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A Survey of Educators and Speech-Language Pathologists Regarding Figurative Language Instruction[1]

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A national survey of educators and speech-language pathologists was conducted to determine current perceptions and practices regarding figurative language instruction. The overall survey response rate (N=806) was 69%. Results showed that the majority of respondents provided either formal or informal figurative language instruction to students; fourth grade teachers taught figurative language more often than third grade teachers, special educators, or speech-language pathologists; a variety of instructional methods and materials were used; and there exists a moderate to great need for more instructional materials in this area. The majority of respondents believed that understanding figurative language could benefit students both socially and academically, and that students in special education had more problems understanding and using these forms than regular education students. A discrepency was found between the perceived value of figurative language instruction for certain special education students and their perceived problems in this area.

INTRODUCTION

Figurative language is an essential part of any language. It allows us to express ourselves colorfully, descriptively, and indirectly. Figurative language includes idioms (e.g., to bury the hatchet), similes (e.g., sweet as honey), metaphors (e.g., fists of steel), proverbs (e.g., a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush), and slang (e.g., dweeb). Prior to mastering these language forms, children frequently interpret these words and phrases literally, which results in confusion or misunderstanding of the speaker's intent.

Research involving various forms of figurative language has revealed that children begin understanding these forms sometime after age six; however, mastery appears to occur as children grow older. For example, Nippold, Leonard, and Kail (1984) determined that although 7-year-olds were able to comprehend metaphors to some degree, 9-year-olds performed with greater accuracy. Results of a study regarding metaphors and proverbs conducted by Douglas and Peel (1979) showed similar findings. Regarding idiom comprehension, children also perform with greater accuracy with increasing age (Brinton, Fujiki, & Mackey, 1985; Gibbs, 1987; Lodge & Leach, 1975; Prinz 1983).

For children with special needs, comprehension of figurative forms generally falls behind that of their typical peers. Ezell and Goldstein (1991a) found that 9-year-old children with mild mental retardation scored sigificantly below typical 9-year-olds on an idiom comprehension task. Seidenberg and Bernstein (1986) found that children classified as learning-disabled were less able to process metaphoric language than nonlearning-disabled children. Lee and Kamhi (1990) found that children with learning disabilities performed consistently lower than nondisabled children in their ability to comprehend and produce metaphors. Also, those children with disabilities who had previous histories of language impairment scored less well than those who did not have a language impairment. Lutzer (1988) examined proverb comprehension of average children and those with learning disorders and found that average students outperformed the children with learning disorders in understanding proverbs in the older age group (grade six). Abrahamsen and Sprouse (1995) studied fable comprehension in typical children and those with learning disability. Fables are similar to proverbs in that the meaning is presented figuratively rather than literally. Their findings concluded that typical children were significantly better at selecting the correct moral meaning of fables and explaining their selections than children with learning disability.

As noted by Milosky (1994), figurative language is highly prevalent in magazines, television shows, in social conversation, and in the classroom. She has found that young children are exposed to these forms through early book reading experiences involving children's literature such as the Berenstain Bear series. Research has suggested that exposure to figurative language occurs in the classroom as well. A study by Lazar, Warr-Leeper, Nicholson, and Johnson (1989) showed that as children advance through the grades, their exposure to figurative language steadily increases. Lazar et al. (1989) observed that 39% of third grade teachers' utterances contained multiple meaning expressions, specifically similes, metaphors, irony, idioms,

or indirect requests. This percentage rose steadily to 44% in grade six. Also, Abrahamsen and Sprouse (1995) reported that an increased emphasis on figurative language occurs at about grade four, at which time there is a marked improvement in children's understanding of figurative language. To avoid possible confusion for children, especially those with language delays, Blue (1981) suggested that adults limit their use of figurative language, sarcasm, and ambiguous statements until these children have developed proficiency in this domain. However, many professionals may perceive avoidance of figurative language to be both unnatural and unrealistic.

Research thus far has focused on figurative language development in typical children, distinguishing how children with disabilities may differ from typical children, and the occurrence of figurative language in classrooms. Little is known about figurative language intervention and the extent to which it is currently receiving attention from various educators. Regarding intervention, one recent study provides evidence that some children with disabilities may be successful in acquiring an understanding of these forms through formal instruction. In a study that used direct instruction to teach the meaning of idioms to 9-year-old children with mild mental retardation, Ezell and Goldstein (1992) found that all children demonstrated learning, although one child required review procedures to facilitate maintenance. These children also demonstrated good generalization of these idioms when presented in unfamiliar contexts. However, in a previous study conducted by these same authors, children with mild and moderate mental retardation were unable to learn to comprehend idioms through observational learning (Ezell & Goldstein, 1991b). Observational learning is an indirect instructional method in which children acquire information by observing instruction directed to others (Bandura, 1971). These findings suggested that children may acquire figurative language such as idioms, through direct instruction better than through indirect instruction.

A topic yet to be explored regarding figurative language is the extent to which educators and speech-language pathologists are addressing this skill for children with disabilities. Although Lazar et al. (1989) studied the occurrence of multiple meaning expressions in classrooms, they did not determine whether teachers were providing instruction in this area. Given the prevalence of figurative language overall (Milosky, 1994) and in the classroom in particular (Lazar et al., 1989), it is important to know whether these language skills are being addressed adequately for children with disabilities. Consequently, this study was designed to survey educators and speech-language pathologists to determine the extent to which various figurative forms are being taught. This information will be important for determining current attitudes and beliefs of the significance of figurative language instruction for children with disabilities and current teaching practices in this regard.

METHOD

Subjects

Survey subjects were selected from a pool of 2,500 names of third and fourth grade teachers, special education teachers, and speech-language pathologists working in elementary schools (grades K through 5) throughout the nation. This pool of randomly selected names was purchased from Market Data Retrieval of Shelton, CT. Next, a proportional stratified sample for geographical region was selected from this pool. The population of each of the nine geographical regions was calculated using U.S. Bureau of Census data from 1991. The number of subjects selected for each region was based on the percent of children (age 5 to 17 years) in that region. This allowed for adequate representation of regions based on the population of children in the specified age range. To select the individual persons for each region, each of the 2,500 names was assigned a number. Using a table of random numbers, 1,200 names were identified for participation.

The overall response rate to the survey was 69% (826 total). All geographical regions had response rates above 50% (i.e., the range was 57% to 80%). A total of 20 questionnaires that were returned were unusable for a variety of reasons such as, the individual no longer worked in a teaching capacity or the questionnaire was left blank. Consequently, of the 826 questionnaires that were returned, only 806 were considered usable. Occasionally, a special education teacher reported that he/she was now teaching regular education or a questionnaire was passed on to a speech-language pathologist when a teacher had moved away. When this occurred, the questionnaire was assigned to the new group instead of remaining in the orginal group. Consequently, the group sizes varied slightly from the initial sample. The distribution of subjects and response rates for the groups may be found in Table 1. As

Table 1

Description of Survey Subjects and Final Response Rate

Subjects:	Number Selected	Final Sample	Total Returned	Response Rate
Regular Education Teachers	480	486	319	66%
Special Education Teachers	480	466	320	69%
Speech-Language Pathologists	240	249	187	75%

there are typically fewer speech-language pathologists employed by school districts than teachers, fewer speech-language pathologists than educators were selected to participate.

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument consisted of a four-page questionnaire developed specifically for this study. A copy of this questionnaire is available from the author. As recommended by Dillman (1978), questions were designed to seek four types of information: attitudes, beliefs, behavior, and attributes. As explained by Dillman (1978), attitudes describe how one feels about something or about its desirability. Beliefs are a reflection of what one thinks is true or false. Behaviors are what people report that they do, and attributes describe who people are, such as their gender, ethnicity, etc. In this survey, the first several questions gather information regarding the respondents' attributes (questions 1 - 7). Questions 8 through 11, 15, and 20 ask about the respondents' behavior. Questions 17, 18, and 19 solicited respondents'attitudes, and their beliefs were solicited through questions 12 - 14, 16, 21, and 22.

To validate the questionnaire, an initial draft of the questionnaire was reviewed by a team of teachers and speech-language pathologists working in public schools. These individuals reviewed the questionnaire for appropriateness of the items and to check for potential wording problems. Upon receiving this feedback, a second draft of the questionnaire was written and reviewed by an investigator and research staff experienced in conducting survey research. When the final draft had been finalized, it was printed and prepared for distribution.

When the questionnaire was mailed, it was accompanied by a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study and brief definitions and examples of idioms, similes, metaphors, and proverbs to refresh the respondent's memory of these forms before completing the questionnaire. Also, a complimentary gift (i.e., a tea bag), and a self-addressed stamped envelope for returning the completed survey were included. Respondents could elect to receive a thank-you gift (i.e., a note pad) and a copy of the results if the questionnaire was returned.

Procedures

Once the questionnaire had been finalized and the subject selection completed, the questionnaires, mailing labels, and return envelopes were coded with identification numbers so that it would be possible to determine which subjects responded.

Questionnaires and enclosures were assembled and mailed by group across a four-week period. All mailings were sent first-class. A post card reminder was sent to all participants one week following the initial mailing. A second mailing of the questionnaire occurred four weeks later for persons who had not yet responded.

A monitoring system was established to keep track of all returned and unreturned surveys. Returned surveys were opened immediately, recorded as received, and determined to be usable or unusable. The incentive gift (i.e., a note pad) was mailed to the respondent the following day along with a brief thank-you note.

Scoring and Interscorer Agreement

Responses to all questionnaire items requiring forced-choice responses were coded and checked by two independent scorers before being entered by geographical region into a computer data file. Responses to open-ended items (i.e., questions 16, 21, and 22) required additional scoring procedures because respondents' answers were individual. Responses to these questions were categorized and scoring guidelines were developed (Guidelines are available upon request). These questions were scored by two independent raters. Interscorer agreement was conducted on 30% of the open-ended questions and involved all groups of respondents. Interscorer agreement was determined by an item-by-item comparison for the scores assigned by the independent raters. The number of agreements was tallied and divided by the number of agreements plus disagreements and this figure was multiplied by 100. Interscorer agreement was 94% for question 16, 90% for question 21, and 88% for question 22. The overall interscorer agreement was 91%.

Experimental Design & Data Analysis. A desciptive design was used to determine extent of occurrence of figurative language instruction conducted by the three categories of educators: regular education teachers, special education teachers, and speech-language pathologists. This entailed frequency counts of responses to various questions and chi-square analyses to determine whether significant differences among the groups were present. Questions left blank by respondents were not included in the analyses.

RESULTS

The results of the survey will be presented in the same order as the questions on the questionnaire. Questions 13 and 15 were deleted from analysis due to respondents' frequent misinterpretation of how to respond to these questions. Such incorrect responding prevented reliable scoring of these items; thus, deleting them was the most appropriate solution to this problem.

The number of years of experience for the responding professionals was 12.7 years (SD = 7.07) for special education teachers, 13.8 years (SD = 7.77) for speech-language pathologists, 14.5 years (SD = 8.3) for third grade teachers, and 16.8 years (SD = 8.4) for fourth grade teachers. Sixty-one percent of all respondents held master's degrees, 38% held bachelor's, and less than 1% held doctoral degrees. The majority of respondents were female (92%) as opposed to male (8%).

When asked whether teachers currently have both regular and special education students in their classrooms, 71% of the third grade teachers and 77% of the fourth grade teachers responded that they do; whereas, 64% of the special education teachers responded that they do not. For the speech-language pathologists, 67% reported that they pro-

vided services to children from both regular and special education classrooms. Nineteen percent reported that they provided services to children from special education classrooms only, and 13% provided services to children from regular classrooms only.

Across all respondents, 85% reported that they provided either formal or informal figurative language instruction during the 1993 - 1994 school year. Table 2 shows the frequency with which various groups reported teaching the four figurative forms. For three of the four groups, idioms and similes were taught with the greatest frequency followed by metaphors and then proverbs. The exception to this was the fourth grade teachers who taught metaphors more frequently than idioms. A chi-square statistic was used to determine whether differences among the groups was statistically significant. For teaching idioms, a comparison across the various groups revealed significant differences between the speech-language pathologists and the special educators ($p < .001$), and between the special educators and the fourth grade teachers ($p < .001$). This indicated that the fourth grade teachers taught idioms the most often and the special educators taught them the least often. For teaching similes and metaphors, there was a significant difference among all groups except the speech-language pathologists and the special educators. Again, the fourth grade teachers taught similes and metaphors more than any other group. No significant differences occurred across the groups for teaching the proverbs. All groups reported teaching proverbs less frequently than any other figurative form.

Table 3 summarizes the teaching methods used by the various professionals who reported that they taught figurative language to their students. This table does not include four options (i.e., guest speakers, oral presentation by students, video presentation, or other materials) that were available on the questionnaire because fewer than seven percent of the respondents reported using these methods, and no significant differences were found for these methods. Examining the data by professional group, all groups except for the fourth grade teachers used informal discussion with stu-

Table 2

The Extent to Which Figurative Forms are Taught by Respondents

	Speech-Language Pathologists	Special Educators	Third Grade Teachers	Fourth Grade Teachers
Idioms	$78\%_{a}$	$56\%_{a,b}$	69%	$83\%_{b}$
Similes	$59\%_{a}$	$59\%_{b}$	$76\%_{a,b,c}$	$97\%_{a,b,c}$
Metaphors	$36\%_{a}$	$40\%_{b}$	$59\%_{a,b,c}$	$87\%_{a,b,c}$
Proverbs	32%	34%	40%	37%

Note. Percentages in horizonal rows having the same subscript are significantly different from one another at $p < .002$ or less in a chi-square comparison.

Table 3

Methods used by Respondents Who Taught Figurative Language

	Speech-Language Pathologists	Special Educators	Third Grade Teachers	Fourth Grade Teachers
Lessons	$52\%_{a}$	$38\%_{b}$	$66\%_{b,c}$	$89\%_{a,b,c}$
Games	$53\%_{a}$	$26\%_{a}$	$19\%_{a}$	$28\%_{a}$
Literature2	$7\%_{a,b}$	$38\%_{c,d}$	$68\%_{a,c,e}$	$86\%_{b,d,e}$
Bulletin Board	16%	16%	13%	21%
Informal Dis	$66\%_{a}$	$63\%_{b}$	74%	$85\%_{a,b}$
Coop. Learn	$24\%_{a}$	$23\%_{b}$	31%	$42\%_{a,b}$
Illustrate	$27\%_{a,b}$	$31\%_{c,d}$	$53\%_{a,c}$	$58\%_{b,d}$
Worksheets	$36\%_{a}$	$33\%_{b,c}$	$49\%_{b,d}$	$70\%_{a,c,d}$
Homework	$9\%_{a}$	$12\%_{b}$	$17\%_{c}$	$37\%_{a,b,c}$

Note. "Informal Dis" refers to informal discussion with students. "Coop. Learn" refers to cooperative learning activities. "Illustrate" refers to having students illustrate figurative meanings through pictures. Percentages in each horizontal row having the same subscript are significantly different from one another at $p < .002$ or less in a chi-square comparison.

dents most often to teach figurative language. The speech-language pathologists reported teaching figurative language through instructional games more than any other group; this finding was highly significant ($p < .00001$). The special educators and regular education teachers had students locate forms in literature, illustrate figurative meanings, and do homework more than the speech-language pathologists. Fourth grade teachers reported using formal lessons significantly more often than respondents in other groups ($p < .0001$). In fact, the fourth grade teachers reported using all methods, except instructional games, to a greater degree than any of the other groups.

Table 4

Use of Written Materials by Respondents to Teach Figurative Language

	Speech-Language Pathologists	Special Educators	Third Grade Teachers	Fourth Grade Teachers
Published Materials	$57\%_a$	$15\%_a$	$13\%_a$	$23\%_a$
Curriculum Materials	$13\%_a$	$32\%_{a,b}$	$58\%_{a,b,c}$	$78\%_{a,b,c}$
Original Materials	35%	31%	38%	37%
Other Sources	10%	10%	11%	9%

Note. Percentages in each horizontal row having the same subscript are significantly different from one another at $p < .001$ in a chi-square comparison.

Table 4 provides the sources of instructional materials that respondents used when teaching figurative language. As respondents could check all that apply, percentages could exceed 100. Speech-language pathologists used materials published specifically for figurative language instruction significantly more often than any other group ($p < .001$). The fourth grade teachers used materials that were provided as part of the curriculum significantly more often than the other respondents ($p < .001$). All groups reported developing original materials and using other sources to the same degree.

Regarding the perceived need for more materials in this area,16% reported little or no need, 49% of respondents indicated a moderate need for such materials, 12% reported a great need for more materials, and 23% reported a significant need. No significant differences were found among the respondents on how this question was answered.

When asked how frequently figurative language forms arise during instructional activities, 73% of all respondents reported either regularly (i.e., 2 - 3 times per week) or occasionally (i.e., about once a week), and 17% reported rarely (i.e., about once a month) with 10% reporting every day. A chi-square statistic comparing the responses across the various groups revealed two significant differences involving the number who reported "rarely". Only six percent the fourth grade teachers reported that it occured rarely compared with 23% of the special educators ($p < .001$) and 19% of the speech-language pathologists ($p < .002$).

Question 16 asked how special education students compared with regular education students in their ability to understand and use figurative forms. The majority of respondents (67%) indicated that students in special education had more problems than those in regular education, and 15% of the respondents indicated that it depended upon the type of disability that special education students exhibited. A total of 6% of the respondents reported that they perceived no difference between special education and regular education students. Some respondents (7%) reported that they did not know or had no experience to make this judgement. Of these respondents, 17% were third grade teachers, 9% were fourth grade teachers, 4% were special educators, and 2% were speech-language pathologists. A chi-square analysis comparing the differences among those reporting that they had no experience to make this judgement found a significant difference between the speech-language pathologists and the third grade teachers ($p < .00001$), and between the special educators and the third grade teachers ($p < .00001$).

When asked to rate the extent to which they value figurative language instruction for various groups of students, respondents ranked figurative language instruction to be of greater importance for students with no disabilities (i.e., typical students), those with learning disabilities, and children with language impairments than for students with multiple disabilities, autism, retardation, and emotional disturbance. Table 5 provides the overall ratings across all respondents for eleven groups of students. Overall, figurative language instruction was viewed as much less important for students who exhibit mental retardation, autism, or multiple handicaps.

Table 6 shows how each respondent group rated the value of figurative language instruction for these various students with mean ratings for each student group. For the students with no disability, the speech-language pathologists' ratings were significantly below the special educators' and third and fourth grade teachers' ratings according to a chi-square analysis ($p < .00001$). For the students with learning disabilities, speech-language pathologists rated them higher than did the other respondents ($p < .00001$). Ratings for the *students with language impairment were*

Table 5

Overall Ratings of the Extent to Which Respondents' Value Figurative Language Instruction for Particular Students

	No Importance		Moderate Importance		Great Importance
	1	2	3	4	5
Students					
No Disability	1%	6%	26%	34%	34%
Learning Disability	2%	10%	28%	32%	29%
Language Impairment	5%	12%	29%	24%	30%
Hearing Impairment	4%	14%	30%	26%	26%
Mild Mental Retard.	9%	28%	33%	18%	12%
Mod. Mental Retard.	37%	34%	16%	8%	5%
Autistic	33%	30%	21%	9%	6%
Physically Handicap.	5%	9%	32%	29%	25%
Emotional Disturb.	5%	13%	36%	27%	20%
Visual Impairment	4%	10%	30%	29%	27%

Table 6

Mean Ratings of the Extent to Which Respondents Value Figurative Language Instruction for Particular Students

	Speech-Language Pathologists		Special Education Teachers		Third Grade Teachers		Fourth Grade Teachers	
Students								
No Disability	3.6	$(1.1)_a$	4.0	$(.9)_a$	4.0	$(.9)_a$	4.1	$(.8)_a$
Learning Disability	4.0	$(1.0)_a$	3.8	$(1.0)_{a,b}$	3.4	$(1.1)_{a,b,c}$	3.7	$(1.0)_{a,b,c}$
Language Impairment	4.1	$(.9)_a$	3.5	$(1.1)_{a,b}$	3.3	$(1.2)_{a,b,c}$	3.6	$(1.2)_{a,c}$
Hearing Impairment	3.9	$(1.0)_a$	3.4	$(1.1)_a$	3.3	$(1.2)_{a,b}$	3.6	$(1.2)_{a,b}$
Mild Mental Retard.	3.1	(1.0)	2.9	(1.1)	2.7	(1.1)	3.0	(1.2)
Mod. Mental Retard.	2.0	$(1.0)_a$	2.1	$(1.1)_a$	2.1	$(1.1)_a$	2.4	$(1.3)_a$
Autistic	2.1	(1.2)	2.2	(1.1)	2.2	(1.1)	2.5	(1.4)
Physically Handicap	3.6	(1.0)	3.6	(1.1)	3.5	(1.0)	3.6	(1.3)
Emotional Disturb.	3.4	(1.0)	3.5	(1.1)	3.2	(1.1)	3.5	(1.2)
Visual Impairment	3.6	(1.1)	3.7	(1.0)	3.5	(1.2)	3.7	(1.1)
Multiple Handicaps	2.7	(1.1)	2.6	(1.1)	2.6	(1.2)	3.0	(1.3)

Note. Percentages in each row having the same subscript are significantly different from one another at $p < .003$ or less in a chi-square comparison. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

significantly higher from the speech-language pathologists ($p < .00001$) as were the ratings for the students with hearing impairment ($p < .00001$); whereas, the fourth grade teachers' rating was significantly greater for children with moderate mental retardation ($p < .003$).

Respondents were next asked to identify which professionals should instruct special education students in figurative language. In this question, respondents were permitted to select more than a single option; thus, percentages of responses equaled more than 100. Table 7 displays the selections for each group of respondents. Overall, respondents identified special education teachers most often and reading specialists least often with the regular educators and speech-language pathologists falling in between.

Regarding the issue of whether the meaning of local slang terms should be taught in school, the majority of respondents within each group (54% to 61%) selected the option "only when misunderstandings arise". Table 8 shows the breakdown of responses by group to this question as well as the number of respondents reporting whether they discussed slang terms with students during the school year.

Question 21 asked respondents if understanding figurative language could help students socially. This question was openended, meaning that the respondents formulated their own original answers. Respondents' answers were categorized by scorers so that similar responses were grouped together. A total of 49% of all respondents indicated that it helped students with their language skills (i.e., comprehension, expression, or pragmatics). Interestingly, the third and fourth grade teachers stated this significantly more often than the speech-lan-

Table 7

Percent of Respondents That Selected Professionals Who Should Teach Figurative Language to Special Education Students

	Respondents			
	Speech-Language Pathologists	Special Educators	Third Grade Teachers	Fourth Grade Teachers
Options:				
Regular Education Teachers	85%$_a$	72%$_a$	77%	82%
Special Education Teachers	97%$_b$	95%	89%$_b$	94%
Speech-Language Pathologists	96%$_{a,b,c}$	75%$_{a,d}$	58%$_{b,d}$	71%$_c$
Reading Specialists	71%	58%	57%	66%

Note. Percentages in each row having the same subscript are significantly different from one another at $p < .002$ or less in a chi-square comparison.

Table 8

Respondents' Opinions on Whether Local Slang Terms Should be Taught in School

	Speech-Language Pathologists	Special Educators	Third Grade Teachers	Fourth Grade Teachers
Should be taught	30%$_a$	21%	14%$_a$	18%
Should not be taught	6%$_b$	12%	14%	18%$_b$
Teach only when misunderstandings arise	56%	54%	61%	56%
Not sure	8%	13%	11%	8%
Did you discuss slang terms with students?				
Yes	60%$_a$	63%$_b$	65%$_c$	82%$_{a,b,c}$
No	40%	37%	35%	18%

Note. Percentages in each row having the same subscript are significantly different from one another at $p < .002$ or less in a chi-square comparison.

guage pathologists ($p < .00001$ with the third grade teachers and $p < .0002$ with the fourth grade teachers). A total of 29% of the respondents stated that understanding figurative language may improve social acceptance by peers. The speech-language pathologists responded with this answer significantly more often than the third grade ($p < .00001$) and fourth grade teachers ($p < .00001$). A few respondents (7%) indicated that figurative language was fun for students, and 6% agreed that it helped students socially but did not elaborate how this might occur. Only 3% of all respondents indicated that they believed it could not help students socially, and 2% were unsure. No significant differences were found for these remaining responses. A few of the responses (4%) were uninterpretable.

The final question asked if understanding figurative language helped students academically. Across all respondents, 68% reported that it helped students' speaking, understanding, reading, or writing skills. Another 9% of respondents stated that it helped students succeed in school or in their overall development, 7% believed that it helped improve their reasoning skills, and 5% agreed that it helped students academically but did not elaborate how this may occur. Only 4% of all respondents indicated that they believed it could not help students academically, 3% were unsure, and 2% of responses were uninterpretable. No significant differences were found among the groups in their responses to this question.

DISCUSSION

According to this nationwide survey, the majority of elementary educators and speech-language pathologists provided either formal or informal figurative language instruction during the 1993-1994 school year. This instruction was greater for idioms and similes with the speech-language pathologists, third grade teachers, and special educators. For the fourth grade teachers, instruction focused more heavily on similes and metaphors. The special educators taught figurative language the least of any group. It was notable that the fourth grade teachers reported teaching idioms, similes, and metaphors at a higher rate than any of the other respondents. This may reflect an increased emphasis in the curriculum on figurative language in grade four as suggested by Abrahamsen & Sprouse (1995). The reported rate of use of curriculum materials (78%) also supports such an emphasis on figurative language in the fourth grade.

One interesting finding was the differing instructional methods used. Fourth grade teachers used eight instructional methods (i.e., formal lessons, locating figurative forms in the literature, bulletin board displays, informal discussion, cooperative learning activities, worksheets, homework activities, and having students illustrate figurative meanings through pictures) at higher rates than all other respondents; whereas, speech-language pathologists used instructional games with the greatest frequency. The use of instructional games by speech-language pathologists may have occurred for two reasons. First, it may reflect a preferred therapy method with small groups. Second, instructional games may be more readily available than other materials to speech-language pathologists through publishers' catalogues as suggested by the fact that 57% of the speech-language pathologists reported using materials published specifically for figurative language instruction. Regarding the need for more materials, the fact that the majority of respondents reported a need for more materials and the rate at which they reported creating original materials or consulting other sources, provide a strong indication that more instructional materials are needed for teaching figurative language.

The finding that 73% of respondents reported that figurative language occurred either regularly or occasionally during instruction lends support to the findings of Lazar, Warr-Leeper, Nicholson, and Johnson (1989) who observed the occurrence of multiple meaning expressions in classroom settings. This occurrence of figurative language in the classroom is an important consideration when determining the extent to which students may be at a disadvantage if they fail to understand these forms. For those who have difficulty with figurative language, comprehension in various forms (e.g., reading stories, understanding oral instructions) may be impaired and may adversely affect students' academic performance.

The opinion of the majority of respondents that slang should be taught "only when misunderstandings arise" was expected. It was for this reason that the question about slang was separated from the other forms of figurative language as it was considered to be somewhat controversial. Some professionals discourage the use of slang by students and others accept and encourage its use. However, it appeared that most respondents agreed that it was more important to instruct students in the meaning of slang terms than to have them remain ignorant in this regard.

Generally speaking, the majority of educators and speech-language pathologists responding to this questionnaire reported that understanding figurative language could benefit students both socially (i.e., by improving their language skills and improving their social acceptance by peers) and academically (i.e., by increasing their speaking, understanding, reading, or writing skills). The majority of respondents also reported that students in special education had more problems understanding and using figurative language than those in regular education. Consequently, one might expect that both educators and speech-language pathologists would value figurative language instruction for students with disabilities to a greater degree than for those with no disabilities. However, only the speech-language pathologists gave higher ratings to students with learning disability, language impairment, and hearing impairment than students with no disability. The reason for this difference is not known. It is unlikely that the difference is a result of the speech-language pathologists having more experience with children with disabilities, as the majority of regular educators reported having these students in their

classes. Certainly the special educators would have as much experience with children exhibiting disabilities as speech-language pathologists. Perhaps a philosophical difference between the speech-language pathologists and the educators could exist that could be based on a hierarchy of educational needs for these children. In any event, the discrepency of placing less value on figurative language instruction for the students who may experience more problems with this language form suggests that educators could fail to recognize the language needs of these children. Additional research is recommended to determine the exact nature of the attitudinal differences in these professionals.

Regarding who should teach figurative language to students with disabilities, each group of respondents selected "special education teachers" most often and "reading specialists" least often. There was a high rate of responding for the regular education teachers and speech-language pathologists as well. Several respondents indicated through written notes that all persons should be prepared to teach figurative language when students fail to comprehend these forms. The fact that so many respondents selected all options suggests that there are few persons who believe that this is the sole domain of a single educator.

There are four limitations of this study. First, although the sample was randomly selected, represented all nine geographic regions of the United States, and had an overall return rate of nearly 70%, the findings are based on a limited number of persons (806 respondents). As with other survey studies, results could vary if different persons were sampled. Second, the questionnaire included a range of items pertaining to figurative language instruction (e.g., focus of instruction, materials used, teaching methods employed). However, these questions did not exhaust the topic of figurative language instruction. More information on this topic could be gathered such as a perceived need for professional training in this area, difficulties experienced with instruction, variability of teaching practices for typical students and those with disabilities, amount of instruction time provided in this area, or the extent to which figurative language instruction is incorporated into lessons simply to make them more interesting. A third limitation is that it does not address the question of whether instruction is provided to all students or only those who have a particular need. This may vary according to the professional providing the instruction. A fourth limitation of this study is the narrow range of professionals surveyed (i.e., early elementary only). Extending the sample to later elementary grades and secondary grades would provide information about how figurative language instruction is provided to students' throughout their school careers. This limitation could be addressed in future studies.

In summary, this study examined the current beliefs and practices of educators and speech-language pathologists in their approach to figurative language instruction. A majority of respondents stated that they provided either formal or informal figurative language instruction to students; that they believed that this could benefit students both socially and academically; and that students in special education had more problems understanding and using these forms than regular education students. However, the responses of both the special and regular educators suggested a discrepency between the perceived value of figurative language instruction for certain special education students and their perceived problems in this area. Such a discrepency was not observed in responses by speech-language pathologists. This discrepency should be examined further to determine whether the instructional needs of these students are being addressed adequately. Additional topics for further research include the amount of figurative language in elementary children's curricula, and academic and/or social outcomes of figurative language instruction.

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AUTHOR NOTES

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