

# Reading Instruction: Perceptions of Elementary School Principals

JOHN JACOBSON  
The University of Texas at Arlington

D. RAY REUTZEL  
Brigham Young University

PAUL M. HOLLINGSWORTH  
Brigham Young University

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**ABSTRACT** A stratified random sample of 1,244 U.S. elementary public school principals was surveyed to determine perceptions of their understanding of current issues in elementary reading instruction and the information sources that they use to learn about current issues in reading. The principals reported four major unresolved reading issues: (a) whole language versus basal approaches; (b) assessment of students' reading progress; (c) the use of tradebooks in place of basals; and (d) ability grouping students for reading instruction. Principals' priority ranking of the four most important unresolved reading issues were (a) whole language versus basal approaches; (b) effective alternative assessment of students' reading progress; (c) alternatives to ability grouping students for reading instruction; and (d) the necessity of phonics instruction as a prerequisite to formal reading instruction. The most frequently consulted reading information sources used by elementary school principals within the past 12 months included (a) professional education magazines, (b) personal contacts with specialists and colleagues, and (c) newspapers. Although college classes were the least used information resource of U.S. elementary school principals within the past 12 months, college courses in reading education rated high in utility along with personal contacts with reading specialists. The study concluded that U.S. elementary school principals report awareness of the important reading issues of the day, but that they may need readily accessible and practical information to significantly impact implementation of the current innovations in reading education.

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No other area of the curriculum receives as much attention and generates as much debate as does reading instruction. For many years, research and practice have indicated that the success or failure of a school's reading program depends largely upon the quality of school principals' knowledge of and involvement in the school reading program (Ellis, 1986; McNinch & Richmond, 1983; McWilliams, 1981; Weber, 1971). One may conclude, then, that it is important for elementary principals to be informed, active participants in the national conversation about reading instructional issues. It is also an ipso facto conclusion that the quality of school principals' instructional leadership in school reading programs is directly linked to the quality of their knowledge about

reading instruction (Barnard & Hetzel, 1982; Kean, Summers, Raivetz, & Tarber, 1979; McNinch & Richmond, 1983; Nufrio, 1987; Rausch & Sanacore, 1984). When principals lack necessary understanding of reading instruction, they tend to shun or delegate responsibility to others for the school reading program (Nufrio). Even worse, some researchers have determined that principals who lack sufficient knowledge of reading instruction tend to resort to misguided means for making decisions instead of grounding their decisions in reliable information and research (Roser, 1974; Zinski, 1975).

A synthesis of past and current research strongly suggests that elementary school principals should bear a major responsibility for the school reading program and have an ethical and professional obligation to be conversant in the same curriculum areas as those expected of elementary classroom teachers (Wilkerson, 1988). To do this, elementary school administrators must stay abreast of current critical reading issues to be effective instructional leaders in their own schools' reading programs.

Past research related to elementary school principals' understanding of reading instruction has been based primarily on surveys of teachers' impressions of principals' reading leadership capabilities. In other related studies, elementary school administrators have been queried about their familiarity with specific reading instructional concepts, their professional reading instruction preparation, and the amount of their own classroom reading teaching experience. Some past research has determined that principals understand reading instructional concepts fairly well (Aldridge, 1973; Gehring, 1977; Panchyshyn, 1971; Shelton, Rafferty, and Rose, 1990), while other research concluded that principals' reading instructional understanding is insufficient and their preparation inadequate to assume leadership roles for elementary school reading programs (Berger & Andolina, 1977; Kurth,

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*Address correspondence to Paul M. Hollingsworth, Brigham Young University, Department of Elementary Education, 215 McKay Building, Provo, UT 84602.*

1985; Laffey & Kelly, 1983; Lilly, 1982; Moss, 1985; Nufrio, 1987; Rausch & Sanacore, 1984; Zinski, 1975).

Several problems have been associated with past attempts to research principals' knowledge of reading instruction. First, most past studies have been limited to a local area or single state. Few past studies go beyond state lines, and none of them have attempted to describe elementary school principals' perceived knowledge of reading instructional issues nationwide. Second, past survey studies have generally had marginally acceptable return rates, and no checks for response bias by comparing responders with nonresponders were made, thus severely limiting the generalizability of their conclusions.

An exhaustive search of the extant literature indicated that no national research study of principals' perceived knowledge of current critical issues in reading education has been conducted to date. Thus, little is known about the state of contemporary elementary school administrators' perceptions of current, critical issues in reading education. Furthermore, no research data are available on how these important leaders of school reading programs commonly access information regarding current issues in reading education. Thus, the purpose of this study focused on three research questions: (a) What do practicing elementary principals perceive are the critical and unresolved issues in reading education? (b) What level of understanding do practicing elementary principals perceive that they have of each issue? (c) What sources do practicing elementary principals use and find helpful to inform themselves about current issues in reading education?

## Method

### *Survey Instrument*

A survey questionnaire consisting of several sections was constructed (see Appendix A). The first section requested the following standard demographic information from the elementary school principals surveyed: (a) school size and type (1-299, 300-599, or 600 or more students, and Grades K-3, K-6, etc.), (b) years of experience as a principal and educator, (c) state, and (d) type of reading approaches used in their schools. The second section of the survey instrument included three tasks. Task 1 presented principals with 11 reading issues and asked them to indicate whether each issue was resolved, unresolved, or never had been an issue in their own minds, experiences, or schools.<sup>1</sup> Task 2 requested that principals rank order from 1 to 3 the top three issues that they had classified as unresolved in Task 1. Task 3 requested that the principals perform a self-rating of their understanding level of each reading issue on a 4-point forced-choice scale: (a) understand well enough to describe underlying issues and give a reasoned argument, (b) understand most of the underlying issues and give a rationale in taking a position, (c) know problem exists, but not sure of basic issue, and (d) not aware of a problem.

In the third section of the questionnaire, Task 4 listed 16 different information sources that principals could use to learn about current reading instructional issues and related research. Principals were asked to respond whether they "had" or "had not" used each of the 16 information sources within the past 12 months. Finally, Task 5 asked principals to rate the usefulness of each reading information resource that they had used on a 3-point forced-choice scale: (1) quite helpful, (2) moderately helpful, and (3) not very helpful.

### *Procedures*

Subjects for this study were randomly selected from a computerized list obtained from Quality Educational Data (QED) of elementary public school principals in the United States during the 1989-90 school year. A total of 1,261 principals from a possible population of 41,467 were selected. The sample represented approximately 3% of the total target population. A stratified random sampling design was used to increase the precision of variable estimates (Fowler, 1988). Elementary school principals were proportionately selected from school size and school types to yield 95% confidence intervals of within  $\pm 1\%$  for the total population from schools with a population of 1 through 299, 300 through 599, and 600 or more. Other subject schools included those having only Grades K through 3 and K through 6 (Fowler, 1988, p. 42).

To track the responses anonymously, we included a postcard (giving the principal's name and a code indicating the size of school) in the mailing. Respondents were asked to return the questionnaire and postcard to separate return addresses. The first mailing was sent in February 1990. Four weeks later, a second mailing (with an updated cover letter and survey form) was sent to those who had not responded to the initial mailing (Heberlein & Baumgartner, 1981).

Return rates on mailed educational survey instruments are frequently in the 40 to 60% range (Could-Silva & Sadoski, 1987). An unbiased final sample of 500 responses would still yield 95% confidence intervals of within  $\pm 3\%$  for the entire target population of U.S. elementary school administrators surveyed (Asher, 1976). To check for response bias among responders, a trained graduate student randomly selected and interviewed over the telephone a sample of 31 (5%) of the nonrespondents (Frey, 1989). The telephone interview consisted of 16 questions selected from the mailed questionnaire (11 questions relating to reading issues and 5 questions on reading information sources used). Telephone responses were then compared with mailed responses by using chi-square analyses of each item to learn if any systematic differences existed between the answers of the two groups. If significant differences were not found between the two groups, then responses for those who returned their survey by mail may be generalizable to the larger

population of elementary school principals (Borg & Gall, 1989).

## Results

Of the 1,261 surveys sent, 17 were returned because of inaccurate addresses. Thus, a total of 1,244 possible responses remained. Thirty percent (373) of the principals responded to the first mailing. The second mailing yielded an additional 17% or 208 principals, giving a total response rate of 47%, or 581 principals. In Table 1, we report the number of principals receiving and returning questionnaires from each state.

Because a 47% survey return rate is a figure that is minimally adequate to accurately reflect the perceptions of the target population (Dillman, 1978), a follow-up telephone interview of 5% of the nonrespondents was conducted. Responses to the telephone interview were compared with the mailed responses by constructing contingency tables from the responses of the two groups (responders and nonresponders). Chi-square statistics were calculated for each of the 16 questions. No significant differences ( $p < .05$ ) were found for responses on 7 of 11 reading issues and 4 of 5 reading information sources. In other words, 64% of the responses between those who responded by telephone and those who responded by mail did not vary significantly on the 11 reading issues. And 80% of the responses between those who responded by

telephone and those who responded by mail did not vary significantly on the sources of information that principals use to remain informed about reading issues. The differences between responders and nonresponders are described in Table 2.

In addition, chi-square analyses of responders from the first and second mailings yielded no significant differences, nor were measurable differences found between respondents resulting from school type or size ( $p < .05$ ). Overall, the similarities between the two groups were determined sufficient to enable reasonably confident generalizations to the target population to be made by using the mail responses only (deVaus, 1986). Therefore, only the mail response data are reported.

## Summary of Research Questions

*Research Question 1: What do practicing elementary school principals perceive are the critical and unresolved issues in reading education?* Of the 11 issues surveyed, 40% or more of the principals perceived 6 issues as *unresolved*: (a) use of whole language approaches instead of basal-reader approaches (73%); (b) assessment of students' reading progress (63%); (c) use of tradebooks instead of basal readers (56%); (d) use of ability grouping for reading instruction (48%); (e) whether kindergarten children should pass a screening test to enter kindergarten (46%); (f) whether at-risk readers should spend increased time reading or practicing skills (40%).

Table 1.—Number of Principals Receiving and Returning Questionnaires, by State

State	Sent	Returned	State	Sent	Returned
Alabama	21	5	Missouri	29	16
Alaska	5	3	Montana	7	3
Arizona	14	6	Nebraska	17	7
Arkansas	17	6	Nevada	6	2
California	125	38	New Hampshire	7	4
Colorado	23	12	New Jersey	36	13
Connecticut	18	7	New Mexico	11	8
Delaware	2	0	New York	68	27
District of Columbia	3	2	North Carolina	31	12
Florida	39	16	North Dakota	4	1
Georgia	27	16	Ohio	62	28
Hawaii	4	3	Oklahoma	21	10
Idaho	9	8	Oregon	21	8
Illinois	53	30	Pennsylvania	57	30
Indiana	33	19	Rhode Island	7	3
Iowa	25	12	South Carolina	17	5
Kansas	22	7	South Dakota	17	4
Kentucky	16	8	Tennessee	22	8
Louisiana	23	8	Texas	92	45
Maine	9	3	Utah	10	7
Maryland	24	12	Vermont	7	2
Massachusetts	32	11	Virginia	21	10
Michigan	56	24	Washington	24	12
Minnesota	24	12	West Virginia	19	10
Mississippi	12	6	Wisconsin	23	11
Total				1,244 <sup>a</sup>	581

<sup>a</sup>1,261 surveys were sent, but 17 were not deliverable.

Table 2.—Percentage of Responders and Nonresponders Whose Answers Differed Significantly (Chi-Square) for the Resolvedness Question About Reading

Issue	Unresolved (%)	Resolved (%)	Never an issue (%)	No response	Total
Should schools be required to adopt a basal series?					
Responders	38.9	35.1	26.0	3	581
Nonresponders	48.4	51.6	.0	0	31
Should reading instruction be mastery based?					
Responders	37.3	46.0	16.7	5	581
Nonresponders	38.7	61.3	0.0	0	31
Should children's entry into kindergarten be delayed until they perform successfully on a screening test?					
Responders	45.7	29.1	25.3	3	581
Nonresponders	45.2	48.4	6.5	0	31
Should schools be required to use the same program in all grades (e.g., same basal series)?					
Responders	35.0	41.1	23.9	7	581
Nonresponders	51.6	45.2	3.2	0	31

Note. Critical value of chi-square = 5.99,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .05$ .

Of the 11 issues, 40% or more of the principals surveyed perceived the following 6 issues as *resolved*: (a) whether reading skills should be taught in isolation or integrated with the remaining language arts (63%); (b) whether phonics should be taught as a prerequisite to formal reading instruction (48%); (c) whether at-risk readers should spend increased time reading or practicing skills (47%); (d) whether reading instruction should be mastery based (46%); (e) use of ability grouping for reading instruction (43%); and (f) whether schools should be required to use the same reading instructional program in all grades (41%).

In 24% or more of the principals' responses, they indicated that certain reading issues had never been an issue in their perception. In order of *never been an issue*, the principals indicated (a) whether schools should be required to adopt basal reading series (26%); (b) whether tradebooks should be used in place of basal readers (25%); (c) whether kindergarten children should pass a screening test to enter kindergarten (25%); and (d) whether schools should be required to use the same reading instructional program in all grades (24%).

Of the issues that principals rated as unresolved, the top four items receiving the highest *priority ranking* in terms of their relative importance to improving reading instruction were (a) use of whole language approaches instead of basal reader approaches; (b) assessment of students' reading progress; (c) use of ability grouping for reading instruction; and (d) whether phonics should be

taught as a prerequisite to formal reading instruction. Of the 11 reading issues surveyed, the principals perceived the issue of requiring schools to use the same program in all grades (e.g., the same basal series) to be the issue of least importance. Table 3 gives the rankings of the surveyed elementary school principals for each reading issue.<sup>2</sup>

In summary, from among the 11 reading issues surveyed, elementary school principals rated the following as the single most important *unresolved* issue: use of whole language approaches instead of basal reader approaches (73%). The issue that the principals perceived as most *resolved* was whether reading skills should be taught in isolation or integrated with the remaining language arts (63%). The *unresolved* issue that the principals ranked highest in relative importance was use of whole language approaches instead of basal reader approaches. Finally, the issue that most of the principals felt had *never been an issue* was whether schools should be required to adopt basal reading series (26%).

*Research Question 2: What level of understanding do practicing elementary principals perceive they have of each issue?* After the principals were asked to rank order the unresolved issues in terms of importance, we requested that they rate their understanding level for each of the 11 reading issues using a 4-point scale (1 being the highest). Therefore, the lower the mean score, the higher the principals rated their personal understanding of each reading issue. Percentages, along with means and standard deviations, are also presented in Table 3.



Table 3.—Classification, Rating, and Ranking of Reading Issues by U.S. Elementary School Principals

Reading issues	Unresolved (%)	Resolved (%)	Never an issue (%)	Issue ranking	Understanding of the issues <sup>a</sup>					
					1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	M	SD
How should student reading progress be assessed?	65	26	9	2	60	33	5	2	1.48	.68
Should the whole language approach be used instead of the basal reader approach?	73	21	6	1	52	39	8	1	1.58	.67
Should tradebooks be used in place of basals?	56	19	25	7	43	15	31	11	1.93	1.0
Should reading skills be taught in isolation or integrated with other language arts curriculum?	23	63	14	8	76	18	3	3	1.34	.70
Should phonics be taught as a prerequisite to formal reading instruction?	39	48	13	4	67	27	4	2	1.42	.67
Should students be grouped by ability for reading instruction?	48	43	9	3	67	28	2	3	1.42	.69
Should schools be required to adopt a basal series?	39	35	26	10	57	26	6	11	1.72	1.0
Should at-risk readers spend more time reading connected text or on practicing isolated reading skills?	40	47	13	6	57	33	8	2	1.54	.71
Should reading instruction be mastery based?	37	46	17	9	45	39	11	5	1.76	.84
Should children's entrance into kindergarten be delayed until they perform successfully on a screening test?	46	29	25	5	58	28	9	5	1.62	.86
Should schools be required to use the same program in all grades (e.g., the same basal series)?	35	41	24	11	61	24	5	10	1.64	.96

<sup>a</sup>1 = understand well enough to describe underlying issues and give a reasoned argument; 2 = understand most of underlying issues and give a rationale in taking a position; 3 = know problem exists, but not sure of basic issue; 4 = not aware of problem.

Principals expressed *greatest* understanding of the following four issues: (a) teaching reading skills in isolation or integrated with other language arts curriculum ( $M = 1.34$ ); (b) grouping students by reading ability for instruction in reading ( $M = 1.42$ ); (c) teaching phonics as a prerequisite to reading instruction ( $M = 1.42$ ); and (d) assessing students' reading progress. Principals expressed *least* confidence in their understanding of the following three issues: (a) using tradebooks in place of basals ( $M = 1.93$ ); (b) using mastery-based reading instruction ( $M = 1.76$ ); and (c) requiring schools to adopt a basal series ( $M = 1.72$ ). Though principals reported a lack of confidence in their understanding of certain reading education issues, an overall mean score of 1.59 indicated that, generally, elementary school principals believed they understood most of the underlying issues, but, according to the survey criteria, they did not feel confident enough in their understanding of reading issues to give a good rationale for taking one side or the other.

*Research Question 3: What sources do practicing elementary principals use and find helpful to inform themselves about current issues in reading education?* Sixteen different information sources were listed on the questionnaire. Principals were to indicate if they had used each of the information sources in the past 12 months. They were asked also to rate the helpfulness of the sources that they had used. Percentages, along with means and standard deviations, were calculated and are reported in Table 4.

The principals reported that the top four reading information sources *used most* were (a) magazines for professional educators that carry articles about reading and literacy (96.6%); (b) personal contacts with specialists in the field (95.9%); (c) newspaper articles about reading issues (93.6%); and (d) magazines or newsletters focusing on reading issues (88.6%). The five reading information sources *used least* were, in order, (a) college or university reading courses (14.3%); (b) college textbooks focused on reading (24.9%); (c) reading articles in professional

Table 4.—Utility of Reading Education Information Sources as Rated by U.S. Elementary School Principals

Source	Percentage used	Rated utility in percentages				
		Quite	Moderately	Not very	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Personal contacts with specialists in the field	95.9	79.1	20.7	.2	1.2	.41
Professional association conventions	61.0	62.0	35.4	2.5	1.4	.54
Magazines or newsletters focusing on reading issues	88.6	52.5	46.3	1.2	1.5	.52
Literacy articles in magazines for professional educators	96.6	61.3	36.6	2.1	1.4	.53
Reading articles in magazines focused on techniques and instructional methods	81.3	46.2	51.5	2.3	1.6	.54
Reading articles in popular national magazines	74.4	17.6	55.4	27.0	2.1	.66
Journal articles reporting results of research	49.3	53.3	42.1	4.6	1.5	.59
Reading articles in professional handbooks	38.8	50.0	46.4	3.6	1.5	.57
College textbooks focused on reading	24.9	42.0	49.0	9.1	1.7	.64
Books about reading published by popular press	64.4	36.3	53.8	9.9	1.7	.63
TV or radio broadcasts about reading issues	77.7	19.3	55.6	25.1	2.1	.67
Newspaper articles about reading issues	93.6	18.3	55.8	25.9	2.1	.66
Reading reports from research agencies	42.3	49.6	46.7	3.7	1.5	.57
Reading reports and publications sponsored by governmental agencies	76.2	47.0	46.6	6.4	1.6	.61
College or university reading courses	14.3	61.3	35.0	3.8	1.4	.57
Workshops or organized study groups focused on reading issues	67.5	71.5	27.9	.5	1.3	.47

Note. Data represent only those principals who reported using the information resources in the past 12 months.

handbooks (38.8%); (d) reading reports from research agencies (42.3%); and (e) journal research articles (49.3%).

Also shown in Table 4 are the principals' rankings of the relative helpfulness of each used source. To calculate means and standard deviations for the relative helpfulness rating of each information resource, we converted category responses to numeric values, using a 3-point scale. The closer each mean approximated the value of 1, the higher the mean helpfulness utility rating for the information source. From an examination of the means, the following five reading information sources were reported as *most helpful*: (a) *personal contacts with specialists in the field* ( $M = 1.2$ ); (b) workshops or organized study groups focused on reading ( $M = 1.3$ ); (c) attendance at professional association conventions ( $M = 1.4$ ); (d) literacy articles in magazines for professional educators ( $M = 1.4$ ); and (e) college or university reading courses ( $M = 1.4$ ). Three information sources rated *least helpful* by elementary principals were (a) reading articles in popular national magazines ( $M = 2.1$ ); (b) watching

or listening to TV or radio broadcasts about reading issues ( $M = 2.1$ ); and (c) reading newspaper articles about reading issues ( $M = 2.1$ ).

### Discussion

Among elementary school principals surveyed across the United States, the most unresolved reading issue is the controversy between the whole language versus basal approaches to reading instruction. The reading education issue rated least understood by principals was the use of tradebooks in place of basals. These findings are most interesting because of their immediate relationship to each other and to the whole language versus basal reader approaches to reading instruction issue. Explaining this finding is difficult because principals were not asked *why* they indicated that this issue is unresolved. One speculation might be that, in the minds of principals, part of the problem associated with deciding whether to implement tradebooks in reading instruction is the question of *how* to use tradebooks either to supplant or supplement the

basal reader. However, further research is needed to determine the reasons *why* the issue surrounding the use of whole language versus basal readers is an issue of such great importance.

Also of note, the principals ranked as the second and third most important *unresolved* national reading issues, assessment of reading progress and use of ability grouping. Yet, when asked to rank their understanding of reading issues, the principals gave the second and most important unresolved issue, assessment of student reading progress, the fourth highest rating of understanding, indicating that although it is an unresolved issue, they understand it well. Additionally, the third most important unresolved issue, ability grouping students for reading instruction, received the second highest rating of understanding. Though principals rated their perceived understanding of the issue of ability grouping as being high, it remains an unresolved issue in the minds of principals nationally. Again, these issues share close philosophical proximity with the whole language versus basal reader issue. Because tradebook use calls into question accepted assessment practices and the use of ability groups, one can understand that these issues would loom as critical issues in the minds of U.S. principals.

Principals' perceived lack of understanding and priority rating of the whole language versus basal reader issue as unresolved reflects a widespread concern among principals nationally regarding this issue. One positive sign that principals may be attempting to deal with the whole language versus basal reader issue is the fact that only 77% of the principals surveyed reported that their schools used the basal reader as the major approach for reading instruction, as compared with other recent estimates indicating that basal reader use in American schools exceeds 90% (Goodman, Shannon, Freeman, & Murphy, 1988).

Although the principals rated their understanding of the whole language versus basal reader issue as one of the least understood issues, they reported less use of basal readers and greater use of tradebooks in schools than previous national estimates indicated. This finding suggests that the principals' perceived lack of understanding regarding the whole language versus basal reader issue may not be precluding their attempts to make greater use of tradebooks in their school reading programs. The means by which principals are learning to make these changes *may* be related to their use of reading information resources.

With respect to the information resources used and valued most by principals, this study revealed that the majority of principals surveyed relied on (a) professional education magazines, (b) personal contacts with specialists in reading, and (c) newspapers as their major sources for gaining information about reading education issues and practices. Nearly 90% of those principals surveyed

indicated that they had used one of those top three information sources about reading education in the past 12 months. Of note, those sources tend to be interpretive sources and may give only surface-level information, as opposed to more in-depth original research sources. However, considering the constraints exigent upon principals' time, less formal research synthesis may be the most pragmatic means of acquiring current information regarding critical reading instructional issues and promising practices. This fact is substantiated in part by the information sources that the principals used least.

During the past 12 months, the information sources that principals used least were (a) college or university reading courses, (b) college textbooks on reading, (c) articles in professional handbooks, and (d) research reports from research agencies. Those sources tend to focus on theories, practices, techniques, and approaches verified by in-depth original research studies, and they require greater time commitments than do the less formal information resources used most by practicing principals. The finding that enrolling in college or university reading courses was least used was rather curious when juxtaposed against principals' rankings of the most helpful information sources. Although the principals tended not to enroll in college and university reading course work during the past 12 months, they ranked college and university reading courses in the top four reading information sources as most helpful ( $M = 1.4$ , on a 3-point, with 1 being the highest).

In summary, the principals chose print informational sources that were interpretive, informal, and less technical information sources, that is, newsletters, newspaper articles, and magazines. They tended not to use detailed research reports found in texts, journals, handbooks, and reading reports from research agencies. However, the principals' selection and use of less technical, more interpretive reading information sources, as well as accessible reading specialists, seems logical given the constraints upon their time. Although the principals tended to rate college courses as extremely helpful, enrolling in university course work might not always be accessible, convenient, or even feasible for many practicing principals.

### Implications

From this study, one might conclude that the vast majority of U.S. elementary school principals do attempt to keep current on issues related to reading education. Although principals appear to be aware of current trends and issues in reading education, they may not feel sufficiently confident about their understanding of the issues to implement innovative changes in school reading programs. This conclusion is sustained by the principals' ranking of the issue regarding using whole language versus basal readers as the most unresolved issue while also ranking this issue as least understood.

The conclusion of this study, that U.S. elementary school principals prefer obtaining information about critical reading issues and practices from practical and accessible sources, suggests that authors of educational literature and reading specialists should be aware that principals not only need to understand the issues but also to receive specific guidance on *how* to select promising reading practices for use in their schools and *how* to implement reading program changes.

One paradoxical finding should give strong signals to colleges and universities. Although the principals valued university-level reading courses, many of them had not used that information resource within the past 12 months. This finding may indicate a need for institutions

of higher learning to design more accessible means for disseminating current, practical information into schools and classrooms.

In conclusion, the majority of U.S. elementary principals perceived that they were aware of current, critical, and unresolved issues in reading education, that is, tradebooks, reading assessment, and ability grouping. However, according to the survey criteria, many principals did not have enough confidence in their understanding of reading issues to give a reasoned rationale for taking one side or the other. Finally, if principals are to remain informed, information related to innovative reading practices must be disseminated in easily accessible and understandable ways.

APPENDIX A

**Reading Education in the United States: Elementary Principals' Involvement**

**ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' QUESTIONNAIRE**

(This questionnaire takes approximately 10-15 minutes to complete)

**Section 1. IMPORTANT Demographic Information**

Please complete the following:  
(Check)

School Size:            \_\_\_\_\_ 1-299            \_\_\_\_\_ 300-599            \_\_\_\_\_ 600+

School Type:            \_\_\_\_\_ K-3            \_\_\_\_\_ K-6            \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

Years of experience as an elementary school principal \_\_\_\_\_ (Specify)

Total years of experience as an educator \_\_\_\_\_

State in which your school is located \_\_\_\_\_

Give, in percentage, the kinds of reading approaches that are currently being used in your school.  
(e.g., 70% basal    20% literature based    10% whole language    \_\_\_\_\_ other \_\_\_\_\_)

\_\_\_\_\_ basal    \_\_\_\_\_ literature based    \_\_\_\_\_ whole language    \_\_\_\_\_ other \_\_\_\_\_

(Specify)

**SECTION 2. THIS SECTION ASKS YOU TO CONSIDER ELEVEN READING INSTRUCTION ISSUES. YOU WILL BE ASKED TO COMPLETE THREE TASKS RELATED TO THESE ELEVEN ISSUES.**

**Task 1. Classify**

Eleven reading education issues are listed below. In your mind, which of these are:

**UI:** An *Unresolved Issue* (research is not conclusive)

**RI:** A *Resolved Issue* (research is conclusive—was once an issue but is no longer)

**NI:** *Never has been an issue* as far as I am concerned.

For each concern, circle the letter which designates the category you selected.

**Task 2. Rank**

After you have classified each statement, rank order the top three *unresolved issues* in terms of their relative importance to improving reading instruction from your point of view. Use the number "1" to indicate the issue which you believe is most important. Then use the numbers "2," "3," and so on to indicate the issues that are second, third. . . . Rank only the issues you classified as *unresolved*.

**Task 3. Rate**

Please rate your understanding of each issue (including any issues you added) as follows:

**A.** I understand this problem well enough to describe the underlying issues and can give a reasoned argument explaining my position.

**B.** I believe that I understand most of the underlying issues, but I can't give a good rationale for taking one side or the other.

**C.** I know that this problem exists, but I'm unsure of what the basic issues are.

**D.** I'm not aware of any problems in this area.





Sources continued . . .

9. Reading college textbooks focused on reading (e.g., Books on teaching language arts, reading)
10. Books about reading which have been published by popular press (e.g., *Cultural Literacy*, *Illiterate American*, *Why Johnny Still Can't Read*, *Closing of the American Mind*, *All I Ever Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*)
11. Watching or listening to radio and television broadcasts about reading issues (e.g., news reports, documentaries, debates, interviews, commentaries)
12. Reading newspaper articles about reading issues.
13. Reading reports about reading from research agencies (e.g., Center for the Study of Reading, regional labs)
14. Reading reports and publications about reading sponsored by governmental agencies (e.g., *What Works*, *Becoming a Nation of Readers*)
15. Enrollment in college or university courses related to reading education.
16. Participation in workshops, seminars, or organized study groups focused on reading issues.
17. Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Task 4	Task 5
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NOTES

1. The 11 issues included in the survey were selected by a panel of reading experts. Issues were selected based on attention that each has received in the recent reading education and research literature.  
 2. In the ranking of the reading issues, some respondents did not follow directions. They ranked all issues, instead of ranking only issues that they felt were unresolved. To adjust for the problem, we included only unresolved issues in the data analysis.

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