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WHOLE LANGUAGE IN CALIFORNIA: A FAILED EXPERIMENT?

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By all accounts 1995 was a watershed year for the teaching of reading in California. More importantly, the year marked the beginning of a national trend toward a renewed emphasis on phonics and skills in early literacy instruction. The two part rationale for this dramatic shift in policy was nearly unanimously agreed upon by government leaders and commissions (Eastin, 1995; CRTFR, 1995), the media (e.g. Stewart, 1996), and many members of the research community (Fry, 1996; CRTFR, 1995): first, California's reading test scores had "plummeted" (Stewart, 1996, p. 23) to record lows over the previous ten year period; and second, this sharp decline was directly attributable to the adoption of a literature-based reading curriculum in 1987 (CRTFR, 1995) which de-emphasized phonics and skills instruction. As I will show in this article, there are no empirical data to sustain either of these assertions.

California's Test Scores: No Declines

The move to reform reading instruction in California began with the appointment of a special Reading Task Force in May of 1995 by Superintendent of Public Instruction Delaine Eastin. The impetus for the task force was the release of two sets of test scores that have been widely cited as demonstrating that California's reading performance has dropped significantly since 1987. The first set is from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a federally-funded, standardized reading assessment administered every two years by the U.S. Department of Education to a representative sample of fourth grade students in 41 states. In both 1992 and 1994, California ranked next to last among the participating states. The median score for California in 1992 was 202, compared to the U.S. average of 215. In 1994, California scored 197, while the national average was 212 (Campbell, Donahue, Reese, & Phillips, 1996, p. 25). Rank scores are, of course, slightly misleading, since a difference of a few points can cause a state to rise or drop in rank if the states are clustered closely together. But even when viewed in

terms of statistically significant differences among the rankings, California still does not fare well: in 1992, the state was in the bottom third, and in 1994, in the bottom quarter (Campbell, Donahue, Reese, and Phillips, pp. 59-60). Clearly, California was performing relatively poorly.

But performing poorly is not the same as declining. To show a decline, one must look at scores from both the beginning and the end of the time period in question. Herein lies the problem: state-level NAEP scores are unavailable before 1992, and the tests are not equivalent to any other standardized reading measure. As such, the NAEP data cannot tell us anything about when scores went up or down after the implementation of the literature-based curriculum.

The second set of data cited to show California's supposed drop, the California Learning Assessment System (CLAS), suffers from the same lack of comparability. The CLAS tests were administered only twice, in the 1992-93 and 1993-94 school years. Like the NAEP scores, they are not comparable to previous test scores and tell us nothing about how California students read before and after the 1987 Framework adoption. (In fact, the two years are not even comparable to each other, due to changes made in the test after the first year of its administration.) Ironically, the 1993-94 results indicated that more than three-fourths of California's students could read at a "basic" level, a rather strong showing in light of the dismal financial conditions of the state's schools (see below).

A third set of data, commercial test score results, has also been cited by some journalists as evidence of a test score decline (Art Levine, personal communication, May 1, 1996). The scores are taken from a report by the Policy Analysis for California Education group (PACE, 1988) which equated California's performance on the California Achievement Program (CAP) to national percentile ranks during the early and mid-1980's. At first look, these scores seem to make the case for whole language critics: as shown in Table 1, California scored near the 50th percentile throughout most of the previous decade in the PACE analysis. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that these

data do not show that California ranked around the middle of the states before 1987, nor that scores were rising relative to other states over that same period of time, nor even that more than half of our students were above the national average in the mid-1980's. Let's take each of these claims in turn.

Table 1
Comparison of California Achievement Program Scores to National Percentile Rankings

	81	82	83	84	85	86	87
CTBS 1973 norms	59	60	62	64	69	71	---
CTBS 1981 norms	--	41	45	46	54	55	55

(from Guthrie et al., 1988, Table 7.5)

First, commercial tests are not comparable in any way to the NAEP tests from which California's low national ranking is determined. NAEP scores can only be compared to NAEP scores.

Second, national percentile ranks are not the same as ranks among the states (such as those that have been used in the NAEP comparisons). A national percentile rank of 50, for example, does not mean that California ranked in the middle of the states. National percentile ranks are derived from comparing the median student scores in a state to the scores of all students collectively in the country. State ranks are determined by comparing a state's median score to the median scores of other states. California's national percentile rank of 55 from 1986-87 CTBS reading test means, then, that the median California student scored better than 55 percent of all students in the country, not that California ranked 27th in the country in reading. Another example will help illustrate this difference: in the 1994 NAEP 4th grade reading test, only 14 of the 42 states (33 percent) had public school average scores above the 50th percentile. Minnesota ranked 13th in the nation, but scored below the 50th percentile.

Third, even the claim about California's mid-80s above-average national percentile rank is inaccurate. The percentile ranks shown in Table 1 were derived by comparing California's performance to 1981 and 1973 norm groups. But commercial test norms have been rising substantially over the past 50 years (see *The Manufactured Crisis*, 1995, by David Berliner and David Biddle for details). This means that comparing a group of students to a previous norm group will likely overestimate their true percentile rank. It is easy to see that one can inflate percentile rank estimates simply by using an earlier (and lower) norming population. Notice, for example, that California's 1987 percentile rank is 55 compared to 1981 norms, but 71 compared to 1973 norms--a 15 point difference! If we assume a similar upward trend in the CTBS norms for 3rd grade reading resulting in a 15 point difference in percentile ranks over the 1981-87 period, then California's true 1987 percentile is not 55 or 71, but around 40.

Another consequence of rising norms is that the farther you move away from the norming year, the more inaccurate the estimate is likely to be. The most reliable measure of 1980s California performance is thus the 1981-82 percentile rank, which is (interestingly enough) around 40, or just slightly better than what California scored in terms of national percentile rank in the 1992 NAEP tests (Campbell, et al., 1996).

Table 2
California Achievement Program Raw Scores for 3rd, 6th, 8th, and 12th Grades, 1984-1990

	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990
3rd	268	274	280	282	282	277	275
6th	249	253	260	260	265	262	261
8th	250	240	243	247	252	256	257
12th	236	241	240	246	250	248	251

(from Guthrie et al., 1993, p. 34)

While the CAP scores do not show that California was on average any better in the 1980's than it was in 1992, neither do they show any serious declines after the implementation of the 1987 Framework. Table 2 shows the raw scores from the CAP until its discontinuation in 1990. There were slight increases and decreases across different grade levels, but overall the scores were very stable. California's third graders, for example, were performing at the same level in 1990 as they were in 1985, which is remarkable in light of the evidence reviewed below on the declining financial status of the state's schools.

The Causes of California's Low Ranking. The second part of the argument used to promote a renewed emphasis on skills instruction was that whole language was the cause of California's (non-existent) decline and (very real) low national ranking. As noted earlier, it is true that California ranked relatively low among the states. Is whole language to blame? Another look at the 1992 NAEP data reveals that the answer is "no." As part of the assessment, fourth grade teachers were asked to indicate their methodological approach to reading as "whole language," "literature-based," and/or "phonics." The average scores for each type of approach were then compared, and those children in classrooms with heavy emphasis on phonics clearly did the worst. Children in whole language-emphasis classrooms (reported by 40 percent of the teachers) had an average score of 220, those in literature-based classrooms had a score of 221 (reported by 49 percent of the teachers), and students in phonics classrooms (reported by 11 percent of the teachers) came in last with an average score of 208 (NCES, 1994, p. 284). There is thus no evidence in the NAEP data that the use of whole language leads to lower reading scores. The cause of California's problems must lie elsewhere. As it turns out, there are several likely sources for the state's low ranking, almost all of which were completely ignored by the state's political and educational leaders and by the media. Consider the following:

California has some of the worst school libraries in the country. There is now massive evidence to suggest that greater access to pleasure reading materials leads children to read more, and that more reading

leads to better reading achievement (e.g., Krashen, 1993, 1996; Stanovich & Cunningham, 1992). Specifically, there is growing support for the critical role of school libraries in reading performance. Children get anywhere from 30 to 90 percent of their free reading materials from the library, and the impact of library quality on reading scores has been documented in a variety of studies. Lance and his colleagues (Lance, Wellborn, & Hamilton-Pennell, 1993) found in a study of Colorado schools that the quality of the school library had a direct and powerful effect on reading achievement scores, controlling for teacher-pupil ratio, overall school spending, and socio-economic status of the students. On the national level, Krashen (1995) showed that school library quality was the only significant predictor of a state's 1992 NAEP fourth grade reading score, controlling for median income, per-pupil spending, and the availability of computer software in a school. McQuillan (in press) also found that public and school library quality were important indicators of a state's average S.A.T. score. Internationally, Elley (1992), in a study of over 200,000 students in 32 countries, found that school library quality had a significant impact on a country's reading performance.

Table 3
School Library Quality in California and the United States

Books per Pupil:	Elementary	Middle	High School
U.S.	18:1	16:1	15:1
California	13:1	11:1	8:1
Per Pupil Spending			
U.S.	15.44	15.50	19.22
California	8.48	7.48	8.21
Librarians per Pupil	**Overall**		
U.S.	895:1		
California	5,496:1		

(from White, 1990; Snyder & Hoffman, 1995)

How does California rank in school library quality? According to the most recent data available (White, 1990), California places last or nearly last in almost every category, including books per pupil, per pupil spending, and librarians per pupil. Table 3 shows just how far California is behind the national averages in library quality, and the state's rankings are abysmal: 45th in per-pupil expenditures, 49th in books per pupil, and 50th in librarians per pupil.

California has one of the worst public library systems in the United States. Mirroring the poor performance in school libraries, California also ranks near the bottom on several measures of public library quality. In 1990-91, Chute (1992) reports that California ranked 39th in books and serials held per capita (1.95 versus 2.53 nationally), 43rd in capital outlay per 1,000 residents ($666.00 versus $1,912.00), and 50th in hours open to the public per 1,000 residents (72.09 hours/week). Not only does California rank relatively poorly now, but the situation has become far worse since the late 1980's. As of 1993, Gibson noted that book budgets in the state had been cut 25 percent since 1989, the number of open hours had decreased 30 percent since 1987, and per capita spending had been reduced 36 percent from 1989. Children service's had been the hardest hit, Gibson found, with 25 percent of public libraries reporting cutbacks in this area.

California's children are poor and getting poorer. The only place children can find books outside of the school and public library is at home. But if you're poor, you're much less likely to be able to afford many books. California ranked ninth in the country in the number of children 5-17 years old living in poverty (Bureau of the Census, 1995), with the poverty rate rising an incredible 25 percent between 1989 and 1993 (Schmittroth, 1994). According to the most recent figures, one out of every four California students is living in a family with income below the poverty line. Data gathered in the 1992 NAEP assessment confirm these figures: California ranked 10th among participating states in the number of children participating in free lunch and nutrition programs. Not surprisingly, the NAEP report also found that the state ranks near the bottom in the percentage of homes with more than 25 books in the home (NCES, 1994).

The Verdict on Whole Language

Whole language did not fail in California. There is no evidence that state reading test scores declined after its implementation in the late 1980s. The real culprit responsible for California's low national ranking in reading achievement is the lack of reading materials for California's students. No amount of phonemic awareness or phonics training will correct this problem, only a sustained investment in school and public libraries.

Notes

1. Some have argued (Fry, 1996) that socio-economic factors can't account for California's low ranking in reading, since the median income for the state's residents in 1992 was above the national average, and both the percentage of people living below the poverty line as well as of those persons 25 or older with a college education was about the same as the rest of the country. These figures, however, are for the average Californian, not the average California parent, who, as the figures above indicate, are indeed poorer than their counterparts in other states.

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