How did teachers’ experiences with the rise and fall of the whole language philosophy of reading instruction during the 1990s affect them and shape their attitudes toward change?

To answer this question, a narrative inquiry was conducted in which the experiences of four teachers were explored through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The participants taught first or second grade in the public school system of a small town in southeastern Massachusetts during the mid-1990s. The teachers’ stories of their lived experiences were probed for significant themes. Documentary evidence from the era stimulated, supported, and contextualized the interview data, and reflective memos chronicled the researcher’s observations throughout and positionality within the interview process. An experience-centered approach to narrative inquiry (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2008) was employed to honor the dialogical/performance nature of narrative interviews (Riessman, 2008). Triangulation of sources through documentary sources, interviews, and reflective memos and validation strategies (such as member checks and peer debriefing) were employed to secure the trustworthiness of the findings.

This chapter will be broken down into the following sections: discussion of the major findings; discussion of the findings in relation to the theoretical framework; discussion of the findings in relation to the literature review; conclusion; limitations; significance of the study; future studies; and next steps.
Discussion of Major Findings

The interviewees recounted their experiences during the whole language era. Through a careful analysis of interview transcripts, the following themes, as presented in Table 7, emerged through the participants’ stories.

Table 7

Major Themes

- Whole language as a failed change initiative
- Teachers’ agency as instructional decision makers
- The pendulum of change
- The role of leadership
- Relationships with colleagues

Each of these overarching themes is discussed below.

Whole language as a failed change initiative. The participants had clear and heartfelt memories connected to their experiences during the whole language/phonics controversy. Although each teacher had her opinion as to whether whole language was, in fact, an effective methodology, they all agreed that several things went very wrong in its implementation. While the newer teachers felt excited and empowered by their leadership role within their schools, the veteran teachers felt marginalized and even insulted that sweeping changes were being imposed upon them and with rookies leading the charge, no less. The newer teachers had been trained in whole language at their respective universities, but the experienced teachers received their information about the methodology by word of mouth and by piecemeal workshops.

Diane, who understood whole language to mean “no phonics,” admittedly never gave it a chance, and then felt fully vindicated in her stance of resistance when the movement failed.
Brenda, a veteran, and Julie, a novice, both viewed whole language as a balanced approach blending skills-based phonics and process-based naturalistic techniques. They felt that whole language had considerable merit but was communicated and interpreted ineffectively. Lisa, who had fully embraced the methodology and philosophy behind it, was the most personally invested in its growth and then devastated by its demise. She grieves the days of the empowering movement that was tragically misunderstood. All of the participants report that whole language ultimately was doomed not by inherent flaws but by the polarizing strife that surrounded it and by the poorly planned manner in which it was presented to teachers.

**Teachers’ agency as instructional decision makers.** The notion that change will permeate the classroom door only if the teacher so chooses is prevalent in education. Each of the four participants spoke to the power of teachers to make decisions about what does and does not enter into classroom practice. Driven primarily by their overarching concern about the limited amount of instructional time they have, the teachers explicated the various ways in which they and their colleagues must choose if and how to adopt, modify, or reject a new practice. They do so based on their assessment of the practice’s merit and feasibility with regard to their own students and setting, as well as on their previous experience with similar practices. They described welcoming or spurning the recommendations of whole language advocates based on the extent to which the new information did or did not resonate with them. At times, they were vocal and forthright about their intentions, but at other times, they paid lip service at the mandated workshop and then quietly maintained the status quo back in their classrooms. The participants fiercely defend their right and responsibility to have the final say in how to utilize their instructional time once the classroom door closes, and they deeply resent when their autonomy and agency are encroached upon.
The pendulum of change. Teacher’s descriptions of educational approaches cycling in and out of fashion convey their feelings of frustration and powerlessness. It is an unbecoming paradigm for those who influence policy to carry, and yet, in the eyes of this study’s participants, it is often accurate. Conventional wisdom about how reading out to be taught appears to oscillate between highly structured, skill-focused principles and developmental, process-focused principles. The veteran teachers in this study made reference to feeling a certain déjà vu when whole language was rising in acceptance. For Brenda, this was a reassuring feeling, that she had done this type of teaching before and so would be able to do it again. For Diane, however, the familiarity of some aspects of whole language led her to feel cynicism and to dismiss it as a passing fad with which she needn’t waste her time and energy. Both Julie and Lisa reported that it was not until later in their careers that they recognized the “what’s old is new again” pattern of innovation. In the mid 1990s, they did not yet have the historical perspective to see whole language as their generation’s iteration of long-standing approaches. Their experiences since then have, however, made them quite wary of the pendulum’s futile swings.

The importance of leadership. Commentary on the role that principals and other administrators played in the whole language era was infused throughout the interviewees’ narratives. Those above them in the hierarchy have considerable power to affect their working lives, and each teacher illustrated leaders whose choices and styles in wielding that power they either liked or disliked. Without exception, the teachers felt that their voices should be heard and their perspectives should be sought. They garner strength and fulfillment when they are a valued member of the team, but they recoil when an administrator doesn’t ask or seem to care what they think. In their stories about the whole language years, they recounted encountering both types of leaders, and this directly contributed to their level of engagement in their schools’ efforts. The
participants seemed to recognize that leaders often inherit problems that they did not create and that being an administrator in a time of conflict is indeed a thankless job which requires tremendous diplomacy. The stakes are very high for leaders, because, as the participants describe, teachers’ future attitudes toward leaders are very much shaped by the respect or the grudges they develop toward their leaders today. The interpersonal skills and vision of savvy leadership is critical for teachers to get with the program.

**Relationships with colleagues.** During their experiences with the rise and fall of whole language, the participants’ interactions with their fellow teachers left lasting impressions on them. Many fond memories of treasured and trusted teammates who shared ideas and the workload were imparted, while darker emotions accompanied stories of rivalries and conflict. The overriding sense was that, during the whole language years, the nature of relationships between colleagues was largely determined along generational lines. Divisive opinions over the curriculum translated into division among fellow teachers. It is important to note that, at this time, there was no mentoring or induction program for novice teachers to guide them in how to enter an existing school community with regard to its norms and values. The participants reported with some regretful sighs that contentious relationships between teammates were so intense as to be evident to the community at large. This is supported by the documentary evidence; newspaper articles and internal correspondence point to a staff divided. As Lisa, now the wiser for wear, put it, “I wish I knew then what I know now: we need to be in this together; otherwise, the job is just too hard.”
Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework

This study was informed through the perspective of Change Theory and Self Efficacy Theory. These theories served as a lens through which to explore and understand the experiences of classroom teachers during the whole language era.

Change theory. The great insights into teachers’ experiences that have resulted from this narrative inquiry cohere with and extend many precepts of change theory. Fullan (2001, 2008) cites key elements that lead to sustainable change, and he emphasizes a focus on capacity building. Capacity building allows individuals within an organization to take risks “based on knowledge and insight” (2008, p. 61). This empowerment to decide one’s course of action is a central theme that emerged from the participants’ interviews. The four teachers reported that they have felt energized and engaged when treated as professionals with expertise, but they have felt discouraged and disengaged when their capacity as decision makers is not valued. Collegial capacity building also breeds successful change. According to Fullan, “When peers interact purposefully, their expectation of one another creates positive pressure to accomplish goals...” (p. 63). The participants in this study reportedly thrived when such collaboration was at play in their careers, and they craved it when it was lacking.

Fullan’s change theory also cites as essential “tri-level engagement” through which actors at the school and community level, the district level, and the state or national level are unified and collaborating toward their common goal. The participants in this study recall great disconnects between teachers and also between teachers and leadership during the reading wars of the 1990s. According to Brenda, “It seemed like the right hand didn’t know what the left hand was doing.” The whole language movement seems to have lacked the “permeable connectivity” or mutual influence within and across levels of an organization in order to it to successfully
change. Leadership’s decisions to build support for a reform from the bottom up or to impose it from the top down played a considerable part in teacher’s “buy in” to the whole language endeavor. The premise that goals set without teachers’ voices are not likely to be reached and sustained (Fullan, 2001, 2003, 2005; Hargreaves, 2003) played out in the participants’ lives. The stories of the teachers reveal that their sense of having been either supported or snubbed by those in authority stays with them as they move forward and colors the way in which they receive future proposed change efforts. While Fullan does emphasize the importance of leadership and relationships in organizational change, this study highlights the enduring effects of previous experiences on teachers’ psyches. The participants recall with vivid detail decades-old times when they have felt included or excluded in the decisions that directly affect their work. This finding illustrates that, in order for teachers to listen to tomorrow’s change messages, they must feel listened to today.

Consistent with Darling-Hammond’s (1997) assertion that individual teachers must act and choose in ways that uphold the change model, or no change will occur at the classroom level, the findings of this study emphasize teachers’ preference for autonomy within their own classrooms. As teachers who were presented with directives to implement whole language, the participants readily acknowledged that, once within the sanctity of their own classrooms, they did what felt right to them. This confirms Hargreaves et al.’s theory (2001) that teachers’ rely heavily on their professional experience to filter and temper a proposed change, determining if it is feasible and likely to benefit their students before adding it to their repertoire. Again, teachers seem, for better or worse, to carry the markings of their earlier change experiences for a very long time.
In relation to Fullan’s (2001) argument that the number of ill-fated initiatives to which teachers are exposed is strongly related to those teachers’ resistance to and skepticism toward future initiatives, the findings of this study are consistent. Almost as if acquiring an immunity to a disease or an allergen, experienced teachers build up a resistance to fly-by-night attempts to affect change. In Julie’s words, “After a while, you realize that turning everything upside down every few years just isn’t productive – it doesn’t make any sense.” For novice teachers, the implosion of whole language was their first taste of this mindset, while for veterans, their hesitancy was reinforced when whole language fell apart. In the wake of whole language’s demise, all of the participants indicated feeling “gun shy” when the next new thing was being hailed. The findings of this study provide concrete, examples and affirmation for the various aspects of change theory.

**Self efficacy theory.** The findings of this study exemplify some of the concepts central to self efficacy theory. Bandura described self-efficacy as “people’s judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance” (Bandura, 1986, p. 391). Previous experiences create a sense of high or low self efficacy. When the participants of this study shared their stories from the 1990s, they established that the remnants of their experiences have lived on for a very long time. Repeated failures are detrimental to one’s self efficacy and to one’s willingness to engage in future ventures. Similarly, exposure to failed attempts at reform contributes to a sense of reluctance or cynicism toward future engagement. Feeling disenfranchised, unheard, and even offended creates in teachers a lasting legacy of resistance and hesitancy.

The participants spoke of waves of reading initiatives heralding unceasing additions to their responsibilities causing them to feel powerless. Teachers fight to retain agency, or the
sense that one is capable of intentional pursuits of courses of action. However, as posited in self
efficacy theory, agency is a function of environmental influences, our current and past behavior,
and internal personal cognitive, affective, and biological processes. During parts of the whole
language years, the participants of this study felt at the whim of environmental influences; they
felt the effects of their past behavior on their present and future behavior; and they felt anxiety
and difficulty in persisting when there was a barrage of work to be done in revamping their
teaching. These were times that their agency was at risk. This sense of compromised efficacy
influenced the future attitudes of the participants when they were faced with subsequent
proposed changes in curriculum. Each teacher expressed the sense that their past engagement in
the whole language period continued to influence them for decades whenever they assessed if a
new endeavor would be worth the effort; if their novel actions, should they be undertaken, would
be fruitful or not. This study adds to the knowledge base about teachers’ agency and self-
efficacy by revealing the long-term and powerful impact of attempts at reform.

Another aspect of self efficacy theory that manifested in the participants’ lives is that of
efficacy expectation. Bandura suggested that efficacy expectation, or the conviction that an
individual is personally capable of successfully executing actions that will result in the desired
outcome, fortifies motivation and enables engagement. Once engaged, an efficacious person is
more likely to persist in and cope with trying situations. Participants in this study spoke of their
self efficacy inflating, such as Lisa’s affirmation, “I felt like I could change the world!”, or of
much more reserved foreboding, as Diane stated, “Trends with lots of hooplah aren’t for me –
they never work out.” Persistence and coping are such fragile attributes that teachers need in
their stressful vocation, and the crumbling of an initiative such as whole language is a great
threat to efficacious habits of mind.
Teacher self-efficacy is described as a teacher’s belief that he possesses the ability to influence the learning and achievement of all students (Bandura, 1977; Hoy, 2000). Efficacious teachers tend to seek improved teaching methods and experiment with instructional materials (Allinder, 1994; Stein & Wang, 1988). The participants’ assessments of their own work are revealing when viewed through this lens. When Julie explained loving teaching because, “It is never the same day twice,” her efficacy opens her up to discovering new ways to facilitate her students’ learning, as if she is on a quest. The pressures of this profession can make it difficult to feel like this in a sustained way. Words from Diane illustrate the sentiment: “We already know what works with kids, but all this effort goes into searching for some silver bullet, some magical program. Enough already.” According to Smylie (1988), teachers’ efficacy acts as “a professional filter through which new ideas and innovations must pass before teachers internalize them and change their behaviors” (p. 148). The participants vocalized this throughout their stories in which they assessed a change in curriculum as “doable or not doable” and, therefore, as worthy or not worthy of adoption. As the pendulum swings, teachers may feel powerless, but, within their own classrooms, they make the choices they determine to be best in their particular world.

A source of this asset of efficacy may be educational leaders. According to Leithwood & Riehl (2003), teachers who feel listened to and supported by the administration tend to have higher efficacy beliefs. The stories shared through this study do, in fact, reveal that the participants’ perceptions of their principals’ level of trust in them was either empowering or deflating. Utterances such as “Why don’t they ever ask us?” (Lisa), and “I’m so lucky to have a principal who listens and cares what I think” (Julie), are highly illustrative of this powerful relationship. With some of the participants in this study, their abiding attitudes toward risk-
taking can be linked to early and formative relationships with leaders, the effects of which have lingered within them.

The goal of this inquiry is to understand the experiences and attitudes of the participants and the context in which they originated through the lens of change theory and self-efficacy theory. While the aim of qualitative research is not generalization, whole language was a powerful movement that influenced the practice and attitudes of teachers across the country and well beyond. It is reasonable to expect that other teachers carry its legacy in ways parallel to this study’s participants. Additionally, these participants’ stories resonate with lessons to be learned about teachers’ emotional and behavioral responses to change in general. Today’s educators and administrators regularly grapple with changing mandates, and voices from the teachers of whole language era may serve them well as they chart their next course.

**Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Literature Review**

The findings from this study strongly align with the literature presented in Chapter 2. The literature review focused on three guiding questions:

1. How can the whole language/phonics debate be understood within the broader context of the history of reading instruction?
2. How do changes in reading policy evolve, and how are they understood and received by classroom teachers?
3. How do teachers feel about change?

**The history of reading instruction.** The body of literature detailing the history of reading education clearly indicates a fluctuation across generations between traditional skills-based instruction and progressive language and context-based instruction. This phenomenon was evident throughout the findings of this study as well. Whether or not they were aware of the
two hundred year long debate between proponents of the two ideologies, the participants used phrases such as “skill and drill” and “touchy feely” to articulate their clear understandings of the two ends of the pedagogical spectrum. The participants noted and were frustrated by what seemed to be fruitless cycling: “Here we go again, back to phonics flashcards!” as Brenda quipped. Each teacher made mention of the risks of polarized thinking when it comes to teaching reading: Julie reflected, “It can’t be one or the other [explicit phonics or language based], kids need both.” As Lisa, the staunchest whole language advocate, confessed, “I do see now that my kids back then maybe needed more direct instruction than they got, but whole language things like writing workshop and big books, that is the real deal, and they can’t ever go away – not in my room anyway!”

The participants’ negative responses toward the whole language era largely relate to a.) disapproving of the extreme “all or nothing” message about phonics, whether it was an accurate portrayal or not, and b.) the emotional firestorm that erupted due to interpersonal issues amongst colleagues and administrators. Three of the four participants stated that key elements of the whole language methodology have greatly improved their teaching technique and style and that, they are glad whole language, in the words of Julie, “came down the pike.” All agree that, as Lisa put it, “We could have done without the drama” of the whole language years.

**The origins of reading policy.** The body of literature related to how changes in reading policy evolve and how they are understood and received by classroom teachers was probed for this study. The stories of the whole language controversy substantiate and give personal dimensions the existing research. Prior to the whole language era of the late 1980s and 1990s, the educational policy arena was dominated by just a few professional educators’ organizations and policymakers (Mazzoni, 1995). Classroom teachers had no voice in determining the
direction that reading curriculum would take. But the grassroots movement inspired by the
democratic vision of John Dewey and other progressives that swelled into a national forum was
based on the voices of classroom teachers. Teachers were empowered to create classroom
communities that valued literacy and cooperation through developmental approaches. Open and
thematic instruction put children’s interests and readiness at the forefront. Brenda, who was the
most experienced teacher during the whole language movement, remembers the different tone:
“For all those years [before whole language] we never knew or even wondered who was making
the decisions. It was like there was some higher ups somewhere who decided, ‘now we need to
use these materials instead.’ But with whole language, it was different. It was exciting. We had
freedom to really dig in and explore with our kids. It really was very nice.” The research shows
that the “freedom” to which Brenda referred may have led to the downfall of whole language.

Triggered mainly by poor results in the 1994 NAEP testing, those outside educational
circles found their voices and raised them. Business groups, parent associations, and all levels of
government became more and more curious, then concerned, then directly involved in shaping
reading policy. They asserted that with whole language there was no structure, no consistency,
in how reading was being taught classroom to classroom, let alone state to state. By the time
NCLB was signed and the report of the NRP was published, teachers’ voices had largely fallen
silent again. The literature speaks to the contrast between the loosely organized whole language
community and the well-financed advocacy groups and governmental agencies that rose up
against it. As recounted by Lisa, “It seemed like all of a sudden everyone was anti-whole
language. It was all over the news and there were phonics laws being passed. I was so shocked.
And I couldn’t understand why there wasn’t someone stepping up and fighting back. The whole
thing was just…devastating.”
The highly regulated and sanctioned landscape of reading instruction today can be largely traced back to the discord around whole language. “They’ve really tightened the leash now,” lamented Julie. The participants described throughout their interviews feeling disenfranchised in today’s climate of testing and accountability. “I can’t believe it’s come to the point where I can’t do Peter Rabbit with my kids because there just isn’t time. It’s so sad.” According to Coburn (2005), teachers respond to policy messages in five ways: rejection or ignoring, symbolic response (changing the appearance but not the substance of their teaching), parallel structures (trying to reconcile or include conflicting messages), accommodation (interpreting or altering the messages in a way that fits their existing underlying assumptions), and assimilation. Reporting of behaviors such as these was infused throughout the narratives of all of the participants in this study and emerged as a central theme of this study. Many policy actors now affect how reading is taught; classroom teachers wish simply to be among them.

**Teachers and change.** “Teachers and change? Uh-oh, look out!” This warning from Julie is an apt beginning for relating the findings of the study to the third body of literature studied. A vast corpus of research exists on teachers and change and organizational change in general. The work of Lortie (1975, 2002) toward understanding the “teaching ethos” was important in guiding this study. Lortie encapsulates teachers’ ethos as inclinations toward conservatism, individualism, and presentism. While teachers are, of course, diverse and unique people, his paradigm was validated through this study’s findings. Brenda’s attitude reflected in her statement, “I know what works, so I stick with it,” is a meaningful support for her in her teaching. Also according to Lortie, many teachers enter the profession planning to teach the way they were taught, and Brenda’s narrative supports this notion as well. Lortie and Kennedy (2005) each emphasize teachers’ “preoccupation” with time as a driving force in their attitudes...
toward change. Teachers’ priority, they suggest, is to utilize time efficiently and to maintain momentum in lessons. According to Kennedy, this reveals why many teachers preserve the status quo rather than risking the disruption that comes with new ventures. The participants in the study all wove their concern for time throughout their stories, as represented by Julie: “I’ve got 20 minutes and a group of six year olds, and they want me to do what? – Give me a break.”

A powerful quote from the literature review found great support in the findings of this study: Hess (2006) observes, “When reforms are forced on schools, the school often has more influence in modifying the reform than the reform has in modifying the school…” (Hess, 2006, p. 179). This was a central theme that bubbled up through the teachers’ many references to altering lessons and curricula to match their knowledge and needs. In Lisa’s words: “I like that program, but I refuse to use that paper. It’s too confusing, so I made my own.” Teachers may feel defensive (Alvy & Robbins) and voiceless (Orenstein) in times of change, and the interviewees agreed as they described anxiety and frustration. The participants recounted times when “resiliency” (Datnow) was at play in their schools. “When we first adopt something,” Brenda described, “there is this honeymoon phase, and everyone is trying it, but then it seems to just gradually go away, and we are all off doing our own thing again.” A compelling unity between the existing literature and this study relates to Fullan’s (2007) supposition that teachers’ resistance to change correlates to the number of failed initiatives they have experienced. The participants described feelings of déjà vu and a desire to simply ride out a change because it will soon go away.

It is important to note, however, that the participants in this study also shared some very favorable attitudes toward change. The excitement, the energy, the collaboration that can accompany a change effort in which teachers feel invested and valued is, for some, the “best part
of being a teacher.” Many comments celebrating the fact that teaching “is never the same day twice” were shared by the interviewees. When change is implemented thoughtfully, many teachers will give it their all. But this study confirms what the literature suggests about teachers and change: that teachers are discerning and practical, and, above all, “All educational change depends on what teachers do and think” (Fullan, 2001, p. 115). This study reveals that it is inaccurate to characterize teachers with a broad brush as being inherently resistant to change, for resistance is often a reasonable response to flawed reforms.

Limitations

This study has been carried out successfully and with fidelity; however, there are several limitations that must be noted. Given the small sample size and homogeneous demographics of the participants in this study, claims cannot be made regarding the generalizability of the results. Holloway and Freshwater (2007) maintain that narrative research can rely on a small number of participants, as depth rather than breadth in data collection is sought. According to Maxwell (2004), “The validity, meaningfulness, and insights of narrative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size” (p. 9).

Another limitation of the study is that the researcher herself experienced the whole language phenomenon as a teacher in the district alongside the participants. It must be noted, though, that, “The doctrine of reflexivity argues that you are free to choose personally relevant issues of research, to draw on and make explicit personal experience, and to enjoy the wisdom and companionship of your “subject” (Bannister, 1981, p. 199). While this personal connection of the researcher also means that the findings cannot necessarily be generalized, this limitation is inherent in narrative inquiry. The goal of narrative inquiry in general, and of this study in
particular, is to understand the meanings that are rendered from teachers’ stories of their lived experiences. This study, while humble, has accomplished just that.

Conclusion

The research question that directed this study was: How did teachers’ experiences with the rise and fall of the Whole Language philosophy of reading instruction during the 1990s affect them and shape their attitudes toward change? Teachers’ experiences within the whole language era provide great insight into how a trend shapes teachers as it grows and then crumbles in popularity. Reflection has revealed that whole language brought many positive and enduring elements to literacy instruction, and that it graced a generation of teachers with empowerment and efficacy. But hindsight has also brought to light the failings that led to this great movement’s demise. Whole language crumbled because it lacked the tri-level engagement, the permeable connectivity, and the capacity building that Fullan espouses. Also, the “either/or” thinking that was fueled by oversimplified messages through sensationalized media reports and inadequate teacher training set phonics and whole language as diametrically opposed to one other. This severely hampered the movement’s ability to appeal to the diverse population of teachers, for veterans tempered their judgments of whole language’s viability with their previous experiences that validated the importance of phonics. Furthermore, many veterans who perceived whole language as a recycled strategy with a new name resisted, perhaps with cause, this déjà vu like swing of the pendulum. Additionally, leadership’s decisions around how to sway or coerce these “resistant” teachers proved even more divisive to collegial relationships between the two “camps.” Government’s intervention into setting policy that clearly privileged phonics and cast aspersions on whole language ultimately led to whole language’s demise. Because the phonics/whole language controversy was neither the first nor the last time that a new approach
has swept in and then faded away, these participants’ anecdotes provide rich fodder for understanding teachers and change in general.

Inundated with change messages, teachers firmly believe that their input should be sought and their voices should be heard regarding what is best for their students. Teachers appreciate when educational leaders value their wisdom and resent when they discount their views. They assess the worthiness of reform initiatives based on their prior experience with earlier or similar versions of the approaches and with their years of practice before they decide whether to accept, modify, or reject the reform. Teachers feel supported and fulfilled through collaborative relationships with colleagues, but they can feel threatened by peers whom they perceive to be preachy or competing for the favor of parents or administrators. The findings of this study suggest that including teachers in determining the course of pedagogical change may promote among teachers a heightened sense of empowerment, engagement, and collaboration, all of which may lead to successful implementation of that change and of future reforms as well.

The insights gained from teachers’ stories invite future studies to continue to examine teachers’ perceptions of the change process and their sense of agency within it. A corps of highly effective literacy teachers is essential to the development of a highly literate society, and so it is critical that we investigate the best ways to help all teachers, and therefore all students, to reach their fullest potential. Respecting teachers as experienced agents of change and encouraging them with sensitivity and respect to engage in their own continued growth will give our students an invaluable asset.

**Future Studies**

The following list represents recommendations for further future research:

- expansion to include more teachers
- expansion to include a more diverse population
- administering a survey to gather quantitative data
- exploring the experiences of administrators (principals, curriculum directors, etc.)
  from the whole language era
- comparing and contrasting teachers’ experiences with the rise and fall of whole
  language with their present day experiences with the rise of current “best practices,”
  such as Response to Intervention (RtI) or the use of instructional technologies

The findings from this study will hopefully encourage further research into lessons that
can and must be learned from times such as the whole language era when education faltered,
opportunities were missed, and mistakes were made. Promoting a stronger historical perspective
in teachers and educational leaders may circumvent some strife among colleagues and some
leanings toward faddism that erode the credibility of leaders who invite teachers to open
themselves to something new. Education is continually changing. Teachers need support to
become comfortable with this reality. Equally important, though, is the need for those driving
change to take care that it is thoughtful, purposeful, and fruitful change, so that teachers don’t
perceive it as “chasing our tails” or “jumping through hoops,” but can instead see it as a welcome
opportunity for continual growth.

**Significance of the Study**

This study is important to the field of education because it highlights the forces that shape
teachers’ attitudes and demeanor. On the frontlines of education, teachers of all disciplines have
both the privilege and pressure of working most directly with children. The emotional impact of
this responsibility must be acknowledged. According to the National Education Association, the
National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future estimates that one-third of all new
teachers leave teaching after three years, and 46 percent withdraw from the field within five years. Surveys of these “leavers” conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics reveal the most commonly cited reasons for departure from the field include: lack of respect and influence; too little support; and stress over changing mandates, particularly in relation to student testing and accountability. These challenges echo the findings of the present study: the change process exacts a dear price. Educational leaders must provide for teachers’ well-being as they grapple with the pace and pressures of the classroom.

Those at the helm must also recognize that today’s young people entering the workforce, known as Millennials, tend to be more team- and process-oriented and to implement technology seamlessly throughout their lives (Howe & Strauss, 2003). How will these inclinations meld with earlier generations who are reputed to “close the classroom door” and to be extremely cautious regarding novel teaching techniques? Novice teachers need to acquire a historical perspective about the mutability of pedagogy and a respect for the words of wisdom of the veteran teachers who have endured the realities of the profession. In turn, longstanding teachers would be well served to continue their journey through the flux of progress knowing that recently trained beginners often bring innovative solutions to the table.

If we hope to give our students the greatest chance at success, we have to provide them with the greatest teachers. The participants in this study shared the many ways that drama surrounding the whole language debate shaped them as people and as professionals. Its lasting impact remained within them as they faced future undertakings. Increasing awareness of how teachers are profoundly affected by ill-conceived ventures in which they have no voice is critical if we have any hope of truly maximizing teacher effectiveness and, therefore, student success. As Diane verbalized, “Teaching will always change, and I guess it should. Can you imagine if
medicine stayed the same instead of always improving? We would be outraged. And dead or
dying! But the difference is, to me anyway, that doctors are respected as professionals, and they
can choose what their patients need. That’s a big difference.” Change will not go away, nor
should it. But change just for the sake of change, change that is hasty or is making a comeback
on the swinging pendulum, takes a hefty and enduring toll on teachers’ psyche. Fledgling
teachers may become overwhelmed by the forces at play, while senior staff-members may spurn
this, and any subsequent, call to change. When teachers struggle, students follow suit.

This study was undergirded by change theory and self-efficacy theory, and it was through
the lenses of these theories that the many important aspects of teachers’ experiences came to
light. The findings were in keeping with what the theories suggest and led to a more nuanced
understanding of the impact of failed and frequent change initiatives on the teachers who
endeavor to implement them. The participants’ narratives also affirmed past research into the
history of the whole language movement and other reform in reading education, and the ways in
which policy evolves prior to landing on teachers’ doorsteps. New and enhanced understanding
emerged from this study about how change makes teachers feel about their work and about
themselves, and future studies will hopefully follow, for teachers and change will most certainly
continue to face each other.

Next Steps

With immense changes underway in teacher evaluation systems, teachers will come
under increased scrutiny and must present as current and reflective practitioners. The propensity
of some teachers to resist change must be viewed not as laziness or stubbornness, but rather as a
learned response to previous experiences with reform or to anxiety in the face of increasing
demands made on their limited time. Providing effective pre-service and in-service training, as
well as mentoring, may support teachers in the emotional aspects of their craft. Teaching is an entirely personal undertaking through which we share ourselves with future generations. We need and deserve support to do so.

**Personal Reflection**

My initial coursework in the doctoral program at Northeastern explored the historical roots of curriculum and the study of multidimensional organizational change. These topics served as a catalyst for tremendous reflection upon my own career, and, subsequently, for my research interest. This inquiry has been very personally meaningful as it has led me to delve into my own teacher-life story. Akin to the four participants in this inquiry, I also was teaching in the district featured herein during the whole language period. As a “survivor” of the reading wars, I sought to understand this important period in the history of education and the ways that it influenced teachers like myself. Many of the experiences and emotions articulated by the participants resonated very clearly with me, and as the study progressed, I came to realize that this study would have depth and breadth beyond what I anticipated. While the “setting” of our stories may have been the whole language era, the “plotline” was the journey of change itself, and that transcends education into the wider human experience.

Hired directly out of college in 1990, I literally came of age teaching in the midst of the whole language controversy. Three other brand-new teachers and I were selected by a first year principal determined to bring the winds of change and a whole language approach to what she privately referred to as a “stale” climate. Incredibly naïve, I had no idea that whole language would soon be at the heart of one of the most contentious debates in education’s history, and that I was sailing right into it, like the Andrea Gail into The Perfect Storm.
At faculty meetings and in-service workshops that first year, the whole language philosophy and approach were being espoused, and our principal asked us to “share” our work with the veteran teachers. “Sharing” is a good thing, I thought, and I of course was flattered by the request. My twenty-two year-old self got up and excitedly prattled on about Writing Workshop and “KidSpell,” showing the staff samples of my children’s endearing developmental attempts at writing. By our second and third years, my fellow “new” teachers and I were being asked to speak to parent groups, to committees, and to the other schools in the district. I did not perceive that, under their breath, the veterans were whispering about how we had not earned the right to be telling them how to teach. It never occurred to us that our exciting new role as young gurus and leaders of professional development workshops could be problematic. Our boss was asking us to “share,” and we were happy to oblige. We knew that we represented change, and we were proud to wear that banner. I was even given a T-shirt by the families of my class that read “Change Is Good.” Of course I happily and unthinkingly wore it at school. I now cringe to think how insulting that may have felt to some of the seasoned staff. We whole language enthusiasts were thrilled to be part of a new day’s dawning, but what we had absolutely no sense of at all, however, was the politics of school culture and the perils of change.

We did recognize that instruction elsewhere in our building and district was very “old school.” There were workbooks galore and desks in rows, which, according to our training, was “developmentally inappropriate.” I never overtly looked down my nose at traditional teachers and their traditional classrooms; however, I now recognize that I also never asked a veteran teacher a single question. As a novice teacher, I should have sought the advice of my experienced colleagues or expressed interest in the displays they had outside their classrooms. The fact that I did none of this must have appeared, at best, indifferent, if not outright arrogant. I
tacitly, through my one-way approach of “sharing,” indicated that there was nothing in their work that I valued and nothing that they could teach me. I regret this very much today.

We newer teachers didn’t know it at the time, but rumblings were mounting. Behind our backs we whole language teachers were being referred to as “The Clique” or even “The Cult.” I was aware that, despite all of our workshops on whole language, many teachers were simply trudging on down the old-school road with their archaic worksheets, but I didn’t understand why. I gradually came to view and judge these teachers as stubborn, closed-minded, and somewhat lazy as their instruction remained unchanged. Our group did, however, happily note that some innovative things were happening with a few veteran staff members, and that point has always stuck with me. It is not a matter of age or years in the trenches that solely determines a teacher’s attitude toward change. Two of the teachers were far older than me and far more experienced, but were very open to change and saw it as their obligation and their joy to keep learning. They also shared with me the fact that these progressive ideas and techniques were actually nothing new. The fact that ten, twenty, and thirty years prior there had been “fads” or “trends” that stemmed from a whole-language type of philosophy was a revelation to me. It was these teachers who gave me my first insights into what I now understand to be “the Pendulum.” To the teachers in my school who had been around the block a few times, they had learned that all they had to do was to wait it out, and this iteration of progressive teaching would go away this time, too.

As it turned out, the resistors who said, either actively or passively, “And this, too, shall pass,” actually were correct. When the whole language movement started to crumble, I had to be very much on the defensive as the whole language foundation of my training was eroding. Negative press served to frighten and incite parents, further fueling an already raging conflict.
The schism in our school worsened and the rift was palpable. I was writing newsletters and holding informational meetings to quell the rumors and address the concerns about whole language. I felt so lost and confused and shed many tears of anger, anxiety, frustration, and embarrassment. We had fallen from being the darlings of consultants’ reports and presenters at workshops to being whispered about by parents when we walked through the lobby. Tensions ran high between those of us on staff who wore the now scarlet letter of whole language and our colleagues who were vindicated and quietly tickled pink that direct phonics instruction was coming steaming back into favor. My sense of efficacy was shattered, and it would be many years before I would put myself “out there” again in the name of what I believed in.

With the passage of time, things gradually settled down. The pedagogical pendulum came to settle somewhere in the middle, with today’s Balanced Literacy approach. Neither of the extreme viewpoints on all-phonics or no-phonics had held “the answer,” and today we largely see that our students need the best of both approaches. I look back on this time of “the reading war” now, both as a veteran myself and as doctoral student studying the change process, and I recognize the significance of this era. I have learned a great deal from it, and I continue to ponder many questions about it and other issues related to educational change. Among the lessons I have learned are:

- It is critical that we as professional educators acquire an historical perspective so that we may understand from whence our current practices have come and where we are today on the arc of the pedagogical pendulum. We regard the constraints of time as our greatest adversary in meeting our students’ needs. When something seems like a repackaged, warmed over, new name for yesterday’s news, it is clear to me now why many of us won’t get on board the swinging pendulum.
• There is great value in resistance. It is an essential force in the change process. It can serve to make the agents of change more determined and more responsible to listen to and address opposing voices as they move forward in the problem solving process. Overt, healthy dialogue elevates everyone’s level of thinking. Teachers’ valuing of autonomy and the difficulty of “penetrating the classroom door” are potent forces that must be recognized and met with very careful consideration.

• Who should herald change? My personal and painful experience tells me that it is not the brand new, green-behind-the-ears teachers. I can see how my zealously preaching the joys and merits of whole language led to resentment among the veteran staff. I hadn’t paid my dues. Who did I think I was? I am grateful that our current principal would never use beginning teachers the way that I was used.

• The word change itself not only is unsettling but is inherently critical. It makes people feel defensive for its very meaning implies that what we are doing isn’t good enough. We definitely shouldn’t parade around wearing the intimidating word emblazoned on T-shirts. We must respect the complexities of the powerfully personal aspects of change for teachers. We who strive to instill in our students a love for learning could perhaps become more comfortable with change if we saw it not as an insult or criticism, but rather as an opportunity to keep learning ourselves.

Today, older and wiser, I am guided by the memories of all that transpired in the 1990s and in every change wave since. Because I have felt how painful and frightening it is to teach amid conflict and dysfunction, I now facilitate, safeguard, and treasure collegiality and unity within my team of teachers. We continually strive to help each other to give all our students all that they deserve. Colleagues trusting each other and collaborating as respectful partners is a
core value that I carry like a birthmark created by my coming of age during a time of great upheaval. In similar fashion, all of the participants in this study trace the roots of some of their behaviors and views back to their personal histories with change. What was done and felt in the past drive what we do and feel in the present and future.

This study has afforded all of us who participated the opportunity for profound enlightenment and healing. Reminiscing and reflecting during the interview process allowed us to truly hear each other’s perspectives, largely for the first time. Whether “friends or foes” in the 1990s, we each realized that everyone acted and reacted based on what we believed and felt at the time was best for our children. One interview that began with defensive body language and reserved exchanges concluded with hugs and laughter. The wariness that we former rivals felt toward each other for these past twenty years melted away over yellowing newspaper clippings and new respect for each other. We agreed that, when struggling through the barrage of challenges that we frequently face, we teachers should turn to each other rather turning on each other.

For many years, a continuous stream of change messages have been navigated by educators, and this will only intensify in the future. We feel the burden of this responsibility very deeply and personally and also carry with us the residual weight of our earlier experiences with change. As we encounter new expectations tied to Race to the Top, Response to Intervention, technology in education, and much more, we yearn for support and respect. Change is a difficult and emotional process which must be approached in ways that are purposeful and respectful toward teachers. Change that is well-planned and well-communicated may be well-received by dedicated educators. In order for teachers to affect change, it must first be appreciated that change affects teachers. Teaching requires strength and persistence, joy and courage, and an
endless love and capacity for learning. Education, as a vibrant entity, is and always will be evolving. As John F. Kennedy pronounced, “Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future.” We teachers, proud to be lifelong learners, are poised to embrace that future.
References


Appendix A

Northeastern University’s College of Professional Studies
Name of Investigator: Stacey Sweeney
Title of Project: Exploring the Experiences of Teachers during the Whole Language Movement: A Narrative Inquiry

Request to Participate in Research
I would like to invite you to take part in a research project. The purpose of this research is to understand the perspectives of teachers who experienced the Whole Language movement of the 1990s.

You must be at least 18 years old to be in this research project. The study will take place at a location that is convenient for you and will take about 1-2 hours. If you decide to take part in this study, I will ask you to participate in an interview about your experiences while teaching in the district in the 1990s.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study. However, your answers may help us to learn more about how teachers experience change initiatives.

The possible risks or discomforts of the study are minimal. You may feel a little uncomfortable answering reflective questions about your teaching experiences during a challenging time. Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. Only the researcher will know that you participated in this study. Any reports or publications based on this research will not identify you or any individual as being of this project. Participants’ names will be changed. The decision to participate in this research project is up to you. You do not have to participate, and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at any time.

You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to call me, the person mainly responsible for the research, at 617-371-8475.

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.7570, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish. You may keep this form for yourself.

Thank you very much.
Stacey Sweeney
Appendix B

Interview Questions

• Can you describe what comes to mind when you hear the term Whole Language?
• What do you recall about Whole Language in the district in the 1990s?
• To what extent did Whole Language influence your teaching in the 1990s?
• Can you describe the dynamics within the faculty in regard to Whole Language?
• In your recollection, to what extent did the principal/administrators support the use of Whole Language?
• How was information and training in Whole Language communicated to teachers?
• Can you describe your experiences with your students’ parents during the Whole Language era?
• Why do you think Whole Language faded from use?
• How did you feel when Whole Language became frowned upon?
• How have your experiences during the Whole Language controversy continued to shape your thinking and attitudes?
### Appendix C

#### Table 8

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Transcript</th>
<th>In Vivo Coding</th>
<th>Paralanguage (dialogical analysis)</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Link to Theoretical Framework</th>
<th>Reflective Memo</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brenda:</strong> “The latest fad was being crammed down people’s throats, especially by new teachers who didn’t even know what they were doing yet. Sorry.”</td>
<td>Hand gesture signifying force</td>
<td>Pendulum of change</td>
<td>Eisner: sense of victimization in teachers expected to continually change to no end.</td>
<td>She and I have discussed over the years how I was one of those new teachers who rubbed the veterans the wrong way. This is what she means by “sorry” – sorry for bringing up our own conflict.</td>
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<td>Lisa: “The thing that was so great about whole language was that it came from teachers – it was ours. But that also meant it meant something different to everyone. It’s practically impossible for something like that to stay afloat.”</td>
<td>Hands to heart with “ours” and wistful nodding of head</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Darling Hammond: a sense of efficacy grows when people are able to control and influence their work</td>
<td>This is definitely the wisdom of hindsight – she has reflected on what went and why it went wrong.</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Julie: “She was smart enough to know that you have to tread carefully with people and not piss them off or scare them off, or else your message is going down in flames”</td>
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