THE INFLUENCE OF PREKINDERGARTEN TEACHER EDUCATION LEVEL ON EARLY
READING INSTRUCTION BELIEFS

by

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(Under the Direction of Stacey Neuharth-Pritchett)

ABSTRACT

Research indicates early reading ability influences later academic achievement. The
literature remains mixed, however, with regard to the best way to implement early literacy
instruction in the classroom, and whether to employ a phonics-based, whole language-based, or
balanced approach. This study seeks to examine the relationship between a teacher’s educational
level and his or her endorsement of beliefs for specific literacy practices. It was hypothesized
that a higher level of education would be connected with beliefs about a balanced approach to
early literacy practices. Fifty-seven prekindergarten teachers and paraprofessionals completed
the Teacher and Paraprofessional Information Form; specific questions were used to determine
both highest level of education and endorsement of a particular early literacy instructional
approach. Results indicated that differences do exist between education levels, yet no significant
relationship was reported between employing balanced approaches and higher degree attainment.
Future research should examine student outcomes in relation to these findings.

INDEX WORDS: Prekindergarten, Early literacy, Phonics, Whole language, Teacher education
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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this to the two most important people in my life: my mother, Patti Adair, and my fiancé, Nathan Lawrence. Thank you both for being there for me and for providing me with your unconditional love and support. I love you both more than anything.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Research suggests that early reading ability provides a requisite foundation for successful academic achievement (Stockard & Engelmann, 2010). Studies consistently indicate reading skills developed during the preschool years are of particular importance to the enhancement of later academic success. Preschool reading accomplishments are critical to subsequent understanding and enhancement of later reading achievements in the primary years of school. Children who have this strong basic reading foundation possess a key advantage as they enter kindergarten and first grade not only in terms of reading ability, but also in their ability to accommodate new materials and concepts as they learn. Unfortunately, children with more limited knowledge may be predisposed to endure an increased amount of difficulties as they progress through school (Sonnenschein, Stapleton, & Benson, 2010).

It would follow, then, that instructional literacy approaches upon which all early childhood teachers agreed and implemented consistently would be in place, given the tremendous influence of young children’s early reading ability on their later academic success. However, in the quest to ensure that all students receive adequate reading instruction, the issue of how best to solve this problem becomes divided (Adams, 1994). Decisions teachers and researchers make about which strategies for reading instruction are most effective for young children have often shifted between two main reading instruction types: phonics-based instruction and whole language instruction. The research literature is replete with debates concerning the merits of one approach over the other; Jeanne Chall in 1967 actually coined the
designated by this “Great Debate” in her book *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, which documented the contentious arguments in the area (Baumann, Hoffman, Moon, & Duffy-Hester, 1998). Although labeled in 1967, the disputes have existed for years, yet the basic tenets of each argument remain fundamentally unchanged. One side insists that the development of specific prerequisite reading skills remains the most important aspect of early reading education, while others argue that because reading requires a significant amount of comprehension, even at the early stages, the most logical first step is to teach language skills holistically and work backwards to teaching skill development (Adams, 1994). While it may appear peculiar to set these two reading strategies in opposition to one another, as they are seemingly each striving for the same conclusion, the arguments have certainly become more divided, and even politicized, over the years (Baumann, Hoffman, Moon, & Duffy-Hester, 1998). Unfortunately, although the literature regarding each approach has grown exponentially larger, particularly as one approach overtakes another in popularity, no definitive answer exists regarding which instructional approach works best for students (Faust & Kandelshine-Waldman, 2009; Nichols, 2009).

**Reading Instruction Approaches: A Historical Perspective**

When examining the practices that teachers employ, it is instructive to examine both sides of the reading instruction debate. It is equally instructive to discuss the benefits and concerns of each approach to clarify the reasons why these two methods are consistently debated.

**Phonics.** Published in 1955, Rudolf Flesch’s book *Why Johnny Can’t Read, and What You Can Do About It* ushered in a new era of thinking concerning reading education (Adams, 1994). For many years, Flesch argued that implementation of a systematic phonics instruction program was necessary for successful reading education. Phonics instruction centers on the
letters and sounds that make up a particular word and how to use these components to create a written language (Mesmer & Griffith, 2005). Proponents of this approach value understanding basic letter-sound relationships and teach students how to manipulate these relationships to make different words and meanings (Christensen & Bowey, 2005; Nichols, 2009; Yopp & Yopp, 2000). Phonics instruction centers on the connection of sounds to spelling and how sound-letter relationships work and can be controlled (Mesmer & Griffith, 2005). It is orthographic knowledge that is the foundation of reading ability and fluency (Stahl, 1992). Through practice and memorization, children acquire alphabetic knowledge from this phonics instruction and are able to process words that they read as they become more fluent with the alphabetic principles (Faust & Kandelshine-Waldman, 2009). Supporters of phonics-based approaches value the importance of reading instruction coupled with phonemic and phonological awareness, and believe that mastery of phonics will allow children to more quickly and efficiently master higher-level comprehension processes due to increased fluency (Yopp & Yopp, 2000).

Jeanne Chall is credited with ushering in a new era of phonics research in the 1960s, as she was one of the first to conduct an empirical study looking at the benefits of a phonics-based education (Adams, 1994). Even with the arguments presented by Flesch nearly five years earlier, the primary form of reading instruction in the United States at the time relied on teaching the word first, followed by a phonetic explanation once the meaning was uncovered (Chall, 1996). In order to provide answers to the great debate question, Chall conducted a study synthesizing more than 20 different research analyses of early reading instruction approaches. She came to the conclusion that those who were taught the phonics-based method not only were able to read just as well as their meaning-taught peers, but also showed significant gains later on,
indicating that phonics instruction may produce more long-lasting results (Adams, 1994; Chall, 1996).

**Whole language.** Although the findings of Chall ushered in a new era of popularity for phonics instruction, many educators and researchers still felt as though it was too stringent of an instructional style, particularly for young readers. One of the principal advocates of this notion was Kenneth Goodman, who, in 1986, wrote the book *What’s Whole in Whole Language*, which explored the basic premise that early reading instruction should not only be simplified for students, but also made more “fun” (p. 4). Goodman’s (1986) main premise sought to contrast the more structured, piece-by-piece instruction style of phonics with the more contextual, natural teaching of whole language; he believed that “children bring to school their natural tendency to make sense of the world” (p. 5), and that phonics instruction disrupted this tendency.

Because of the more natural, conceptually-based ideals of whole language instruction, a precise definition of what whole language instruction actually is (and how specifically to implement it in the classroom) has yet to be determined. However, a few main tenets upon which most researchers and educators tend to agree do exist (Bergeron, 1990; Goodman, 1986). Whole language approaches incorporate reading and language instruction holistically, with emphasis placed on learning how to say words, as opposed to syllables, and how to read within the context of a story or a passage (Nichols, 2009; Roberts & Meiring, 2006). Supporters of whole language instruction believe that exposure to literature itself fosters the development of important literacy-based skills in realistic and organic ways (Fang, 2002; Nichols, 2009). Knowledge of the alphabetic principle, so key for phonics instruction supporters, develops through reading and interacting with literature in its own contexts; through these methods, students come to a natural understanding of this principle (Sacks & Mergendoller, 1997).
Through this contextual instruction, children read more fluently and comprehend what they read more quickly, as well as formulate an understanding of words within the context of a book rather than through a list (Pearson & Stephens, 1992).

**An ongoing debate.** In 2000, the National Reading Panel (NRP), commissioned by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), released a report detailing effective instruction strategies for teaching early reading skills. The panel determined that, as presented in Chall’s research, phonics-based instruction appears to provide the most benefit to beginning readers (NICHD, 2000; Pressley, 2001). The panel went on to conclude specifically that *explicit, systematic* phonics instruction appeared to be the most effective instruction implementation for teaching phonics (NICHD, 2000, p. 8). Explicit, systematic phonics instruction refers to teaching phonics directly (i.e. all necessary components are plainly stated) and separately from other reading instruction (Mesmer & Griffith, 2005; NICHD, 2000). While in theory this appeared an effective approach, in practice it was much more difficult, particularly because, while the report gave the definition of explicit, systematic phonics instruction, the application practices were presented in a much more ambiguous way (Cunningham & Cunningham, 2002; Mesmer & Griffith, 2005). Although explicit, systematic phonics instruction appears to work better than phonics instruction with no direction at all, there are many different levels of systematic phonics instruction, all of which seem to work the same way, making it difficult for educators to come to a consensus on the superior instruction style (Cunningham & Cunningham, 2002).

Other researchers also thought that the NRP report left out many important issues in early reading education, particularly in its exclusion of whole language instruction styles and other aspects of reading instruction. In his paper commissioned by the National Reading Conference,
Pressley (2001) criticized the panel’s exclusion of much of the research on early reading instruction, and the choice to focus most of their attention on phonics instruction and phonemic awareness as the more effective instruction styles. Much of the research on whole language instruction, as well as research on the more integrated aspects of reading instruction, was mainly ignored in favor of supporting the aforementioned systematic phonics approach. Many were also concerned with the general lack of direction regarding how this type of instruction was designed to be implemented within the classroom; the question of how to apply these principles became perhaps the most significant issue after the release of the report (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001).

**Issues of Implementation**

Functionally speaking, the two reading approaches, phonics and whole language, merely serve as separate means to the same end: increasing children’s early reading abilities. Each approach has its own merits, although valuing one exclusively appears quite problematic, especially when attempting to determine which one, if either, works better. The sections below highlight the problematic nature of the discourse between these two topics.

**Low-ability students.** A good deal of controversy exists on the efficacy of whole language and phonics approaches and which approach works better for specific students. The literature on this controversy remains mixed. Some studies have demonstrated that a primarily phonics-based approach may benefit lower-achieving readers, as it helps them engage with bottom-up processing during alphabetic knowledge acquisition (Faust & Kandelshine-Waldman, 2009; Roberts & Meiring, 2006). However, while these approaches also may benefit students with typical ability, limited research exists on whether or not a whole language approach would be better suited for the instruction of these typical ability students (Faust & Kandelshine-Waldman, 2009). Also, it appears that some poor readers actually perceive contextual
information from the text and rely on this information to glean clues about what they read. Without this contextual information, it becomes difficult or even impossible for these students to decode the words, let alone comprehend them (Stanovich, 1986).

**Timing.** Most researchers advocate for teaching both phonics and whole language approaches; however, some research suggests that each approach should be employed within a specific timeframe in a child’s reading development. Many propose that phonics-based instruction should be provided first to develop a foundation for sound and letter recognition that will be used to later identify actual words within the context of the classroom literature (Christensen & Bowey, 2005; Henning, McIntosh, Arnott, & Dodd, 2010; Roberts & Meiring, 2006). Developing these early reading skills, to some, is crucial for the future understanding not only of how to read, but also how to interact with words and how they fit within a text (Christensen & Bowey, 2005). Other researchers, however, have found the exact opposite. In one study, whole language programs appeared to work very well in the kindergarten classrooms, but by the time these same students were in the first grade, a more systematized approach was needed to more clearly define specific word and sound relationships (Stahl, 1992).

**A balanced approach.** While some strict advocates still assert that their chosen instructional style works better, most researchers and educators believe a balanced approach works best when teaching reading. Because children learn in so many different ways, determining one way that works for everyone remains fairly impossible and may actually disadvantage one group over another (Cunningham, 1998). A balanced approach, combining the two methods into one main reading instruction program and implementing aspects of each that complement the other, may bring about a more rich and complete understanding of literacy. Some researchers have found that a combination of literature-based instruction with basal readers
is far more effective for beginning readers than either approach alone (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001). However, inadvertently or not, most of the literature tends to focus on one approach more than the other, making it difficult to decipher specifically what the “balanced approach” looks like in practice. What becomes most interesting about this balanced approach is the fact that most teachers employ this method in their classroom and do not hold polarizing attitudes when it comes to teaching early reading skills (Baumann, Hoffman, Moon, & Duffy-Hester, 1998).

**Teacher Demographics**

One area of interest to researchers studying the differences between reading approaches has been teacher demographics, particularly when attempting to determine the method a specific teacher employs in his or her classroom. An aspect of this research that has not been examined well, however, is teacher education level and how education level interacts with a preferred instructional approach. Teacher education level is a widely contested area in the literature, generating almost as much controversy as the reading approach debates. Almost all researchers support pre-service training for new teachers, but few agree upon how this training should be conducted and whether the training should extend into the undergraduate level or beyond (Chingos and Peterson, 2010). Ediger (2011) defends the acquisition of a higher level degree, such as a master’s degree, as a way to further this training because it allows teachers to “receive professional guidance…[and] to overcome challenging teaching situations” (p. 848). Reception of a master’s degree in education requires more time spent studying specific theories and concepts pertaining to the field.

It should follow that receiving a master’s degree in education would provide future teachers with a more well-rounded view of the literature and pertinent instruction on how to implement these learned concepts in their own classrooms. However, the literature on the actual
effects of receiving a master’s degree remains contradictory, and not much of the research has looked specifically at how it affects the instruction of early literacy. In a study by Chingos and Peterson (2010), they pointed to the fact that “teacher classroom performance is correlated neither with…the acquisition of an advanced degree, nor with the selectivity of the university a teacher attended” (p.449). The researchers go on to report that only experience within the classroom directly correlates with teacher performance, which contradicts the apparent effectiveness of receiving a master’s degree (Chingos & Peterson, 2010). Pre-service teachers continuing school to obtain a master’s degree to be certified may have a problem with the interference of their program on any direct experience in the classroom, particularly if they only participate in one semester of full-time student teaching. Even a practicing teacher, looking to gain more specialized knowledge in their field, may be at a disadvantage by earning a master’s degree; spending more time actually in the classroom may increase student performance more significantly than simply receiving a higher degree.

**Purpose of the Study**

One aspect of research on teacher education level that has not been examined well is how level of education interacts with reading instruction approaches chosen by particular teachers, and, more specifically, teachers of prekindergarten students. Most teachers, when interviewed, do acknowledge ascribing to a specific belief, whether phonics, whole language, or a balanced method. Their level of education, however, is not factored into their responses, even though that factorization may provide important insights into the choices of teachers. This study seeks to determine whether a relationship exists between teacher education level and choice of instructional approach for early literacy practices. By examining teachers of prekindergarten students, this study specifically engages with the demographic that appears most significant in
terms of endorsement of a certain program, as these students will be shaped by the type of program their teacher chooses to use. The main research question examined in this study is whether or not there is a relationship between prekindergarten teacher education level and their beliefs about early reading instruction approaches; it is hypothesized that those with higher credentials will claim to use a more balanced approach in the classroom, whereas those with more limited education will favor one approach more than the other. Before discussing the methods of this particular study, however, a discussion of more contemporary issues regarding the different instructional approaches, as well as teacher education level, is needed.
CHAPTER 2

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD LITERACY EDUCATION

After the No Child Left Behind Act mandated the use of research-based instructional programs, the focus on instructional styles within the classroom, particularly in elementary schools, has narrowed tremendously (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002). Most of these “research-based instructional programs” have centered on phonics-based instruction, particularly systematic phonics instruction, as it appears easier to implement a more skills-based approach under the requirements of the NCLB Act (Armbruster, 2010). Since the passage of NCLB, there has been research regarding the benefits of a more literature-based style of instruction (Krashen, 2009), but much of the focus, particularly in the early years following the implementation of NCLB, remained on phonics instruction practices. Recently, as policymakers have begun analyzing the research surrounding the effectiveness of different instructional techniques, the literature has circled around to a combination of both phonics and literature-based styles of instruction. Much of this research has led to the consensus that a balanced approach is perhaps the best way to teach early reading skills, yet even the decision regarding what is “balanced” has come under considerable scrutiny by researchers (Arrow & Tunmer, 2012; Hatch & Benner, 2011). Further, current studies center on what this idea of balance means for implementation in the classroom. Advocates of the “either/or” approaches, phonics or whole language, still exist, yet even some of these researchers point out the effectiveness of teaching both strategies, at least in certain contexts. This chapter presents some of the tensions in the “great debate,” as well as a
view into both teacher beliefs concerning particular reading instruction styles and how teacher education level influences these beliefs.

**The Modern Day Great Debate**

**Student techniques.** While analyzing which instructional technique (phonics, whole language, or balanced approaches) a teacher uses in his or her classroom remains important, it is also pertinent to note what techniques students themselves implement as they read. As stated in the previous chapter, it does appear that struggling readers perform better when the instruction given to them is a more phonics-type orientation (Faust & Kandelshine-Waldman, 2009; Roberts & Meiring, 2006). It was argued that phonics instruction allows for the most direct way to help struggling readers learn the basic pre-reading processes, particularly decoding processes. However, as researchers have examined the actual methods that students use while they read, some disparities have emerged.

When attempting to read themselves, struggling readers often attempt to decipher the words they read by relying on whole language-like approaches (Torgesen, 2002). That approach counters the way teachers are instructed to work with students who struggle to read. Students will seek out context clues within a story or will relate unfamiliar words to those they already know to form some basic understanding about the story as a whole, yet they still do not have the capacity to understand most of the words (Krashen, 2009; Torgesen, 2002). Some researchers interpreted these findings to mean that teaching decoding-only strategies to these students may be detrimental to their overall acquisition of reading knowledge, particularly reading comprehension (Krashen, 2009; Torgesen, 2002). What this means for instruction is that using a more balanced approach may be more effective when teaching early reading skills. Readers who struggle often attempt to determine words based on whole language approaches; perhaps instead
of overriding these strategies by teaching only decoding skills, a more balanced strategy might capitalize on their existing whole language strategies.

It is unrealistic, however, to expect students to comprehend words when they do not possess the prerequisite skillset required to efficiently decode them. This is the reason many researchers still vouch for phonics instruction in the early grades, particularly the explicit, systematic instruction discussed in the previous chapter. Researchers argue that the whole language “strategies” struggling readers use are actually just simple cues used to attempt to understand the meaning of the passage (Armbruster, 2010; Arrow & Tunmer, 2012). Because struggling readers do not have prerequisite reading skills, they are usually unable to make any conclusions about the meaning of a text because they are too busy trying to decode the words on the page. Phonics instruction then becomes a strategy to provide these students with the pre-reading methods that will help them comprehend what they read (Armbruster, 2010). Current research supports the idea presented in Chapter One regarding the timing of instruction, that phonics-based instruction should come before more holistically structured approaches (Christensen & Bowey, 2005; Henning, McIntosh, Arnott, & Dodd, 2010; Roberts & Meiring, 2006). Preliminary phonics instruction might provide support for struggling readers’ decoding abilities and also for their future comprehension processes (Arrow & Tunmer, 2012; Krashen, 2009).

Balanced approach revisited. As stated previously, there appears to be a changing culture surrounding “the great debate.” One of the proposed solutions to this long-standing dispute was to incorporate aspects of both instructional styles into a balanced method that integrates the “skill-based” and “meaning-based” features of each approach (Bingham & Hall-Kenyon, 2013, p. 15). A balanced approach might be the most logical method, one far more
effective than simply choosing between two extremes on the continuum (Arrow & Tunmer, 2012; Hatch & Benner, 2011). Most researchers conclude that a balanced approach provides a more inclusive instructional context within the classroom; however, even this may be an oversimplification of what needs to be done in current contexts (Arrow & Tunmer, 2012). Some recent literature has extended the idea of the balanced approach further, urging teachers to implement balanced techniques based on an assessment of each individual student, identifying early whether there are differences in student responses to a particular style, and then tailoring their instruction differently to each student (Arrow & Tunmer, 2012).

Additional evidence of a shift in the debate has led to a discussion of how to efficaciously use each method in the same classroom in differentiated ways. The main questions for educators and researchers center on how exactly teachers implement balanced instruction and how they are instructed to take these new research findings into consideration. Another important question is whether teachers actually use a balanced approach in their classrooms; therefore, it remains important to address the actual beliefs of teachers about what they think the most effective instruction style is within their own classes.

**Teacher Beliefs Regarding a Balanced Approach**

In 1963, on the heels of Flesch’s incendiary strike against the lack of phonics instruction in schools, but before the influential publication of Jeanne Chall’s famous review of “the great debate,” (Baumann, Hoffman, Duffy-Hester, & Moon-Ro, 2000), a study was published by Austin and Morrison entitled *The First R: The Harvard Report on Reading in Elementary Schools*. The study was one of the very first to analyze what was actually occurring in the classroom, and, more importantly, what strategies teachers were implementing when they taught reading. The conclusions of the study were rather dismal; specifically, reading curriculum in
elementary schools was severely lacking, and was leaving many students unprepared for their future education (Austin & Morrison, 1963; Baumann, Hoffman, Duffy-Hester, & Moon-Ro, 2000). Austin and Morrison included 45 suggestions for educators following these results, some of which were exceedingly revolutionary, such as the proposal for all schools to include kindergarten programs (Austin & Morrison, 1963).

Other suggestions were quite pertinent to today’s research issues, one of which noting that “no single method of instruction in beginning reading be advocated but…a variety of approaches be utilized” (Austin & Morrison, 1963, p. 221). This suggestion was one of the reasons why Baumann, Hoffman, Duffy-Hester, and Moon-Ro (2000) decided to replicate Austin and Morrison (1963) to analyze the differences in elementary reading instruction between the past and present. They especially wanted to look at balanced instruction practices in current contexts, finding that most teachers did in fact use a somewhat balanced method in their classrooms, with perhaps slightly more of their focus being on phonics instruction, particularly at the younger grade levels (Baumann et al., 2000). However, teachers also stated that they taught phonics in “context-rich ways” (p. 346), indicating that a good deal of literature-based instruction augmented students’ acquisition of phonics knowledge (Baumann et al., 2000).

While current in 2000, it is possible that the data presented in that study do not accurately capture the attitudes and beliefs of today’s teachers. The data is also somewhat limited due to the fact that it was published before NCLB required drastic changes be made to early reading research. One of the concerns is whether or not classroom environments have changed since then, and whether teachers are still applying similar types of strategies. One very recent study, published in 2013 by Bingham and Kenyon-Hall, suggests that teachers are, in fact, using similar strategies, particularly now because the heightened testing environment surrounding NCLB has
begun to slightly wane, and teachers have transitioned back into a more literature-based classroom instead of implementing a purely phonics-based instruction style. One of the main changes the authors noted, however, is the way in which teachers employ balanced approaches. In line with the research presented previously by Arrow and Tunmer (2012), teachers are tailoring their instruction to each individual student; thus the “balanced approach” has become one of balancing different student needs based on early and individualized assessments from teachers. Rather than attempting to combine phonics and whole language instruction into one jumbled approach, teachers instead should focus on particular aspects of each approach as they relate to specific students’ needs. If a student is struggling with reading, perhaps a phonics-based approach would benefit the most, whereas if a student is a more accomplished reader, a literature-based instructional style would fit their needs most effectively (Bingham & Hall-Kenyon, 2013).

Bingham and Hall-Kenyon (2013) also revealed an interesting dilemma wherein “effective literacy instruction requires that teachers possess sound literacy expertise that allows them to adapt their literacy instruction to meet the specific challenges and needs of the age group that they teach” (p. 24). Having adequate education in this area is important for teachers, especially those of very young children, as it allows them to fluidly move from one instructional style to the next, and to be able to determine the specific instructional needs of individual students. The point made by Bingham and Hall-Kenyon (2013) was noted as a “dilemma” because it does not appear that teachers are necessarily being effectively taught how to shift between the instructional approaches or how to determine which approach a student needs. There appears to be “a lack of expertise among many educators in how to effectively teach these
harder-to-master reading skills” (Duke & Block, 2012, p. 55), a subject the following section will address.

**Contemporary Effects of Teacher Education Level**

Chapter One provided a brief overview of a few studies regarding teacher education level. Most of the studies examined levels of education and what most teachers were expected to receive in their pre-service training; however, the studies mainly presented views on earning a master’s degree, which is a higher degree than most teachers are expected to obtain. For example, most states require only a bachelor’s degree, if they require anything at all (Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002; Early et al., 2007; McDonald-Connor, Son, Hindman, & Morrison, 2005). In this section, a more extensive review of the literature will examine teacher education levels and how these levels influence what is observed in the classroom. A more specific look at how teacher education level as it relates to reading instruction will also be reviewed.

Before looking at the effects on reading instruction style, however, it is important to note how teachers’ educational level relates to education and instruction in general and the effects that are presented within contemporary classrooms. For example, an important mandate from NCLB was the credentialing and education process for pre-service teachers; federal directives stated that teachers needed to have proper qualifications for the profession. Most states have some requirement for becoming a teacher; many require at least a bachelor’s degree, and almost all require some type of practicum or in-field experience prior to certification (Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002; Early et al., 2007; McDonald-Connor, Son, Hindman, & Morrison, 2005). However, because these requirements differ between states, sometimes drastically, it becomes difficult to determine an accurate picture of the credentialing system as a whole in the United States. Because the federal government does not specifically mandate how teachers are
credentialed, and instead lets states decide upon the process, there is no “one” way a teacher becomes certified to teach. There is also no specific national curriculum, although the adoption of the Common Core Standards by 45 out of the 50 states is certainly an attempt to change this issue (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

Aside from the difficulties in generalizing education level due to the many differences between the states, research conducted on teacher educational level has found inconclusive results regarding whether it affects student outcomes, as previously examined. In 2002, Darling-Hammond and Youngs conducted a review of the Secretary of State’s Annual Report on Teacher Quality, in which the Secretary called for the elimination of teacher preparation programs and education systems, and offered explanations for why alternative routes to certification were more advantageous to student outcomes. The review of Darling-Hammond and Youngs (2002) criticized the recommendations of the Secretary and suggested that the report did not adequately analyze the data surrounding teacher education and preparedness programs in secondary education. The report by the Secretary, however, remains significant for two reasons. The first reason is that the report accurately portrays the level of controversy surrounding effective teacher education programs. An entirely separate debate exists on the merits of teacher education, one that rivals that of “the great debate” of phonics versus whole language. What is problematic about this report, however, is that it undervalues teacher education programs as a whole and provides false evidence regarding the effectiveness of these programs (Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002). The second reason the Secretary’s report is significant is that it provided a call for research to provide sound evidence for teacher education level and teacher preparedness programs to determine their effectiveness in terms of student outcomes, which is what occurred.
in the years after the Secretary’s report and the study by Darling-Hammond and Youngs were published.

In a study conducted in 2005 by McDonald-Connor, Son, Hindman, and Morrison, the effects of teacher qualifications were studied in relation to the reading outcomes of first grade students. Some of the other important factors examined in the study were socioeconomic status, characteristics of the family of the child, classroom practices, and the child’s preschool experience. In terms of teacher qualifications, the researchers used three markers to determine qualification level: teacher education level, whether the teacher had an education credential in elementary or early childhood education, and actual years of experience within the classroom. That data did indicate a relationship between teacher education level and student outcomes, but in an interesting way. The only aspect that teacher education level clearly predicted was level of warmth a teacher had toward a child, with higher education being positively correlated with level of warmth (McDonald-Connor et al., 2005). The students whose teachers were warm and caring did indeed have higher vocabulary scores at the end of first grade compared to students with teachers who were not as affectionate (McDonald-Connor et al., 2005). In an indirect way, it would appear that teacher education level does have some effect on student outcomes, perhaps simply because it provides them with more experience and knowledge on how to deal with classroom management and has less to do with their specific instructional practices in terms of reading.

Another finding of this study that rather complicates the results is the fact that, while teacher education level had an effect on the level of warmth of a teacher, which in turn had an effect on vocabulary scores, the early reading skills of the students were actually weaker somewhat when they had a teacher with a higher level of education (McDonald-Connor et al.,
2005). The other factors measured in this dataset, particularly socioeconomic status, represented most of the variability in student outcomes, and accounted for more of the differences than did education level (McDonald-Connor et al., 2005). This study did provide preliminary evidence that teacher education level affects student outcomes, yet not enough to override other influences affecting student achievement.

Two years later, a study conducted by Early et al. (2007) sought to gather data looking purely at teacher education level and the effects on both the quality of early childhood classrooms as well as student achievement outcomes. One of the main reasons for the study again dealt with the major policy changes taking place concerning higher quality teacher education programs, and the more stringent educational requirements for aspiring teachers (Early et al., 2007). The researchers wanted to provide a summative report on whether the research suggested that education level had markedly different effects on students to better inform policymakers bent on changing the requirements of teacher credentialing processes. Taking data from seven different studies concerning early childcare and education, the researchers reported mainly inconclusive results regarding the impacts of teacher education level (Early et al., 2007). Most of the studies did not show any effect on student outcomes; two studies actually showed negative effects of having a higher education (Early et al., 2007). Based on these findings, there is not enough evidence to support claims of policymakers to increase the requirements for future teachers as it does not appear that a teacher with a higher level of education produces better student outcomes.

A relationship does appear to exist between teacher education level and teacher beliefs, particularly when it comes to developmentally appropriate classroom practices (Han & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2009). Teachers with a higher level of education, in relation to their teaching
assistants, were more likely to support the use of developmentally appropriate practices in their classrooms, whereas the assistants agreed often with statements regarding developmentally inappropriate practices when given a questionnaire pertaining to classroom practices and beliefs (Han & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2009). However, the authors of this study caution that the difference between teachers and their assistants was not something that occurred on a regular basis; more often than not, the two agreed with each other on the use of appropriate practices in the classroom (Han & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2009). As in the previous studies, the results of this research indicate that teacher education level by itself cannot be used to make specific inferences, in this case particularly to classroom practices, but also when it comes to student outcomes.

While all of the studies reviewed in this section refer to early childhood education, and the McDonald-Connor et al. (2005) study does look at early reading skills and vocabulary indices, these studies do not specifically look at reading instruction style as a function of teacher education level. None of these studies looked at whether teachers with a higher level of education use different reading instruction practices within their classroom than those with more limited educational backgrounds. Recent research, such as the Bingham and Hall-Kenyon (2013) study, suggest implementation of at least a balanced approach was influenced by the grade level of the student more than either years of experience or whether they were certified for that particular grade level. However, the research does not indicate how the number of years a teacher spent in school relates to the type of reading instruction approach they decide to implement.
Summary

This chapter presented a more contemporary review of the phonics and whole language debate. The overall implication is that while the debate has definitely shifted over to the acknowledgment of the importance of using a balanced approach, how exactly this balanced approach should be implemented has become another debate entirely. Studies suggested that teachers cannot separate their instruction into half phonics/half whole language and expect that to be an effective way to implement the balanced method (Arrow & Tunmer, 2012; Hatch & Benner, 2011). Teachers must be keenly aware of the different needs of all students in their classes and need to have the ability to accurately assess these needs early on in the school year in order to tailor their instruction to successfully meet each child’s needs (Arrow & Tunmer, 2012). As stated by Bingham and Hall-Kenyon (2013), not only must teachers “possess sound literacy expertise” (p. 24), they must also possess the expertise to be able to identify the particular requirements of each student in their classes.

Also reviewed was the extension of the literature regarding teacher beliefs about literacy instruction and how these beliefs have fluctuated over the years. Beliefs about reading education have come a long way since the Baumann et al. (2000) study and have come even further since the Austin and Morrison study in 1963. In accordance with the research findings, teachers do believe it is important to implement a balanced approach in their classrooms, but also realize the importance of differentiating instruction for each child (Baumann et al., 2000; Bingham and Hall-Kenyon, 2013). However, it appears that teacher beliefs do still differ, especially in terms of appropriate classroom practices (Han & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2009) and there is a definitive lack of knowledge concerning the most accurate ways to implement these difficult reading instruction methods (Duke & Block, 2012).
Finally, a more comprehensive review of the literature concerning teacher education level was analyzed, suggesting inconclusive results regarding whether higher levels of education have any effects on student outcomes. The most direct finding in relation to education level and student outcomes was found in the McDonald-Connor et al. (2005) study, where the level of warmth a teacher had toward his or her students, predicted by higher education level, influenced vocabulary scores. If warmth is really the most prevalent predictor of outcomes related to teacher education level, as indicated by the research, does teacher education level really matter? As pointed out in the Darling-Hammond and Youngs (2002) study, it would appear that education level does make a difference in some ways, but the direction of which has yet to be determined. It should be noted, however, that teacher education level is an integral factor for positive student outcomes when it comes to classroom practices (Early et al., 2007; Han & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2009), and when it comes to the ability to assess the type of reading instruction approach that should be used for specific students.

**Restatement of Purpose**

While this study, again, is not specifically looking at student outcomes, nor is it looking at whether education level affects the ability to accurately assess student achievement level, it is attempting to provide more specific information regarding whether there are differences between teacher beliefs regarding reading instruction approaches that are influenced by teacher education level. The study seeks to determine whether education level is a factor in the beliefs of whether to use a phonics-based, whole language-based, or a balanced approach in early reading instruction. Based on the research, it would appear that some effect exists, and this study seeks to determine what that effect really is. The main research question answered in this study focused on the influence of prekindergarten teachers’ education level and their preferred beliefs
about early reading instructional approaches. It was hypothesized that prekindergarten teachers with a higher level of education will be more likely to implement balanced reading instruction approaches in their classrooms.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Participants

Fifty-nine prekindergarten teachers and their paraprofessionals comprised the sample with 35 of the teachers in a lead teacher role and 24 serving as paraprofessionals. For the purpose of this study, all participants will be termed “teachers.” All but one of the teachers in the sample were female. The teachers were sampled from 19 schools across 3 counties in a southeastern state in the United States. Their ages ranged from 25-60, with the mean age being 37.00 (SD = 9.11). Thirty-five of the teachers identified as White, 17 as African American, 2 as Hispanic, 1 as “Other,” and 4 chose not to provide information about ethnicity.

Organizing education level. All teachers provided information about their highest level of education. Teachers’ educational level ranged from high school to completion of a graduate degree. Of the sample of teachers, 13 noted high school completion, 6 indicated that they either had completed some college coursework or obtained an associate’s degree (which was operationalized as “some college/associate’s degree”), 17 had completed an undergraduate program and earned a bachelor’s degree, and 23 had a master’s degree or educational specialist’s (6 year) degree. Teacher type (lead and paraprofessional) and highest level of education were analyzed to determine if there were differences between the two groups on their highest level of education. A significant difference was found between the two groups ($\Phi = .85, p < .01$). The differences between the two groups were found in the number of paraprofessionals versus lead teachers who either had a high school education or some college/associate’s degree ($n = 19$) as
their level of education. No lead teachers listed high school or some college/associate’s degree as their highest level of education. Further, 22 lead teachers had a graduate degree while only one paraprofessional had obtained a graduate degree.

Measure

Organizing teacher belief responses. The data used for this study was a collected from a larger research study and examined as part of a secondary data analysis. Teachers and paraprofessionals completed the Teacher and Paraprofessional Information Form, which originally included 317 questions, ranging from informational questions to questions regarding teacher beliefs and practices in early childhood classrooms. Many of the questions centered on general practices or beliefs about early childhood education, and as such were not central to the early literacy questions. Because this study sought to examine teacher’s education level and specific beliefs on reading and literacy education, many questions were deleted and only questions that specifically focused on literacy were retained. This process left 60 questions that specifically dealt with reading or literacy beliefs and practices in the classroom. Of these 60 questions, only 22 were chosen as the most specific questions that pertained to beliefs about early literacy, and of which three were used simply to categorize the teachers into either a phonics, whole language, or balanced approach system. This left 19 questions that provided the most accurate measure of teachers’ general beliefs about early literacy.

The remaining 19 questions fell into three overall categories: “How important is it to teach the following literacy goals” (4 questions); “Beliefs about teaching reading/learning to read” (8 questions); and “Importance of the following goals” (7 questions). Of these, 8 were related to phonics, 9 were related to whole language, and 2 questions were related to balanced instruction. The “importance” questions were rated on a scale of 0-3 (0 = unimportant [or not
important], 1 = somewhat important, 2 = pretty important, 3 = essential), while the “beliefs”
questions were rated on a Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = undecided, 4
= agree, 5 = strongly agree). The 19 selected questions are presented in Table 1.

Analysis Strategy

Because teachers were grouped by their educational levels, a series of analyses of
variance were conducted to examine differences among teachers’ beliefs on questions regarding
early literacy by teacher education level. For each of the three subsets of questions, an analysis
of variance was conducted; the following chapter will discuss the results of the ANOVA.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Prior to analyzing results based on specific questions, teachers were first categorized based upon their preferred instructional approach in the classroom. This information was used to determine whether or not any differences existed between the teachers based upon their own beliefs. Teachers responded to three questions, rated on a one to five scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree,” that were related to specific definitions of their particular reading instruction approach. These three questions were: (1) I use multiple learning perspectives and sets of materials when teaching children about reading; (2) I am a whole language teacher; and (3) I am a phonics teacher. Teachers’ responses were examined and a combination of responses to each of these three items was used to categorize teachers into one of three groups: phonics, whole language, or balanced. A clear instructional approach could be determined for 57 of the 59 teachers; two teachers provided data where a clear preference could not be established and their data were not used in the subsequent analyses. Beliefs about early literacy indicated 24 teachers endorsed a phonics perspective, 7 teachers had beliefs indicating a whole language perspective, and 26 teachers had beliefs that endorsed a balanced perspective.

A series of analysis of variance tests looking at the relationship between teacher education level and response to questions regarding importance and beliefs on early literacy practices in prekindergarten was conducted; the results of the ANOVA are displayed in Table 2. The analysis yielded statistically significant results for 4 of the 19 questions. Three of the questions were in the “beliefs” subgroup, and one question was in the “importance of goals”
subgroup. The significant questions in the “beliefs subgroup were: “Teaching students to decode words is one of my most important goals” ($F(3,55) = 3.26, p = .03$); “I surround students with literature and literary experiences in order for the children to become fluent, skillful readers in the future” ($F(3, 54) = 4.60, p < .01$); and “Teaching students to read some basic sight words is an important goal” ($F(3, 55) = 3.54, p = .02$).

On the question of teaching students to decode as an important goal, with the exception of teachers who had some college courses or an associate’s degree, most teachers disagreed with this statement. The mean rating by subgroup for the high school, bachelor’s, and master’s/educational specialist groups was 2.85, 2.94, 2.87, respectively, whereas the teachers with some college/associate’s degree education endorsed this belief ($M = 4.17$), indicating their agreement with the practice. For a second question on surrounding children with literacy experiences to develop fluent, skillful readers, all teachers generally endorsed this belief. However, post-hoc analyses indicated that the difference among the teachers was found between high-school completers and graduate degree completers. On the third question of the teaching of sight words, teachers with bachelor’s degrees or graduate degrees were less likely to endorse this belief, whereas teachers with some college/associate’s degrees strongly endorsed this practice ($M = 4.67$). The difference between the some college/associate’s group and both college degree completer groups was significant in post-hoc analyses.

The fourth question, involving the importance of the goal of understanding the meaning of words, revealed a significant difference ($F(3, 55) = 4.05, p = .01$). All teachers noted some importance of this practice in prekindergarten children’s early literacy experiences. Post-hoc analyses indicated the significant difference among the four groups of teachers was between high school completers and the graduate degree completers.
Differences Among Teachers

Upon further investigation of the Scheffe post-hoc tests for the four items that demonstrated significant differences, the results of which are presented in Table 3, it would appear that the most significant mean differences exist between those with a graduate degree and those with either only a high school diploma or some college/associate’s degree. Interestingly, it would appear that, after further examination of the particular questions that were statistically significant, 3 of the 4 questions were all whole language-based questions. This was an intriguing finding, as while most teachers and paraprofessionals, regardless of their educational level, did not show any significant differences in opinions regarding either phonics or balanced instruction strategies, they did in fact differ in terms of their opinions regarding whole language practices. The other question that produced statistically significant results is a phonics-based question, so, perhaps even more interestingly, there were never any differences between the teachers on balanced type questions based on their level of education. This finding contradicts the original hypothesis that those teachers with a higher level of education would be more likely to endorse a balanced approach than those with a less advanced level of education.

Overall Response Analysis.

While many of the analyses from the 19 questions did not indicate significant differences between teachers with different educational levels, trends in the data suggested some interesting relationships present in the data. One of the most interesting findings was the fact that teachers would answer different questions that targeted early literacy concepts in completely contradictory ways. For example, the question “Teaching students to read some basic sight words is an important goal,” was similar to the question regarding the importance of having students “recognize basic sight words” as a goal in the overall classroom program. However,
teachers with the same educational level grouping answered differently on those two questions. On the first question, almost all teachers agreed with this belief; on the second question, none of the teachers rated it more than “somewhat important.”

Another example of this phenomenon was between the two questions measuring “balanced” early literacy approaches. The two questions fundamentally addressed the same concept, as in the previous example; the first question asked whether or not teachers combined skill development with literature and language-rich activities, whereas the second question centered on the combination of tradebooks and basal materials when teaching reading. On the first question, all teachers agreed fairly strongly with this approach except those with a high school diploma. On the second question, most of the teachers were undecided on the issue; however, this time, the teachers with the graduate degree had the lowest mean score of the group ($M = 3.00$), contradicting the answers from the previous question.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

At its core, the premise of this study was to determine whether or not teacher beliefs about early literacy instructional approaches differed among teachers who have reached varying levels of educational attainment. The results of the current study suggest that these differences exist on some questions, but the main hypothesis, that those with the highest level of education would be more likely to endorse a balanced approach, was not supported by the data. Interestingly, all teachers, regardless of education level, were basically undecided on both “balanced” questions. These findings are inconsistent with the work by Baumann et al. (2000), which indicated most teachers have beliefs noting the importance of implementing a balanced early literacy approach in classrooms.

The results of this study do support the research findings, however, that indicate a lack of consensus when it comes to what type of instructional approach works best in early childhood classrooms. Even within the educational levels in this study, results differed across similar constructs; teachers who agreed with an approach presented in one question disagreed with the same approach posed in a different context on another question. The findings presented here do not provide consistent evidence regarding the significance of teacher’s highest level of educational attainment other than the fact there does seem to be a difference between those with a high school education and those with a graduate school degree; unfortunately, as presented in some of the literature, the direction of this difference has yet to be determined.
Implications for Education

Because this study does not specifically look at any kind of student outcomes, and instead looks purely at teacher beliefs, specific implications for education are limited to discussions on how to reconcile the differences that may occur at both the school-level, between classrooms with teachers of varying education levels, and within classrooms between teachers and paraprofessionals with differing levels of education. This becomes especially important when classes are being instructed full-time by paraprofessionals, instead of by lead teachers, which is often the case in remedial classrooms and in high-poverty schools (van der Klauuw, 2008). While lead teachers are required in almost all states to obtain a bachelor’s degree, this threshold does not exist for paraprofessionals. In classrooms where the main source of instruction is provided through a paraprofessional, one without the specific requirements designated to a lead teacher in that same classroom, this could become problematic. As shown in this study, lead teachers and paraprofessionals have varying levels of education, which could influence their style of instruction of particular reading approaches. Evidenced by the research, disagreement between lead teachers and paraprofessionals on classroom beliefs and practices could introduce problems within the instructional setting, producing negative consequences for student outcomes.

Limitations

One of the most significant limitations of this study was the number of participants included in the final analysis, as well as the small number of questions posed to the participants. A larger sample size, as well as one representing greater diversity, might provide a more accurate depiction of prekindergarten teachers and their opinions on instructional approaches. More questions specifically tailored to instructional approaches may also provide a more precise measure of these differences, and perhaps provide more insight into specifically where these
differences occur. Because this study relied on an existing dataset, it was not possible to manipulate the questions to perfectly match.

Another major limitation of this study was that there is no real standardized curriculum for prekindergarten classrooms, meaning that some of the teachers in this study may have thought that some of the questions did not pertain to the instructional level of a prekindergarten child. For example, one of the questions that had a relatively low mean score overall was regarding the importance of teaching sight words. Many teachers might not believe that prekindergarten children should be learning particular sight words, and may endorse a more play-oriented, child-centered learning model, rather than a cognitively-structured curriculum. This might in turn bias their answers on these types of questions where they may not believe teaching prekindergarten students to read sight words is important, yet that does not necessarily mean that they are against the instruction of sight words in general.

However, findings regarding sight words are contradictory to findings concerning the importance of being able to clap out syllables; almost all teachers rated this as being unimportant. Clapping syllables to represent the sounds within a word appears to be a fairly simple task, one that even prekindergarten children could be plausibly expected to be able to complete. This points to a related problem of an unstandardized curriculum, which is simply the fact that teachers may define certain terms in the questions as either being less important or even completely unrelated to the subject in which the study was attempting to address. For example, in this study the term “basal readers” was used to refer to textbooks, specifically textbooks that aid in the instruction of phonics. Because of this, all questions having anything to do with basal readers were deemed “phonics” questions. However, not all teachers may define basal readers as having to do simply with phonics instruction; many may use the stories presented in textbooks,
and thus would even perhaps feel as though these books fall into the whole language category, particularly if they were using them to teach sight words or words in a story. These discrepancies suggest that teachers may have conceptualized the questions asked in the study much differently than they were intended.

**Directions for Future Research**

Future research studies looking at teachers’ education level and belief differences should not only include a larger sample size and related survey questions, but should also establish a clear consensus with the participants on the definition of the terms used in the study. These strategies leave less room for misinterpretation of the question and would also allow for a more accurate answer from the participants. It may also be important to either change the nature of the questions provided to the teachers, or to simply ask these same questions to teachers of older students, because perhaps the constructs measured by these questions were more suited to an older group of children rather than prekindergarten students.

Another future research query would be to look into how well teacher beliefs related to their own “classification” of belief style. In categorizing the participants in this study, teachers that were grouped by their belief style, according to the answers they provided. Using this data, it would be interesting to see whether or not there was a significant relationship between the categorization of the teachers and their answers to specific questions within their same belief style. This would provide information regarding whether or not teachers are completely aware of the instructional approach that they actually endorse.

Perhaps the most important future research study, however, is to use this data in relation to actual student outcomes to determine whether or not these differences between teachers actually matter in terms of classroom instruction and student outcomes. Because their answers
were collected via a survey, it is difficult to determine whether or not these teachers actually endorse and instruct their classrooms based on their beliefs on a daily basis. It would be beneficial to examine what occurs naturally in a classroom setting; as research suggested, tailoring instruction to fit student needs is an important factor in student achievement. This may be what is actually occurring in a prekindergarten classroom on a daily basis, not simply the pure instruction of either phonics or whole language approaches.

As requirements are changing, and more teachers are being mandated to acquire at least a four-year degree to become certified to teach preschool, it may also be pertinent to determine whether these differences are more a function of age rather than education, particularly looking at older teachers who did not need to have obtained a bachelor’s degree to become certified in relation to new teachers who are required to do so. The relationship between age, education, and certification and licensure would be an interesting aspect to study, one that may provide more insight than simply highest level of educational attainment alone.

It is imperative, however, to make known the differences that exist between teacher educational level and beliefs about the instructional styles of early literacy skills in prekindergarten children. These differences, while not all entirely significant, provide key insight into the heterogeneity of the American educational system, and lend more support to the research stating that these differences are important to the children whose early literacy experiences rest upon the instructional approach of their teacher, the same instructional approach which may be resting upon that particular teacher’s highest level of education.
REFERENCES


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<th>Question Code</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Instructional Approach</th>
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<td>How important is it to teach the following literacy strategies to prekindergarten students? Decoding (phonics) strategies</td>
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<td>Q2WL</td>
<td>How important is it to teach the following literacy strategies to prekindergarten students? Looking for meaningful parts of words</td>
<td>Whole Language</td>
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<td>Q3WL</td>
<td>How important is it to teach the following literacy strategies to prekindergarten students? Using context to decide how to pronounce a word</td>
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<td>Beliefs about teaching reading and learning to read: I combine skills development with literature and language-rich activities</td>
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<td>Beliefs about teaching reading and learning to read: Teaching students to decode words is one of my most important goals</td>
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<td>Q19P</td>
<td>The importance of each of the following goals for the language arts or literacy program in your classroom: Clapping out syllables</td>
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### Table 2

*Results of the ANOVA Comparing Instructional Approach Score Based on Education Level*

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<th>Graduate Degree</th>
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*p < .05. **p < .01.
Table 3
Significant Results of the Scheffe’s Post-Hoc Test

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