The reading wars have raged for most of the 20th century, and they continue into the 21st. What is the best way to teach reading? From whole word to whole language, various approaches have been tried, rejected, and revived. The National Reading Panel’s (2000a, b) recent report has only added to the debate it was designed to settle. The Panel, convened to “assess the status of research-based knowledge, including the effectiveness of various approaches to teaching children to read,” published a report in 2000 (National Reading Panel, a, p.1) The report immediately came under attack and is still being criticized for its methodology as well as its findings (see Garan, 2001a, b; Wilson, Martens, Arya, & Altwerger, 2004; Yatvin, 2002). Much of the controversy focuses on the Phonics section, which is predictable since phonics and whole language are the major approaches in the “great debate.”

What is the difference between phonics and whole language? A teacher using a phonics, or a skills-based, perspective focuses on the relationships between letters and sounds and teaches them explicitly. Once students begin to recognize letters with greater speed, the students can move up to word recognition. Usually, teachers incorporate sight word instruction early on; in this method, children are taught to recognize common words such as my, the, and at on sight instead of sounding them out. Once students get faster at both recognizing sight words and sounding out words, they can begin to process sentences and eventually paragraphs. With increased fluency, students have more cognitive ability to devote to comprehension (see Adams, 1990; Liberman & Liberman, 1992).

For whole-language theorists, comprehension does not happen after children can read fluently. Whole-language advocates see reading as making sense of text. Children not only bring meaning to what they read, they are constantly constructing meaning as they read (see Goodman, 1996; Wilde, 1997). Breaking language into abstract categories like individual letters is unnecessary. In a whole-language perspective, contrary to a phonics perspective, one does not need to read every single word or letter to get meaning (Goodman). Instead, readers take as little information as necessary from the print to infer the meaning. As children gain experience with text, they develop better schemas that allow them to make more effective and efficient inferences. Whole-language theorists...
relate learning to reading to learning to speak and advocate literature-rich environments (e.g. Goodman, Wilde).

Though these two theories seem very different, whole-language teachers do not exclude phonics and phonics teachers do not spend all their time in workbooks. In fact, some studies show that most teachers support a balanced or eclectic approach. For example, Baumann, Hoffman, Moon, and Duffy-Hester (1998) found just that when they surveyed over 1,000 kindergarten through fifth grade teachers. Nearly 90% of the teachers said they believed in a balanced approach. Baumann et al. also found that few teachers endorsed one particular approach over the other: only 22% indicated that they saw themselves as “traditionalist,” and only 34% described themselves as “whole-language” teachers (Baumann, et al., p. 642). Burgess, Lundgren, Lloyd, and Pianta (2001) found similar results with preschool teachers. In their sample, 6% selected “I am a phonics teacher,” and 25% selected “I am a whole-language teacher.” According to these results, less than one-third of teachers use one approach exclusively.

Though previous research suggests that most teachers support a balanced view, the curriculum may not be balanced. The National Reading Panel (2000) report strongly endorsed phonics over other instructional methods; this emphasis has transferred into national policy and state curricula. For instance, the curriculum for Georgia, the state where the current study takes place, views reading from a phonics approach. In kindergarten, children are expected to know letter-sound correspondences, phoneme blending, and sight words. Each year through third grade, students increase their speed and accuracy of recognition under very specific terms. To meet the standard in kindergarten, each student should read “previously taught high frequency words at the rate of 30 words correct per minute” (Cox, n.d.). The standard increases to 60 words per minute in first grade, then to 90 words in second grade, and finally to 120 words in third grade. Whole-language advocates would say that this emphasis on correct oral reading is unnecessary and could actually get in the way of comprehension (Goodman, 1996). Children could focus so much on getting the words right that they lose meaning. However, Georgia’s curriculum does not neglect meaning, as different levels of comprehension are goals in each grade. For the most part, however, the Georgia curriculum is phonics-based.

What does a phonics-based curriculum mean for teachers who believe in a more balanced approach or a whole-language approach? Do they modify their program to match their beliefs? According to Islam (1999), teachers’ theoretical orientations influence their choices about instruction. Even implicit beliefs are important. So, do the beliefs and practices of most teachers align, or do other factors, such as the curriculum, have more control?

Researchers have looked at the question of beliefs and practices in reading instruction in different ways. They have used self-report instruments, interviews, observations, and varying combinations of those methods. Frerichs (1993) studied 16 kindergarten teachers in seven schools in one district. She used a survey to determine if the participants’ beliefs and practices matched in four areas: Reading, Writing, Concepts About Print, and Letter/Sound Association. Using correlations, she found that teachers’ beliefs and practices did not match. She found no significant correlations in Reading, and in only 4 of 14 possible matches did teachers state that they conducted practices that matched their beliefs in that area. The teachers endorsed attitudes consistent with the recommendations of Marie Clay, creator of the Reading Recovery program. Frerichs described this program as “emergent literacy” (Frerichs, p. 4), another term for whole language. The teachers, however, did not use Clay’s recommendations in their classrooms. They held whole-language beliefs but their practices did not match those beliefs.

On the other hand, Burgess et al. (2001) found that beliefs were consistent with practices. They surveyed 240 preschool teachers throughout Virginia and analyzed the surveys with factor analysis and ANOVA. The teachers in their sample believed in and used practices that were more whole-language oriented. For instance, they felt that letter-naming and knowing letter/sound correspondences were not that important, and their classroom activities reflected this belief. Islam (1999) also looked at preschool teachers in addition to kindergarten and first grade teachers in one Mississippi county. When she compared the beliefs, practices, and knowledge bases of 350 teachers, she found that that there was a high (i.e., .89) correlation between what the teachers believed and what they did in the classroom, regardless of the teachers’ theoretical orientations. While Frerichs (1993) found that beliefs and practices did not match, Burgess et al. and Islam found that they did. Why there is a difference is not clear, as Frerichs did not provide enough data about her participants to compare them to those of Burgess et al. and Islam.

Conclusions about beliefs and practices matching are not limited to survey studies. Using interviews, focus-group meetings, observations, and a questionnaire, Foertsch (2003) found that kindergarten through eighth grade teachers’ practices in reading and lan-
guage arts matched their beliefs. When asked to place themselves on a continuum between whole language and phonics, most teachers said they were balanced. Additionally, the Georgia Department of Education, as part of an evaluation of its Reading First program, examined teachers’ beliefs and practices using discussion groups, site visits, and surveys. They found that teachers generally agreed with the Reading First philosophy, and that their practices supported the program. The Reading First program calls for direct, systematic phonics instruction and sight word development, but it also emphasizes quality literature. Additionally, the evaluators found that few differences existed in beliefs or practices between Reading First teachers and teachers who used other programs (Schrenko, 2000; 2001). With the exception of Frerichs (1993), the above research supports the conclusion that, however measured, the beliefs and practices of teachers tend to match.

In the studies where beliefs and practices matched, the teachers supported central ideas that were the focus of the curriculum. This study considers a school district in Georgia where, as we have seen, the curriculum is more phonics-based than whole-language-based. City Schools of Decatur is an independent district in Dekalb County, Georgia that has an enrollment of about 2,000 in one preschool, four elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. As a very successful district, all of the elementary schools had met their Annual Yearly Progress for three consecutive years in 2006 (City Schools of Decatur, n.d.). The district’s performance on Georgia’s statewide tests is consistently higher than Dekalb County schools or the state of Georgia as a whole (Governor’s Office of Student Achievement, 2005).

Within City Schools of Decatur, this study looks at kindergarten through third grade teachers. President Bush’s No Child Left Behind policy states that every child should read by third grade (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Therefore, it is important to consider what happens in the classrooms up to this benchmark and not just in the early grades. The primary purpose of this study is to replicate previous research and add to it by comparing the results to the state curriculum and achievement scores. Is there conflict between the beliefs of these teachers and the teachers’ practices? If there is, are the emphases in the curriculum to blame? This study differs from those above in that, instead of viewing teachers on a continuum between phonics and whole language, it considers the degree to which teachers endorse aspects of both. It may be inappropriate to view whole-language teachers and phonics teachers as diametrically opposed. To that end, I measure beliefs and practices in two ways: by the average agreement with whole-language items and phonics items, and by participants’ self-ratings.

Another question I consider is what factors are related to a teacher’s theoretical orientation? Islam (1999) found that teachers with less than six years of experience were more likely to endorse an emergent literacy, or whole-language perspective, as were first grade teachers and African American teachers. I also examine the factors teachers felt were important in reading instruction as well as their beliefs about standardized testing. Another analysis will consider the knowledge bases of teachers and whether their beliefs are related to their familiarity with certain terms. Islam reported that teachers’ beliefs did not relate to their knowledge base, indicating that teachers were equally knowledgeable despite their theoretical orientation. Finally, I will compare achievement data with the level of conflict these teachers face in order to determine if conflict has any effect on achievement.

In summary, the first hypothesis tests the conclusions of Baumann et al. (1998), and Burgess et al. (2001)—that is, participants will endorse a balanced approach. The second hypothesis is that beliefs and practices will match, in agreement with the studies discussed above. Considering the Georgia curriculum’s focus on phonics skills and the implications that beliefs and practices will match when teachers support the focus of the curriculum, the third hypothesis is that any conflict between beliefs and practices will be due to the curriculum. Additionally, because the teachers share common standards, the fourth hypothesis is that the level of conflict will not vary by school or grade level. Finally, to concur with Islam’s (1999) results, the fifth hypothesis is that the level of conflict will vary by demographic factors such as experience and race.

Method

Participants

Participants were 30 teachers in City Schools of Decatur, located in Decatur, Georgia. The school district has three elementary schools that are comprised of kindergarten through third grades. The K-3 schools are Clairemont, Oakhurst, and Winnona Park. After receiving IRB approval for the study, I obtained e-mail addresses for all head and support teachers in those schools from the school websites and sent a link to the survey to 80 teachers. The respondents were mostly female (28 female, 2 male); 20 were Caucasian, 6 were African American, 2 were Asian or Pacific Islander, 1 was Hispanic, and 1 was “mixed”; 13 were from Winnona Park, 9 were from Clairemont, and 8 were from Oakhurst. Most teachers had either a bachelor’s
degree or a Master of Arts in Teaching \( (n = 11, n = 14, \) respectively), and the median years of teaching experience was 6-10. Most of the participants (26) were head teachers.

**Materials**

The survey used items from Islam (1999) and Schrenko (2001). I edited some statements for wording. For instance, “Reading readiness is my primary literacy philosophy” became “Reading readiness is my primary philosophy.” I eliminated “extremely” from the statement “Standardized testing is an extremely appropriate way to determine early literacy development” to make it more moderate. The majority of statements were not modified. I also added “A significant amount of class time should be devoted to preparing for standardized tests” to the Beliefs section and “Onset/rimes” to the knowledge base terms.

The final survey contained three sections and began by collecting demographic information, including at which school participants taught and whether they had taught at this school in 2004-2005. Items asked participants which reading programs they used and how long they had been using them. I took the list of reading programs from Schrenko (2001); they included Reading First, Reading Rescue, Reading Recovery, the Patricia Cunningham Four Block Method, and Success for All. The participants then indicated their level of agreement with nine statements on a scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 6 (Strongly Agree). These statements addressed their satisfaction with their jobs, their reading programs, their level of autonomy, and whether they felt their programs were balanced between phonics and whole language.

The Beliefs section consisted of 28 statements, about half reflecting a whole-language attitude, and half reflecting a phonics attitude. An example of a whole-language statement is, “It is not necessary for a child to know the letters of the alphabet in order to read.” An example of a phonics statement is, “When children do not know a word, they should be instructed to sound out its parts.” Participants indicated their level of agreement using the same 6-point scale as above. Three additional questions concerned standardized testing and computer use.

The Practices section consisted of two parts. Using the scale above, participants first indicated their level of agreement with 18 statements, half whole-language practices and half phonics practices. An example of a whole-language practice is, “I conduct literature circles.” An example of a phonics practice is, “I teach spelling and phonics rules.” In the second portion, I asked participants to “Enter the percentage of your total instructional time spent on each of the follow-

ing activities.” Thirteen statements followed, including, “Sight words” and “Reading and science combined.” Half of the statements were whole-language items and half were phonics items, while the remaining questions addressed behavior management, computer use, and testing.

Next, participants were asked to rate their familiarity with 31 terms commonly used in whole language and phonics instruction, including, “Portfolio assessment,” “Digraph,” and “Onset/rimes.” They responded using a scale from 1 (Very Unfamiliar) to 6 (Very Familiar).

In the last section, participants ranked several factors in the order of importance to reading development. They then placed themselves on two scales consisting of 15 ticks, labeled “Phonics Only” at one end, “Balanced” in the middle, and “Whole Language Only” at the other end. They were asked to rate both their beliefs and their practices, and they could select “N/A” if they felt they did not fit on the continuum. The scale had high face validity because it was similar to other scales measuring similar concepts. Cronbach’s alpha for whole-language was .61, based on 23 items, and .78 for phonics, based on 25 items.

**Procedure**

Participants took the survey online. Instructions indicated, “The purpose of this research is to collect information about the training, philosophies, and reading programs of K-3 teachers in City Schools of Decatur” and informed the participants that their responses would be kept confidential and not reported in any way that could identify an individual respondent (i.e. third grade teachers at a particular school). The participants had about three weeks to complete the survey, and I sent three reminders during that period. I coded statements in the Beliefs and Practices sections as phonics, whole language, or other, and computed the average level of agreement for four categories: Phonics beliefs, phonics practices, whole-language beliefs, and whole-language practices. I will refer to these averages as Belief Scores or Practices Scores. Too few participants responded to the second part of the Practices section, which asked for percentages of time spent on certain activities, so I did not analyze it.

**Results**

First, I computed average agreement with each type of item as well as a Conflict Score (CS). The CS was equal to the absolute value of the Phonics Practices Score (PP) subtracted from the Phonics Belief Score (PB) added to the absolute value of the Whole-language Practices Score (WP) subtracted from the Whole-language Beliefs Score (WB), or
CS = |PB − PP| + |WB − WP|

The minimum possible CS was zero and the maximum was ten. This score reflects the extent to which teachers reported they used practices more than they agreed with them. Additionally, I computed descriptive statistics and performed Spearman correlations, Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis comparison tests. Because of the small sample size, \( p = .10 \) was used as the significance level.

**Reading programs used.** The most popular programs were Reading Recovery (\( n = 21 \)) and Teacher’s College Reading and Writing Project (\( n = 22 \)). Five or fewer participants used the other programs, which included SRA Direct Instruction and Reading First.

**Hypothesis 1: Participants will endorse a balanced approach.** Participants would endorse a balanced approach if they agreed with items favoring a balanced approach, i.e. that the most effective programs were balanced, and indicated that their programs were balanced. Additionally, individual items would show that participants were balanced. On the six-point scale of Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree, the median agreement with beliefs items was 3.88, while the median agreement with practices items was 3.50.

First, the participants strongly agreed that schools should adopt a balanced approach to reading instruction (\( Med. = 6.00 \)), but they only moderately agreed that their programs were balanced (\( Med. = 5.00 \)). The participants strongly agreed that they were satisfied with their jobs (\( Med. = 6.00 \)), and they felt their reading programs were effective (\( Med. = 6.00 \)). Teachers agreed slightly less about their reading programs being the “most effective way to teach reading” (\( Med. = 5.00 \)). Participants who agreed more strongly that their programs were balanced also agreed more strongly that their programs were the most effective way to teach reading (\( r = .73, p < .01 \)). A significant, negative relationship existed between wanting more freedom in determining their instruction and feeling their program was balanced (\( r = -.35, p < .10 \)), indicating that those who were dissatisfied with their programs were less likely to feel that their programs were balanced. Participants felt that a balanced approach was best and that they taught using a balanced method. Those who were most satisfied also felt that their programs were balanced. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for beliefs and practices in general and when separated by philosophy.

Table 2 demonstrates that the participants tended to agree more with the whole-language items than with the phonics items in both their beliefs and practices. Therefore, the participants were not balanced. Looking at the two items “Reading readiness is my primary philosophy” and “Emergent literacy is my primary philosophy,” 17% moderately agreed with the first statement (none strongly agreed), while 41% moderately or strongly agreed with the second statement. This indicates that more of the sample was whole-language oriented. Participants’ self-ratings supported this conclusion. When asked to rate their beliefs on a continuum, participants tended to place themselves on the whole-language side, that is, 9 or above out of 15, with 8 as balanced (\( Med. = 9.50 \)). The lack of balance was even more apparent for practices (\( Med. = 11.00 \)). Out of 16 participants, 1 selected “N/A” on the practices scale. None selected “N/A” on the beliefs scale. Most of the participants felt they were on a continuum between phonics and whole language.

**Hypothesis 2: Beliefs and practices will match.** For beliefs and practices to match, the correlations...
between beliefs and practices scores would be significant, as would correlations between individual beliefs and practices items. The Conflict Score would not be significantly different from zero. The results showed that the correlation for beliefs and practices in general was .22 (ns). When looking at the different approaches, the correlation between whole-language beliefs and whole-language practices was .10 (ns). The correlation between phonics beliefs and phonics practices was significant, .42 (p < .10). Those who held stronger phonics beliefs also used more phonics practices. On the participants’ self-ratings, there was a .47 correlation (ns) between their ratings of their beliefs and their ratings of their practices. The correlation matrix for the calculated scores is in Table 2. Most of the correlations were not significant because of the small sample size, as only 19 of 31 participants responded to the practices section of the survey. In summary, those who used phonics practices appeared to have more of a belief in phonics. However, the results did not show a significant relationship for whole language.

The Conflict Score (CS) was another measure of the degree to which participants’ beliefs and practices matched. The average level of conflict was significantly different from zero, t(18) = 8.00, p < .001. This supports the conclusion that beliefs and practices did not match.

Finally, I examined the relationships between individual items. In whole language, there was a significant relationship between agreeing that reader’s theaters and author circles were good ways to assess literacy and those who used literature circles (r = .53, p < .05). I also found a relationship between those who agreed that invented spelling was an important stage in the writing process and allowing students to use invented spellings (r = .77, p < .01). A significant relationship existed between agreeing that literacy could be assessed through any area in an integrated curriculum and evaluating literacy during an integrated unit (r = .79, p < .01). Moderate to strong relationships existed between these whole-language beliefs and practices.

In phonics, there was a non-significant relationship between teaching spelling and phonics rules and believing that having children verbalize phonics rules was a good way to assess reading (r = .14, ns). I found no relationship between believing that correct oral reading was important and using Round Robin reading (r = .09, ns). Round Robin reading is a practice in which students take turns reading short passages from a text aloud. Finally, there was no relationship between feeling that the recognition of alphabet letters was essential and teaching letter sound correspondences (r = -.02, ns). When comparing individual items, there were fewer significant relationships between phonics items than whole-language items. Nevertheless, the 18 practices items did not match up to a particular belief, so Hypothesis 2 is rejected. The teachers’ beliefs matched more in phonics than whole language generally, and more on individual whole-language items than on phonics items. Overall, these results indicate a lack of strong alignment between beliefs and practices.

**Hypothesis 3: The conflict between beliefs and practices will be due to the curriculum.** If the curriculum were a source of conflict, then teachers would use more phonics practices than whole-language practices though they endorsed whole-language. They would also agree that they wanted more control over their instruction. The relationship between the Conflict Score and participants’ ratings of their beliefs was -.37 (ns), while the relationship between CS and participants’ ratings of their practices was -.14 (ns).

When looking at medians, participants believed in phonics (3.60) more than they practiced it (2.67), and believed in whole language (4.20) less than they practiced it (4.75). The difference between whole-language and phonics beliefs was less than the difference between whole-language and phonics practices. The amount of conflict teachers experienced was not related to their ratings of their beliefs or their practices and whole-language practices were more prevalent in the curriculum at the expense of phonics practices.

Participants tended to agree that curriculum standards determined their instruction (Med. = 5.00) but they also felt that they determined the focus of their reading programs (Med. = 5.00). They tended to somewhat disagree with the statement, “I do not have much time for texts or activities outside the curriculum” (Med. = 3.00) as well as with a statement saying they would like more freedom (Med. = 3.00). In general, participants felt they had enough autonomy to develop their instructional programs while still meeting curriculum standards.

A correlation revealed a significant, positive relationship between participants agreeing that their reading program was the most effective program and agreeing that they determined the focus of their reading program (r = .45, p < .05). Those who agreed more with their program’s effectiveness agreed that they had more autonomy. A significant, negative correlation existed between feeling that a program was the most effective way to teach and wanting more freedom (r = -.53, p < .01). Teachers who agreed more that their programs were the most effective disagreed with wanting more freedom. Finally, teachers having an effective program was negatively related to agreeing that
they did not have time for things outside of the curriculum (r = -.63, p < .01). Those who agreed that their programs were effective tended to disagree that they did not have enough time for extra activities. Those who had control and freedom felt their programs were more effective. Since teachers felt they had control over their programs in general, Hypothesis 3 is rejected. Though the curriculum was more phonics-oriented, teachers did not use more phonics practices; they chose to use whole-language practices.

**Hypothesis 4: The level of conflict will not vary by school or grade level.** In Table 3, we see the participants grouped by the school in which they taught. The n is the lowest number of participants available for all of the statistics. The following results are tentative because of the small number of participants in certain groups.

Clairemont had the highest Conflict Score and the highest phonics belief score. The differences between schools by Conflict Score was significant (Kruskal-Wallis H(2) = 6.41, p < .05). A Mann-Whitney U comparison revealed that the difference in Conflict Score between Clairemont and Oakhurst was significant (U = .00, p < .01), as was the difference between Oakhurst and Winnona Park (U = 4.000, p < .10). The difference between Clairemont and Winnona Park was not significant.

Table 4 shows that participants who taught second grade agreed the least with phonics beliefs and phonics practices. The first grade teachers agreed most with whole-language beliefs, while kindergarten teachers agreed to using whole-language practices the most. These differences were not significant. Grade levels also differed significantly by Conflict Score (Kruskal-Wallis H(3) = 8.69, p < .05). Participants who taught second grade were significantly lower in conflict than participants in each of the other grade levels were (U = .00, p < .05 for kindergarten, first, and third). Despite these results, no conclusion is made for Hypothesis 4. Differences in conflict did exist by school and grade level, but the sample sizes are too small to support a definitive answer.

**Hypothesis 5: The level of conflict will vary by demographic factors such as experience or race.** On the following variables reported (except gender), participants were recoded into two or three groups to obtain the largest possible number of participants in each group. I found no significant differences by age, professional participation, highest degree obtained, or gender in phonics beliefs, phonics practices, whole-language beliefs, whole-language practices, or Conflict Score.

A significant difference existed between Caucasian and non-Caucasian participants (n = 16, n = 7, respec-
tively) on phonics beliefs (Kruskal-Wallis H(1) = 3.03, p < .05). The median agreement with phonics belief items for Caucasian participants was 3.48, while the median for non-Caucasian participants was 4.07. Participants also differed significantly on phonics practices (Kruskal-Wallis H(1) = 2.79, p < .10). The median for Caucasian participants was 2.60 and for non-Caucasian participants, 2.80. Non-Caucasian participants were somewhat more phonics oriented than Caucasian participants.

Analysis revealed a significant difference in phonics beliefs by position (Kruskal-Wallis H(1) = 4.23, p < .05). Head teachers (n = 20) endorsed phonics less (Med. = 3.48) than support teachers (n = 3, Med. = 4.13), though this may be an artifact of the different sample sizes. Again, no conclusion is made for Hypothesis 5. Analyses revealed significant differences by ethnicity and position, but the differences were small with respect to ethnicity and may likely be due to sample size with respect to position.

Other results. I asked participants to rank eight factors in order of their importance in reading development. The rankings are listed in Table 5. Participants felt that a combination of home factors and teacher factors were influential, with pre-school experiences being most important. Student and school factors were relatively less important. Participants could list up to three other factors they felt were important. Other factors listed were “Lower class size,” “Student’s developmental readiness,” “Time to plan instruction,” and “Staff development.”

When assessing the participants’ knowledge bases on a six-point scale of Very Unfamiliar to Very Familiar, the most familiar term was “invented spelling” (M = 6.69, SD = .60). The least familiar terms were “sub-skills” (M = 4.12, SD = 1.59) and “onset/rimes” (M = 4.18, SD = 1.68). Onsets and rimes are phonological divisions similar to syllables. On average, all the terms were familiar to participants. The median familiarities were all above four, and most were five or six. Participants’ self-ratings of their philosophy were not significantly related to any of the terms. Ratings of their practices were related to several items, but no pattern emerged.

For the final analysis, participants responded to two statements in relation to standardized testing. In general, they strongly disagreed that standardized testing was an appropriate way to assess early literacy development (N = 23, Med. = 1.00, M = 1.69, SD = .97). They also moderately disagreed that a significant amount of class time should be devoted to preparing for standardized tests (N = 21, Med. = 2.00, M = 2.19, SD = 1.40). These participants did not agree with the use of standardized testing for early literacy, and disagreed that much class time should be devoted to preparing for tests.

Discussion

Some of the hypotheses were supported and some were not. The teachers in this study felt their reading programs were balanced and that having balance was an effective strategy. The measure revealed, however, that the teachers’ beliefs and their programs were not balanced but more whole-language oriented (Hypothesis 1). My sample was similar Burgess et al.’s (2001) sample and dissimilar to Frerichs (1993) and Islam’s (1999) samples, who were balanced. While in Burgess et al.’s sample, 25% reported that they were whole-language teachers, 41% of my sample moderately or strongly agreed to being whole-language teachers. Most of the participants in my sample were satisfied with their jobs and felt they had freedom over their programs. Even though their reading programs were more whole-language oriented, the teachers used them, probably because they believed in the programs’ effectiveness. Beliefs and practices did not match except for those who endorsed a phonics approach (Hypothesis 2), and teachers did not experience conflict from a lack of control over their curriculum (Hypothesis 3). It appears that the curriculum did not have a primary influence on the participants’ reading programs. Most of the teachers used whole-language practices regardless of how much they endorsed whole-language, so further study would need to address why the teachers used whole-language.

Teachers did differ based on school and ethnicity, but the results were not conclusive (Hypotheses 4 and

---

**TABLE 5**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Median Ranking</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-school reading experiences</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to children, etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home environment</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional program</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent involvement</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher involvement and</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>individual attention</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student’s motivation</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student’s intelligence</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School environment</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

---
5). Oakhurst, the school that used the fewest phonics practices and had the most whole-language oriented teachers, experienced the least amount of conflict. The school with the most conflict had the most phonics-oriented teachers, but the level of practices was intermediate. Other factors could contribute to the differences between schools, however.

In relation to Islam’s (1999), these results support her findings in part. Theoretical orientation was not related to knowledge base in my sample, just as it was not related in hers. In her sample, African Americans and less experienced teachers were more likely to be whole-language oriented. In my sample, the non-Caucasian teachers were more phonics oriented. This sample did not reveal significant differences in number of years teaching. However, first grade teachers in this sample were the most whole-language oriented in beliefs, which is what Islam found. A larger sample size could illuminate these trends.

This study shows that in Decatur, teachers think of balance in a unique way. The reading programs most participants used, Reading Recovery and the Teachers’ College Reading and Writing Workshop, are designed to be balanced, but the teachers still used more whole-language practices. If the teachers are using the programs as they were designed, then balance is more about using a whole-language perspective to address the skills needed for reading, including recognizing letter/sound correspondences and other phonics skills. An unbalanced view would be, for example, using phonics only without making reading meaningful or integrated, or only focusing on literature without paying attention to the alphabet. Balance, then, could mean incorporating phonics skills into the classroom but viewing those skills in context. Participants tended to disagree with items that emphasized isolated skills; they favor an integrated approach. Not all teachers felt this way, however. Some desired more explicit emphasis on phonics and sight word instruction. Further study would determine how balanced the programs are as designed and investigate how closely teachers adhere to the design of the programs.

These results are surprising considering the emphasis in the Georgia curriculum on specific skills. However, it appears that these teachers have found a way to meet those standards without losing focus on broader concerns, most likely because they have control over their instruction. Table 6 presents the scores on the Georgia Criterion Referenced Competency Tests in reading for 2004-2005. Students in first grade and above take these tests every year (Georgia Department of Education, 2005). For the Conflict Scores, participants were grouped by the school in which they taught in 2004-2005.

As can be seen in Table 6, the three elementary schools in the study are highly successful. Though the teachers did not advocate the use of standardized testing, they prepared their students to perform well on them. The achievement scores support the teachers’ feelings that their programs were effective. When looking at the rankings of important factors, teachers saw their programs as being very important in the success of their students. Nevertheless, home factors played as much of a role. This seems to indicate that the Decatur teachers’ view of balance, and the autonomy they have to implement it, works for this district. Whether it holds true for other districts remains to be seen.

Finally, further study should use a larger and more diverse sample. For instance, it would be interesting to look at a poorly performing district to see what kinds of approaches the teachers are using. In addition to a small sample size, the self-report format was a limitation for this study. A more informative design would be to combine a survey with classroom observations and interviews. This would better answer the question of how the teachers see themselves achieving balance in the classroom. A future study should also have specific items in the beliefs and practices sections of the survey to match each other, allowing for an assessment of particular strategies. A final consideration could be that, though the teachers endorsed whole language more, they felt it would be more socially appropriate to indicate that they endorsed a balanced approach. Observations could rule out this possibility.

In terms of the great debate, this study confirms that teachers do not see whole language and phonics as diametrically opposed. They can use strategies from both to get the best result. However, this means seeing reading as a more integrated process, which is contrary to a phonics perspective. Whether to call that view balanced or whole language is debatable. In conclusion, research that proclaims one approach over

---

**TABLE 6**

| Percentages of Students Who Met or Exceeded Standard and Mean Conflict Scores |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Conflict Score | CRCT-1 | CRCT-2 | CRCT-3 |
| Clairemont | 1.93 | 97% | 92% | 96% |
| Oakhurst | .93 | 98% | 95% | 95% |
| Winnona Park | 1.28 | 95% | 97% | 94% |
| District | 1.42 | 97% | 95% | 95% |
| Georgia | 1.42 | 91% | 87% | 92% |

Source: Governor’s Office of Student Achievement (2005)
the other may not settle the debate. Instead of rejecting an approach completely, administrators should trust teachers to use their best judgments to design programs that work.

References


