

# Literacy Shifts: Teacher Beliefs about Reading Paradigms

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**Abstract:** The study examined how, in the current context of reading reform, teachers' beliefs coalesced and aligned with prevailing paradigms of reading instruction (Science of Reading, Balanced Literacy, and Whole Language). The sample included 14 graduate students (in-service teachers) and 13 undergraduate students (pre-service teachers). Q Methodology factor analysis revealed three distinct factor families, or groups of participants, that each shared a distinguishable perspective on reading instruction. These factors families primarily clustered around their beliefs about phonics instruction and texts used for instruction. Implications for professional development with teachers in response to teacher beliefs and Science of Reading policies are discussed.

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## Literacy Shifts: Teacher Beliefs About Reading Paradigms

Policies about the best approaches to teach reading have been contentious for decades (Goering & Gardner, 2020). The current debate surrounding Science of Reading (SoR) may have many reading educators and researchers feeling déjà vu or flashing back to the reading wars that have dominated reading conversations (Terry, 2021). Recently, SoR was considered the “hottest topic of the year” with 100% agreement among 25 top experts in the field; however, these experts were split on if SoR should or should not be a focus of attention (Cassidy et al., 2021). Experts were concerned with SoR's singular approach to reading, the implementation of instructional approaches based solely on this research, and its impact on teacher certifications and professional development.

A long running discourse exists about the best way to provide early literacy instruction with top-down and bottom-up approaches to reading instruction often situated at opposing sides of the continuum (Pearson, 2004; Reinking et al., 2023). In the mid-1960s, the gap between these two approaches widened as Chall (1967) indicated the importance of code-focused instruction and Goodman and Buck (1997) shared the psycholinguistic aspects of reading. Eventually, the “reading wars” emerged with whole language and phonics-based approaches creating conflict among educators over the best instructional approach. To resolve these differences, a middle ground, balanced literacy, was proposed in the 1990s. Wharton-McDonald et al. (1997) defined this as the explicit instruction of graphophonics within thematic and authentic literacy contexts.

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Policies that affect English Language Arts (ELA) have historically been adopted legislatively and then filtered down to teachers. Because of this, teachers are routinely provided mandatory professional development and required to implement the popular ELA legislation of the time. In these reform efforts, teachers are often positioned as struggling and the reason that students are failing (Hanford, 2019; Wexler, 2020). Frequently, teachers are viewed as necessary change agents, but policies often fail to foster teachers' agency. In this climate, teachers may require "trust and support...more than ever" (Goering & Gardner, 2020, p. 86).

The present study provides an opportunity for teachers of reading, at entry and more advanced in the profession, to have voice in this debate. As the reading continuum shifts to include SoR, we ask—*What do teachers believe about teaching reading?* The answers to this question are essential as teachers are asked to enact instructional changes.

This study does not aim to add contention to the current debates or elevate one reading perspective over another, but instead, seeks to understand and give voice to teachers in these discussions. Likewise, we recognize that all three major paradigms investigated here (SoR, balanced literacy, and whole language) involve multiple dimensions of language arts (e.g., reading, writing, speaking, and listening). However, this paper focuses solely on the reading strand of each paradigm because students' abilities to read is at the core of the SoR debate. This paper explores how teachers' beliefs coalesce into distinct perspectives and examines how they align with prevailing paradigms of reading instruction in the current context of reading reform. Through this work, we believe teacher educators can provide a more participatory experience for teachers in professional development (PD) and paradigm debates.

### **Teacher Beliefs and Instruction**

With the changing context of reading instruction that increasingly relies on the implementation of reading-focused legislation, who includes mandates for assessment, instruction, and PD, teachers and their beliefs are essential for the enactment of reading instruction in our classrooms. Fisher, Frey, and Lapp (2023) interviewed 25 experienced K-5 teachers to investigate definitions and instructional approaches associated with balanced literacy. Researchers found evidence that the top-down bottom-up debate had "evaporated" (p. 7). Teachers embraced elements of whole language and balanced literacy paradigms.

Sanden et al. (2022) surveyed over 400 teachers across the U.S. and found that 97% of teachers reported teaching phonics, with 80% of these teachers using a published curriculum. Of note, 88% of the teachers who used a published curriculum supplemented this with other instructional materials and resources. This indicates teachers are teaching phonics, and they may view the adopted curricula as lacking something and are filling the gap themselves. Better understanding teacher motivations for and content of additions will enable the field to perceive, interpret, and better respond to the reading instruction occurring in classrooms.

While teachers report the importance of providing phonics instruction, this may not be viewed as the only important aspect of reading instruction. Phonics is best taught embedded in a comprehensive literacy program (Reinking et al., 2023). Teachers may pair direct phonics instruction with authentic literacy experiences to support fluent readers (Baumann et al., 1998). Teachers may be observed using a combination of direct skills

instruction and “authentic” whole-language type activities in instruction to provide readers with high-quality experiences with diverse texts based on their interests and abilities (Findlan, 2006; Sanden, 2012). Teachers, who view facilitating learning as their role, provide students with scaffolding to make more independent decisions regarding their learning (Findlan, 2006; Sanden, 2012; Wharton-McDonald et al., 1998). Based on prior research, teachers may provide a range of instruction based on their beliefs that affect how they interpret and implement reading instruction.

## Methods

The purpose of this study was to examine how, in the current context of reading reform, teachers’ beliefs coalesce and align with prevailing paradigms of reading instruction (SoR, Balanced Literacy [BL], and Whole Language [WL]) into dominant viewpoints. We selected Q-Methodology because it systematically and objectively studies the beliefs of participants, making them explicit by bridging quantitative and qualitative traditions (Sexton et al., 1998). It is a participatory methodology that positions participants as active agents in the research process as they rank premade Q statements based on their personal agreement or disagreement. Q statements are constructed from a collection of ideas on the topic called a concourse. Q-Method researchers carefully construct the Q statements using research and then edit and revise them with a group of experts from the field to reduce the potential of researcher bias (Damio, 2016). A final selection of Q statements is chosen which make up what is called the Q-set. Participants are then asked to participate in a Q-sort where they must rank each statement in the Q-set within a forced distribution called a Q-grid. For this study, the distribution Q-grid ranged from +5 to -5, guiding participants to place the statements they most agreed with at +5 and statements they most disagreed with at -5, with 0 serving as a neutral position.

## Study Context and Participants

This study was conducted in one of the 37 states that enacted SoR legislation. This reading act created state-wide initiatives that included universal screening in foundational skills, specific instructional programs for Tier II and III interventions, and professional learning for teachers on sequential, explicit, systematic, and age-appropriate foundational skill instruction.

Participants were recruited from the elementary education department of a mid-sized university in the southeastern United States. Graduate student participants (n=14) were practicing teachers enrolled in the final Reading Clinic Practicum course program that leads to K-12 reading specialist certification. Undergraduate students (n=13) were a few weeks from completing their final semester for initial K-6 elementary education certification.

## Data Sources and Analysis

We developed statements to be used during the Q-sort based upon research on SoR, BL, and WL. First, we identified five key areas as important to understanding the three reading paradigms—phonics, comprehension, whole child, developing as a reader, and texts. Then, using research and knowledge developed as literacy experts, we wrote corresponding

statements for each reading paradigm and key area. We worked through two stages in consultation with other literacy experts to generate and refine the statements from 66 to the final 27 statements (9 for each paradigm) that were sorted by participants on the Q-grid (see **Table 1**). Following completion of the Q-sort, participants completed a survey online through Qualtrics (2022) composed of reflective questions about their choices in the sorting process.

**Table 1.** *Q Statements in the Q Set by Reading Paradigm*

Reading Paradigm	Q Statement Number	Q Statement
Science of Reading	1	Phonics should be the primary method for teaching reading.
	6	The ability to read words in isolation quickly and accurately is the hallmark of being a skilled reader.
	9	A weak foundation of decoding strategies compromises reading comprehension.
	10	Explicit, systematic, and cumulative instruction in phoneme-grapheme correspondences is key to successful reading instruction.
	13	Teachers should select texts that focus the reader on decoding the words on the page.
	15	Reading instruction should be rooted in the sounds of our language (phonemes) and systematically teach letters and letter combinations that correspond with each sound/phoneme.
	18	I believe that learning to read is a cognitive process independent of students' culture.
	22	Learning to read is primarily a cognitive process acquired through direct instruction.
	25	Students should read decodable texts as they learn to read.
Whole Language	2	Teachers should only teach phonics as needed for students to comprehend a text.
	3	When prompting students who misread a word, teachers should first ask, "Does that make sense?"
	8	Meaning should drive the reading process and students use decoding as needed.
	12	Students should begin reading with interest-based texts.
	16	Reading should never be taught through the isolated skill of connecting symbols and sounds.
	19	My students' culture and at home experiences must be the primary drivers of their at school reading experiences.
	20	Students should primarily read texts that are interesting and meaningful to them without an emphasis on level or type.
	23	Learning to read is a natural process, like learning to speak.

Reading Paradigm	Q Statement Number	Q Statement
	27	It's okay for students to read a word that isn't exactly right (ex: house for home) as long as it makes sense.
Balanced Literacy	4	Phonics/word study should be one component of a literacy block.
	5	Teachers should use a combination of read alouds, guided reading, shared reading, independent reading, and word study to teach reading.
	7	Students should use multiple strategies as they read words in text with phonics being one of those.
	11	Decoding and comprehension should be taught together as supportive of one another.
	14	Teachers should use predictable texts with beginning readers and then progress to leveled readers.
	17	I believe that my students should make connections between their home experiences and school reading experiences.
	21	Students learn to read through a balance of experiences that extend the natural process of oral language development.
	24	Guided reading with word work is important for developing readers.
	26	Students should read texts at their instructional level.

With Q-Methodology, factor analysis is used to provide the clearest interpretation of the latent variables while still allowing the researchers to focus on factors that are both specific and common. This data reduction technique is utilized so that the large number of variables from the participants' sorts are reduced to a reasonable number of factors to analyze, making it easier to find themes amongst the data. These identified patterns helped researchers group participants together based on their sorted statements, while looking for the most statistically significant sorts within all participants. Then, varimax rotation was chosen to ensure that participants were found to be linked to just one factor rather than multiple. Before moving on in the analysis, we determined the number of factors to keep for interpretation based on certain guidelines including: (a) clarity, (b) simplicity, (c) distinctness, and (d) stability of the factor (Damio, 2016). Factor loadings, which show each participant's influence or correlation with each of the factors or families, were produced and organized within each rotated factor, along with markers of each participant that loaded on a specific factor. Survey responses were analyzed for demographic information, to confirm the Factors, and to support our understanding of participant beliefs.

## Results

Factor analysis revealed three distinct factor families, or groups of participants, that each shared a distinguishable perspective on reading instruction. In this section, we use the results of the factor analysis in concert with survey data to describe each factor.

### **Factor 1: Phonics is the Foundation not the Finish Line**

One core question that represents Factor 1's beliefs about teaching reading is *How can I meet my students' needs in multiple ways?* Factor 1 accounted for 35% of the variance within the Q Set and represented perspectives of 13 participants (six graduate and seven undergraduate).

Significant statements that distinguished this group ( $p < .01$ ), and associated directly with this factor family included 9, 10, 11, 12, 18, 20, and 25 (see composite Q-sort). The highest positively ranked distinguishing statement for this group, at +3, specified that a weak foundation of decoding strategies compromises reading comprehension (S9; SoR). This group also more positively ranked statements related to SoR that emphasized the importance of explicit, systematic, and cumulative instruction in phoneme-grapheme correspondence and the use of decodable text (S10 & S25; +1 ranking). The importance of decodable text for instruction was emphasized by their negative rankings of two WL statements about the use of interest-based and meaningful texts without an emphasis on level (S12 & S20; -1 & -2 rankings). Although this groups privileges decodable texts, they believe decoding should be taught with comprehension (S11; BL; +2 ranking) and that learning to read is a process linked with the culture of students (S18). Overall, the Q-sort indicates the beliefs of this Factor align with the SoR emphasis on phonics and the use of decodable. The following statement is a representative quote for Factor 1:

Using a combination of different teaching styles is important because students need to see and hear fluent reading but also practice it on their own. When learning to read students should be able to read decodable words especially if they are being taught phonic[s] instruction. (UG 30)

### **Factor 2: Primarily Phonics**

One core question that represents Factor 2's beliefs about reading is *How can I teach my students to read with phonics?* Factor 2 accounted for 10% of the variance within the Q Set and represented perspectives of 3 participants (one graduate and two undergraduate). Statistically significant statements that distinguish this group ( $p < .01$ ), and associated directly with this factor family included 1, 6, 15, 16, and 17 (see composite Q-sort). The highest positively ranked distinguishing statement for this group, at +5, specified phonics should be the primary method for teaching reading (S1; SoR). The other positively agreed upon statement, at +3, also aligned with SoR and showed that participants believe reading instruction should be rooted in the sounds of our language and letters, and letter combinations should be systematically taught with each sound/phoneme (S 15). Interestingly, the statement with the highest disagreement, at -4, stating reading should never be taught through the isolated skill of connecting symbols and sounds (S16, WL). This strong negative ranking further reinforces their emphasis on phonics and adds that they believe in teaching phonics in isolation. In comparison to the other Factors, this group more positively ranked the statement that the ability to read words in isolation quickly and accurately is the hallmark of being a skilled reader (S6; SoR). They also more negatively ranked the belief that students should make connections between their home experiences and school reading experiences (S17; BL).

The following statement is a representative quote that demonstrates the main philosophy of the Phonics First Factor: “I believe in the primary grades that reading should be rooted in the sounds of our language. This builds a good base for reading instruction and students who learn to read phonetically perform better” (G10).

### **Factor 3: Meaning over Phonics**

One core question that represents Factor 3’s beliefs about reading is *How can I help students become motivated, confident readers?* Factor 3 accounted for 7% of the variance within the Q Set and represented perspectives of 5 participants (four graduate and one undergraduate). Statistically significant statements ( $p < .01$ ) associated directly with this factor family included 13, 15, and 20 (see composite Q-sort). The highest positively ranked distinguishing statement for this group, at +3, specified students should primarily read texts that are interesting and meaningful to them without an emphasis on level or type (S20; WL). In contrast, the highest negatively ranked distinguishing statement for this group, at -5, said teachers should select texts that focus the reader on decoding the words on the page (S13; SoR). In comparison to the other Factors, this group more negatively ranked the statement that reading instruction should be rooted in the sounds of our language and systematically teach letters/letter combinations that correspond with each sound/phoneme (S15; -1 ranking; SoR). Overall, the Q-sort indicates this Factor places meaningful and interesting text as primary in the reading process and prefers not to use texts that privilege decoding. Their use of text most closely aligns with the WL paradigm.

The following statement is a representative quote that demonstrates the main philosophy of the Meaning over Phonics group: “You have to appeal to the child’s interests to get them interested in reading. Motivation helps” (GR9).

## **Discussion**

The use of Q-Methodology delineated three factor families with distinct beliefs about teaching reading. Based on these Factors, SoR beliefs that emphasize a strong foundation in phonics and decodable texts are clearly visible in two of the three Factor families. Overall, these teachers viewed reading as a complex process that is not just cognitive or acquired through direct instruction. This is evidenced in Factor 3 which emphasized the importance of reader motivation. In addition, text type mattered for these Factor Families. Factors 1 and 2 had strong beliefs about the type of text that should be used, and these were two different types of texts for different purposes. Perhaps the types of texts, including their different purposes and uses, should be discussed more widely in PD and their classroom uses supported.

Teacher beliefs, as revealed in this study, are varied and more nuanced than the paradigm debate may showcase. Similar to the findings of Fisher et al. (2023), the bottom-up top-down debate seems to have dissolved among teachers. Instead of continuing this debate, teachers may have a need for PD that supports them with developing a more refined view of literacy teaching and learning that focuses on aspects of literacy that substantially deepen and reach beyond phonics knowledge alone. According to these factor families, teachers are teaching phonics, but they may also be supplementing the required instruction in curricula adopted by schools (Sanden et al., 2022). These additions may be decided by

teachers based on their beliefs. Better understanding their beliefs can help us know what is being added to the required curricula, why this is occurring, and how PD can best address teachers' needs.

As researchers and teacher educators, we can work to elevate teachers' voices by supporting teachers with making their beliefs explicit through participatory research methods like Q methodology and then including teachers in the design of PD. By integrating teacher beliefs into PD, teacher educations could create more effective PD opportunities that promote conceptual change (Feldman, 2000) and impact instruction. By conducting research like that employed here, we allow teachers the opportunity to speak back to these policies based on their experiences in the classroom and have their specific needs met. Not only does this methodology give teachers an opportunity to make suggestions and help guide the direction of PD being offered, but it also provides stakeholders in education with feedback on policy and its impacts based on the experiences of teachers who are actively implementing the policy in the classroom.

The work of supporting and coaching teachers as researchers and educators is complex. According to Hoffman, Hikida, and Sailors (2020) a concern with SoR policies is that they offer a quick fix that may divert resources from other needed areas such as equity (its silence on issues of diversity related to race and linguistic diversity), agency (create teachers who act as activists who work in the stem as agents of change and not maintainers of the status quo/existing structures), and design (research that minimizes the gap between researcher and those researched to expand and engage what could be). By being attentive to these areas, researches and teacher educators can prepare and support teachers who are influenced by these policies.

As individuals working in reading education, it is important for us to reflect on our beliefs and begin introspection around the following questions: What beliefs do we want teachers to have? Should teacher beliefs be monolithic or as diverse as teachers and their students? What beliefs are being silenced in the current context or privileged? How do we provide teachers voice and agency? Asking these types of questions is essential to creating a context that supports effective reading instruction for all students.

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