

The Impact of Whole Language Practices on the Reading Instruction of Second-Grade African American Males

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Abstract

Research consistently shows African American boys in the early elementary grades often lag behind their peers in reading proficiency. This reading gap is particularly evident in under-resourced communities, where high-quality, culturally responsive instruction is often limited and governed by the principles of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, which emphasizes accountability and equity in ensuring all students succeed. This study investigated whether alternative instructional approaches can lead to improved outcomes for struggling readers. Specifically, this study examined the impact of whole language instructional practices on the reading achievement of second-grade African American boys, age 7 to 8 years, in a rural Title I elementary school serving approximately 119 students.

In this research study, a group of second-grade African American boys received reading instruction using a whole language approach, which focuses on meaning-making, context, and student engagement with authentic texts, in contrast to traditional phonics-based instruction. Pre- and post-assessment reading data were collected to analyze the correlation between instructional method and reading performance. The results indicated whole language practices had a positive influence on reading achievement for the participating students. These findings show that incorporating whole language strategies may provide a more effective and inclusive approach to improving literacy outcomes for African American boys in alignment with the goals of NCLB, and adopting a whole language approach may be a viable strategy to enhance literacy outcomes among African American boys in similar educational settings.

Keywords: African American boys, whole language instruction, reading achievement, Title I schools, culturally responsive teaching

Reading proficiency is a foundational skill that is essential for academic achievement and lifelong learning. Early literacy development, especially in the primary grades, plays a critical role in shaping a child's educational trajectory. Despite widespread recognition of the importance of reading proficiency, significant disparities in reading achievement persist among student subgroups in the United States. One of the most consistently underperforming groups in reading assessments is African American boys in elementary school (Ferguson, 2003; Tatum, 2006). By the second grade, when students are typically between the ages of 7 and 8 years, many African American boys are already reading below grade level, placing them at an academic disadvantage that often compounds over time (Howard, 2010).

This issue is especially prevalent in rural schools serving low-income populations. In Title I schools, where most students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, limited resources, outdated instructional materials, and staffing challenges often increase educational inequalities

(Milner, 2012). These systemic barriers hinder educators' ability to effectively meet the needs of all learners, particularly those already at risk of academic failure.

The federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 was implemented with the intent to close the achievement gaps by holding schools accountable for student performance and ensuring all children, regardless of background, receive a high-quality education (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Though NCLB emphasized standardized assessments and accountability, it also highlighted the urgent need to adopt effective instructional strategies tailored to diverse learners. However, many educators continue to rely heavily on phonics-based instruction, which, though evidence-based, may not address the broader linguistic and cultural needs of African American boys (Delpit, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

In response to the challenge of addressing the linguistic and cultural needs of diverse learners, some literacy educators have advocated for the use of the whole language approach, which emphasizes reading as a meaning-making process through immersion in authentic texts, language-rich environments, and student-centered learning experiences (Cambourne, 1995; Goodman, 1986). Unlike phonics-based instruction, which isolates skills such as phonemic awareness and decoding, whole language practices integrate reading, writing, speaking, and listening to create a more holistic and engaging learning experience. Advocates argue that this approach is particularly effective for culturally and linguistically diverse students, as it allows for greater student autonomy and has greater relevance to students' lived experiences (Gay, 2010; Moll et al., 1992).

Purpose of the Study

The debate surrounding whether to use a phonics-based or whole language approach led to the design of this study, which investigated the impact of whole-language practices on the reading achievement of second-grade African American boys in a rural Title I elementary school serving approximately 119 students. The research focused on a group of students receiving whole language instruction and used pre- and post-assessment data to determine whether a correlation existed between this instructional method and improvements in reading performance.

Research Questions

1. What is the impact of whole language instructional practices on the reading achievement of second-grade African American boys in a rural Title I school?
2. How do whole language instructional practices influence the reading comprehension and engagement of second-grade African American boys?
3. How do teachers implement whole language strategies when teaching reading to second-grade African American boys, and what challenges or successes do they report?

By addressing these questions, the study aimed to provide insight into instructional strategies that can help close the achievement gap and support the goal of educational equity as outlined in the NCLB legislation. Results can be used to inform the use of literacy practices that are

both culturally responsive and pedagogically sound for one of the most academically vulnerable student populations.

Literature Review

Reading Achievement and African American Boys

Research has long documented the persistent achievement gap in reading between African American boys and their peers. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data show that African American students, especially males, consistently perform below the national average in reading at all grade levels (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). In the early elementary grades, this gap begins to develop and often increases over time due to a combination of factors, including socioeconomic status, school funding inequities, and a lack of culturally responsive instruction (Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Scholars such as Tatum (2006) have argued that African American boys often disengage from reading instruction because it fails to reflect their background experiences or interests. Moreover, many are labeled early as struggling readers and subsequently placed in remedial programs that emphasize rote learning and skill drills rather than meaningful literacy engagement (Ferguson, 2003). These practices can perpetuate low expectations and limit students' access to the rich literary experiences needed to foster comprehension and critical thinking (Delpit, 2006).

In addition, Husband and Kang (2020) stated the use of culturally relevant texts enhances engagement and motivation among African American boys in early childhood and elementary school settings. These texts enable students to connect with their social, cultural, economic, and racial experiences, resulting in improvements in fluency and decoding skills. However, Husband and Kang noted reading culturally relevant texts alone does not automatically guarantee specific reading outcomes. Therefore, to improve the academic success of African American boys, school leaders must actively include them in the school culture and implement coordinated strategies, such as clear communication, effective data collection, early education programs, accountability systems, and strong literacy instruction (Varlas, 2005).

Phonics-Based Instruction

Phonics-based instruction, which emphasizes the systematic teaching of sound-letter correspondence, has been widely endorsed by federal policy and reading researchers as an effective method for building foundational reading skills, especially in the early grades (National Reading Panel, 2000). This approach focuses on decoding skills, phonemic awareness, and fluency, often taught through scripted programs or direct instruction.

Though phonics instruction is effective for developing basic literacy skills, critics argue that it may not be sufficient on its own, chiefly for students who are not engaged by the materials or instructional methods used (Allington, 2012). In many cases, especially for culturally diverse learners, phonics instruction can feel disconnected from meaningful language use and authentic reading experiences (Gee, 2001). Additionally, when phonics is overemphasized at the expense of comprehension, vocabulary development, and student voice, the instruction may not adequately support students' broader literacy growth (Pressley, 2006).

According to Torgerson et al. (2018), some reviews, such as “systematic tertiary reviews,” highlight that despite there being a general agreement on the benefits of phonics, several key issues remain unresolved. These include determining which phonics methods are most effective, how phonics instruction should be integrated with vocabulary and comprehension teaching, and what the long-term outcomes are, particularly for students who struggle beyond the early years. Furthermore, other researchers, such as Bowers (2020), indicated phonics may have little to no impact on reading comprehension and any initial benefits may fade over time if not continually supported within a comprehensive literacy framework.

Whole Language Instruction

Within the whole language approach, reading is viewed as a natural, meaning-centered process. The emphasis is on immersion in rich texts, student choice, and the integration of reading, writing, speaking, and listening (Cambourne, 1995; Goodman, 1986). Rather than isolating skills, whole language environments encourage learners to make connections, construct meaning, and engage with texts that are relevant to their lives. Moreover, advocates of whole language practices argue that this approach is beneficial for students from diverse backgrounds, as it supports language development in meaningful contexts and allows for greater student autonomy (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Moll et al., 1992). When students are encouraged to read and write for real purposes, they are more likely to develop a positive identity as readers and writers, which is key to long-term academic success (Johnston, 2004).

Stahl et al. (1994) conducted a meta-analysis of whole language research conducted since 1988 and discovered whole language methods usually led to reading achievement levels comparable to those achieved through traditional basal readers. However, few of the studies met high standards for research rigor, with many focusing more on students’ attitudes toward reading rather than actual achievement. Programs that combined whole language with phonics or direct instruction, reflecting varied approaches, tended to yield better results in both achievement and student attitudes. As a result, whole language is frequently recognized for cultivating positive reading attitudes, promoting a love for literature, being student-focused, supporting comprehension and meaning-making, and integrating listening, speaking, reading, and writing in a unified manner.

In contrast, the whole language approach has drawn considerable criticism, particularly during the “Reading Wars” of the 1990s and early 2000s. Critics contended that its lack of direct phonics instruction could impede students’ development of the critical decoding skills necessary for reading success (Moats, 2000a). These concerns prompted leaders of many school districts to shift toward more structured, phonics-based instruction, particularly in light of federal policies such as NCLB (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Common critiques of the whole language approach include (a) insufficient emphasis on explicit phonics and decoding; (b) overreliance on context clues or guessing strategies for unfamiliar words; (c) the absence of a structured, sequential approach to foundational skills like phonemic awareness; (d) uneven quality in how programs are implemented; and (e) weak or inconsistent evidence of improvements in key reading abilities such as word recognition and decoding (Moats, 2000b).

Conversely, Klesius et al. (1990) compared three first-grade classrooms using the whole language approach with three classrooms employing a more traditional phonics- and skills-based method. They assessed multiple areas, including reading comprehension, vocabulary, phonemic awareness, decoding, spelling, and writing. The results revealed there were no significant differences between the two teaching approaches in any of the measured outcomes.

Though the study by Klesius et al. (1990) provided insight into early comparisons between whole language and phonics-based approaches, the findings must be interpreted with caution due to several key limitations. Most notably, the study was conducted in first-grade classrooms, not second-grade settings, where developmental reading skills and instructional needs differ significantly. Furthermore, the study lacked critical demographic information, including the racial composition of the classrooms, which limits its relevance to understanding the impact of whole language instruction on specific student populations, such as African American boys. Therefore, without this context, it is difficult to determine whether the instructional approaches had equitable effects across diverse learners. Additionally, the absence of data from Title I schools or other indicators of socioeconomic context restricts the generalizability of the findings to more underrepresented or marginalized student groups. Therefore, though the study offered a general comparison of instructional methods, it did not adequately address how whole language practices affect reading outcomes for African American boys in second grade, a gap that necessitates further, more targeted research.

Culturally Responsive Literacy Practices

Keehne et al. (2018) explained that culturally responsive literacy instruction emphasizes students' cultural backgrounds, languages, lived experiences, and identities as valuable resources in the learning process, rather than viewing them as obstacles. This approach is grounded in the work of scholars such as Ladson-Billings (1994; culturally relevant pedagogy), Gay (2010; culturally responsive teaching), and Paris and Alim (2017; culturally sustaining pedagogy). As a result, terms such as "culturally relevant," "culturally responsive," and "culturally sustaining" are often used interchangeably in educational settings, although they each carry distinct meanings and theoretical foundations.

Accordingly, for African American boys, combining the strengths of whole language instruction with culturally responsive teaching may offer a more effective solution. Culturally responsive pedagogy acknowledges students' cultural backgrounds as assets and integrates their experiences into instructional practices (Gay, 2010). This approach aligns well with whole language principles, which support learner agency and value diverse linguistic practices.

Studies have shown that when African American boys are exposed to texts that reflect their identities and are given opportunities to engage in literacy practices that are personally meaningful, their motivation and achievement increase (Kirkland, 2013; Tatum, 2005). Thus, the implementation of whole language practices, especially when embedded within culturally relevant pedagogy, may help to alleviate the persistent reading achievement gap for this student population.

Research Gaps and the Present Study

Despite the growing body of research on culturally responsive literacy practices, few studies have explicitly examined the impact of whole language instruction on African American boys' reading performance in rural, Title I settings. The existing literature focused significantly on either the general effectiveness of instructional methods or on urban populations. Given the unique educational challenges present within rural schools, such as limited resources, teacher shortages, and geographic isolation, there is a need for targeted research that addresses both instructional approach and context (Azano & Stewart, 2016).

This study aimed to fill that gap by investigating the relationship between whole language practices and reading achievement among second-grade African American boys in a rural Title I elementary school. By analyzing pre- and post-reading assessment data, the study was designed to determine whether whole language instruction can contribute to measurable improvements in reading outcomes for this historically underserved group.

Methods

Research Design

This study involved using a quasi-experimental design to investigate the impact of whole language instructional practices on the reading achievement of second-grade African American boys in a rural Title I school. A pretest–posttest design was used to measure changes in reading performance before and after the instructional intervention. Although true experimental control (random assignment) was not feasible in the natural school setting, this design allowed for the comparison of student progress over time and facilitated the identification of potential correlations between instructional approaches and student outcomes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at a small rural Title I elementary school. The school serves approximately 119 students from Pre-Kindergarten through fifth grade. Students from low-income households comprise 97% of the school's population. There are two to three classrooms per grade level. The student-to-teacher ratio is 12:1, which is lower than the state average of 15:1. Additionally, 97% of the school's students receive free lunch, and the school relies on federal funding to support its supplemental reading programs. The school's demographic composition consists of 20% Caucasians, 55% African Americans, 15% Hispanics, 3% Asians, 1% Native Americans, and 1% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders, with the remaining 8% identifying as two or more races. African American students comprise a significant portion of the students identified as reading below grade level by the end of first grade. The African American students in the study comprised 55% of the overall school population.

The participants consisted of 10 (five students per two second-grade classrooms) second-grade African American boys, ages 7 to 8 years, who were identified by their classroom teachers as reading below grade level according to district-wide Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) and teacher observations. The teachers administered the DRA in self-contained classrooms. In this context, a self-contained classroom refers to a classroom where one teacher is responsible for instructing all core subjects in alignment with the state's standard curriculum.

Each student received whole language instruction from the school's certified reading interventionist. Additionally, parental consent was obtained from all participants, and pseudonyms were used to protect their identities.

Instructional Intervention

Over a 9-week period, participants received daily reading instruction rooted in whole language principles. The instructional approach included:

- Exposure to culturally relevant and authentic literature
- Daily read-alouds and shared reading experiences
- Integrated reading and writing activities
- Student-led book discussions
- Journal writing in response to texts
- Emphasis on comprehension and personal connections to texts

Instruction was delivered by a certified reading interventionist who had been trained in whole language pedagogy and worked closely with the classroom teacher to ensure alignment with the school's English language arts standards. The instructional reading lessons were adapted to reflect students' interests and cultural backgrounds, in keeping with culturally responsive teaching practices (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Data Collection

Two main forms of data were collected:

- **Reading Assessment Scores:** Standardized pre- and posttests were administered using the DRA, a widely used tool for evaluating reading level, fluency, and comprehension (Beaver et al., 2003). Assessments were conducted in one-on-one settings to ensure accuracy and minimize distractions.
- **Qualitative Observations and Student Work Samples:** The reading interventionist maintained weekly observation logs documenting student engagement, participation, and literacy behaviors. Student samples (e.g., journal entries, written responses, and reading logs) were also collected to provide qualitative insight into student progress and attitudes toward reading.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine mean reading levels before and after the intervention. A paired samples *t* test was used to assess whether the difference in pre- and posttest scores was statistically significant. Qualitative data were coded thematically to identify patterns related to student engagement, reading behaviors, and attitudes toward literacy (Miles et al., 2014).

Validity and Limitations

To enhance internal validity, the same reading specialist consistently delivered instruction and the assessment conditions were standardized. However, the study's limitations include a small sample size and the absence of a randomized control group, which limits generalizability. Additionally, as with any educational intervention, external factors such as home environment and prior literacy experiences may have influenced the outcomes. Despite these limitations, results offer valuable insight into how whole language practices may support reading achievement for African American boys in rural, low-income educational settings, as these populations are often underrepresented in the literacy research (Azano & Stewart, 2016; Tatum, 2005).

Findings

The purpose of this study was to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference in student DRA levels before and after the instructional intervention using a quasi-experimental design with a pretest–posttest format. Ten second-grade African American boys participated in a 9-week whole-language instructional intervention designed to improve their reading achievement. The DRA was administered both before and after the intervention period to measure student progress. A paired samples *t* test was conducted to compare DRA levels at the beginning and end of the 9-week instructional period (pretest and posttest) for the same group of students ($N = 10$).

Pretest results showed 100% of the participants were reading below the expected grade level for the beginning of second grade (see Table 1). Initial DRA scores ranged from Level 8 to Level 16 with a mean score of 12.0. Thereafter, the intervention resulted in significantly improved posttest DRA scores, ranging from Level 14 to Level 26 with a mean score of 19.6, representing an average increase of 7.6 DRA levels.

The paired-samples *t* test indicated this increase was statistically significant, $t(9) = 14.08$ ($p < .001$), suggesting a strong positive correlation between the whole-language instructional method and improved reading outcomes for the students.

Table 1

t-Test Results ($N = 10$)

Measure	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean DRA levels	Mean range
Pretest	12.0	2.58	8–16	12.0
Posttest	19.6	4.12	14–26	19.6

In addition to improved test scores, weekly observation logs and student work samples revealed notable changes in student engagement and behavior:

- Increased participation during read-alouds and group discussions.
- Improved comprehension as demonstrated through journal responses and text-based conversations.

- Positive attitudes toward reading, especially when texts reflected students' cultural backgrounds or interests.
- Emergence of student-led reading behaviors, such as choosing books independently or recommending books to peers

Students expressed greater confidence in their reading abilities and appeared more willing to take risks with unfamiliar texts. These qualitative findings support the quantitative results, suggesting whole language instruction not only improved reading achievement, it fostered a deeper connection to literacy (see Table 2).

Table 2

End of 9-Week Whole Language Instruction

Research participant	Engaged in lesson	Student participated in discussion	Demonstrated comprehension	Written submissions (9 weeks)	Literacy behaviors demonstrated (out of 7)	Notes on behavior or response
Student 1	✓	✓	✓	9/9	7	Maintained high engagement; shared thoughtful text connections in Week 9
Student 2	✓	X	✓	8/9	3	Writing remains strong; still hesitant in group discussions
Student 3	✓	✓	✓	8/9	7	Consistently inquisitive; led peer questioning in Week 9
Student 4	X	X	X	3/9	0	Lack of engagement; minimal improvement observed
Student 5	✓	✓	✓	9/9	7	Excellent comprehension; shared strong character

						analysis in Week 9
Student 6	✓	✓	X	9/9	4	Submission was completed, but summarization issues persist
Student 7	✓	✓	✓	9/9	7	Strong peer leadership continues; facilitated group activity
Student 8	X	X	X	6/9	0	Some improvement in reading stamina, but participation is still low
Student 9	✓	✓	✓	9/9	7	Meaningful responses continue; supported peers with story mapping
Student 10	✓	X	✓	9/9	6	Writing strongly showed interest during read-aloud, but was silent in discussions

In Week 9, the instructional focus centered on the text, *Freedom in Congo Square*. Students were prompted to reflect on the question, “What does freedom mean to you?” as part of a broader strategy to foster text-to-world connections. This lesson also included discussions of historical context and reflective journal writing, allowing students to engage with the story’s deeper themes on both cognitive and social-emotional levels.

Student engagement remained steady for those who had demonstrated consistency throughout Weeks 1–8, as shown in Table 2. The historical and poetic nature of the text prompted insightful reflection, particularly from Students 1 and 9, who made meaningful connections between the book’s themes and their own personal or cultural experiences. These connections emphasize the power of culturally relevant literature in enhancing comprehension and engagement.

Additionally, Students 3, 5, 7, and 9 continued to emerge as classroom leaders, taking initiative in discussions and modeling strong literacy behaviors.

Students 2 and 10, though less vocal during group discussions, showed a clear ability to process and articulate their understanding through their writing. This highlights the importance of offering multiple modalities for expression, as not all students thrive in oral discussion formats. On the other hand, Students 4 and 8 continued to show limited engagement. However, there were slight signs of progress in Student 8's stamina and attention span due to the consistency of the instructional model and increased classroom support.

At the end of Week 9, nine out of the 10 students had completed the writing assignment, reflecting a high level of participation. Seven students consistently demonstrated all of the targeted literacy behaviors, including group discussions, comprehension, text-to-self connections, and expressive writing. Peer-led discussions and the ongoing use of culturally relevant literature continued to foster a learning environment where most students felt confident and connected. However, ongoing differentiated support will remain crucial for Students 4 and 8, who have not yet shown meaningful progress. Their needs will require targeted strategies based on individualized learning to tailor instruction, progress monitoring, and collaboration among peers, promoting motivation and teamwork as they transition into the next phase of instruction.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of whole language instructional practices on the reading achievement of second-grade African American boys in a rural Title I elementary school. Grounded in the broader context of persistent literacy achievement gaps and informed by the goals of the NCLB legislation, this research addressed the urgent need for effective, culturally responsive literacy instruction for historically underserved student populations.

The analysis of pre- and post-intervention reading assessment data revealed positive gains in reading achievement among students who received whole-language instruction over a 9-week period. The average increase in reading level, as measured by the DRA, suggests there is a strong correlation between whole language practices and improved reading outcomes. Qualitative observations further indicated increased student engagement, stronger comprehension skills, and greater enthusiasm for reading, notably when the instruction included culturally relevant texts and opportunities for student voice and choice.

These findings reinforce the potential to use whole language instruction to meet the complex literacy needs of African American boys in early elementary school. Unlike traditional phonics-based instruction, which may overlook the importance of meaning-making and cultural identity in literacy development, the whole language approach offers a more holistic, student-centered alternative. When embedded within a culturally responsive framework, this instructional method can foster both academic growth and a positive reader identity, which are essential for long-term educational success.

Although the study's limited sample size and lack of a control group constrain the generalizability of the results, the research nonetheless provides important implications for practice. Educators and school leaders, particularly in rural and under-resourced settings, should consider integrating more meaningful, context-rich literacy experiences into early reading instruction. Professional development should also emphasize culturally responsive pedagogy and the importance of connecting reading materials to students' lived experiences.

Future research should expand on this work by conducting larger-scale, longitudinal studies to examine the sustained effects of whole language practices across grade levels and demographic groups. Comparative studies of whole language, phonics-based, and balanced literacy approaches, especially when disaggregated by race, gender, and socioeconomic status, can offer deeper insights into which instructional models are most effective for specific learner populations.

In conclusion, this study highlights the importance of rethinking early literacy instruction through an equity lens. By aligning pedagogy with the cultural, linguistic, and developmental needs of African American boys, educators can begin to close the achievement gap and fulfill the promise of educational equity for all students.

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