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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Whole Language

A Thesis Submitted to the

University Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree

With Upper Division Honors

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

by Frances Brady

DeKalb, Illinois

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HONORS THESIS ABSTRACT
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ABSTRACT (100-200 WORDS):

Whole language is a philosophy of teaching and learning based on the theory that children learn pest when language is whole, real, and relevant.

This paper is a qualitative-research paper using classroom observation and secondary materials as resources. It attempts to describe the functions of readipg and writing in the whole language classroom, and the roles phonics, spelling, handwriting, and assessment play in this kind of learning.

Whole language is a philosophy based on the research done by experts in the fields of linguistics, child development, sociology, literacy theory, and other related fields. Whole language is an attempt to make the school literacy program as natural and successful as the environment in which oral language acquisition occurs.

By keeping language whole, instead of breaking it into bite-sized pieces, the natural purpose of language - communication - is stressed instead of the abstract, isolated sounds and words that are unrelated to the child's experiences.

Children come to school wanting to make sense of their world. Whole language classrooms help them do that by building the curriculum around the interests and experiences the children already have.

ABSTRACT

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WHOLE LANGUAGE

Whole language is not just another method of teaching. Rather it is an entire philosophy about teaching and learning based on the strong learning theory that children learn best when language is whole, real, and relevant.

When babies learn to walk adults are delighted by the process of learning. They coax and encourage all efforts, and accept all failures as milestones in the baby's learning. They do not stop the learning process and break it down into a series of subskills they feel are necessary for the baby to learn in order to learn to walk properly. Rather, they encourage his natural growth and development.

When a young child starts to talk adults are delighted by every sound that comes out of the child's mouth. Again they encourage and coax and strengthen the child's efforts by supporting all his attempts to make sense out of language - to communicate so adults can understand him. They do not break this learning process into a series of subskills in order for him to talk properly. Rather, they encourage his natural growth and development.

All learning involves risk. Families cherish first attempts of their children's learning and therefore diminish risk to learners. Schools need to be equally encouraging of risk-taking, especially during language development. But, when children learn to read in a school setting, the schools traditionally insist upon accurate word pronunciation and identification from the very beginning. Words are broken down into bite-sized pieces. Subskills are accepted as being necessary in the reading process. Risk-

taking is denied. This attention to surface features is at odds to children's intuitions about how language works.

Careful observation of children is helping teachers better understand what makes language easy or hard to learn. Many schools actually hinder language development in their efforts to make it "easy." By breaking language into small pieces, "language is turned into words, syllables, and isolated sounds that postpone the natural purpose of language - communication - and turn it into an abstraction, unrelated to the needs and experiences of the children" (Goodman, 1986, p. 7).

DEFINITIONS OF WHOLE LANGUAGE

By far the easiest and most to the point definition of whole language comes from Ken Goodman in his book What's Whole in Whole Language. "Whole language is an attempt to get back to basics in the real sense of that word - to set aside basals, workbooks, and tests, and to return to inviting kids to learn to read and write by reading and writing."

Regie Routman defines whole language as a philosophy which refers to meaningful, real, and relevant teaching and learning. She states that whole language "respects the idea that all the language processes (listening, speaking, reading, and writing - including spelling and handwriting) are learned naturally and in meaningful context as a whole, not in little parts" (Routman, 1988, p. 26). Routman stresses that risk-taking and making errors are encouraged and necessary for optimal language development.

Maryanne and Gary Manning, in an article in Teaching Pre K-8, refer to whole language as a belief system that "transcends all

content areas and grade levels." It is a system where students construct their own knowledge from within, using prior knowledge. It is a system that places emphasis on process instead of product. It is a system where classroom learning activities are authentic and resemble the real world as much as possible (Manning, 1992, pp. 58-60).

RESEARCH

Whole language is a philosophical stance based on research done by teachers and researchers while "exploring the practical applications of recent theoretical arguments arising from research in linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, child development, curriculum, composition, literacy theory, semiotics, and other fields of study" (Newman, 1985, p. 1).

In the early 1950's it was believed that children were passive receptors of language; that they developed speech by imitating first the sounds and then the words in their environment. Positive reinforcement was the director of this learning. Noam Chomsky, however, demonstrated that language is based on a "complex set of syntactic or grammatical rules for relating the sounds of language and meaning" (Newman, p. 8). This led us to believe children are actively involved in their language development.

In 1966 psycholinguist John Carrole declared that school literacy programs should be more like the successful environments in which oral language acquisition takes place. He stated the need for "provisions of a rich language environment that includes the full complexities - irregularities and all" (Cazden, 1992, p. 11).

He stated that reading and writing need to be experienced as both parallel and reciprocal. He also emphasized the need for reading and writing tasks to be "meaningful in the sense of having functional relations to the child's experiences, desires, and acts" (Cazden, p. 11).

According to research by Clark, and Macnamara in the early 70's children become language users by mapping language into experiences. The situation provides clues to the meaning of words. Words lead to the formation of concepts. A relationship is then negotiated between the two (Newman, 1985, p. 9).

The most exciting research was done by Clay in the early 1970's on child development. Clay found that children tend to work from their strengths. They use the processes they are familiar with before they master new ways of operating. This means that children depend on the Ilspoken language competence in reading before they are capable of discriminating sound elements in the flow of language" (Holdaway, 1979, p. 89). Dr. Clay states that beginning reading is a "communication system in a formative stage" (Holdaway, p. 90). The child first produces a message from his oral language experience and past associations. He verifies it as probable or improbable and changes his responses if the check produces uncertainty. Eventually the cues from experience and spoken language are supplemented by the learning of letters, words, and letter-sound associations.

Developmental learning, such as that demonstrated by Clay, takes place with such apparent ease and with so little conscious planning that whole language advocates call it "natural" in distinction

from learning in which skills require intensive instruction. Developmental learning seems to be regulated and paced by the learner and is reinforced both intrinsically and extrinsically. Developmental learning is highly individual and non-competitive. It is short on teaching and long on learning. It is self-regulated rather than adult regulated. It imitates the behavior of people who model the skill in natural use. It is the foundation of the whole language philosophy.

According to Don Holdaway in his book The Foundations of Literacy, school failure is imminent for many children when the teachers and programs dominate, when motivation is extrinsic, when competition is the norm, when isolated skills are taught, when authentic language is emasculated, and when deep meanings are replaced by surface correctness (Holdaway, p. 185).

In the early 1980's an investigation done by Harste, Burke, and Woodward on a large group of three to six year olds found that literacy development is not in terms of stages but in four specific language strategies. The first strategy is text intent. All the children expected the written language to make sense. The second strategy found was negotiability. This means using what children know about language to make sense in their encounter with print. Children make a hypothesis about the print which is then confirmed by adult reaction. The third strategy is risk-taking which is done by both attitude and action in hypothesis testing. The last strategy the investigators discovered was fine-tuning language with language. What was learned from one language encounter became a resource for other language situations (Newman,

1985, pp. 15-19).

Despite all the research done in the past few decades education in the United States is just now recovering from a long depression dominated by the behaviorists where each subject area was broken into separate entities and learning was often viewed as memorizing isolated bits of information. Whole language teachers value the holistic nature of knowledge and are constantly thinking about how they can help students make natural relationships.

PHONICS

Traditional schooling methods based on the works of behaviorists such as B. F. Skinner and Edward Thorndike begin reading lessons that focus on phonics. They believe that children learn such complex skills by first making sense of the smallest components of language (letters) and then progressing to the larger components of sounds, words, and sentences. They believe that children must learn to decode the language and that only after the code is broken can understanding follow.

Whole language advocates believe that children engage in a search for meaning, structure, and order and reject the idea that decoding the smallest components of written language are necessary for children to learn to read. According to the findings published in Becoming A Nation of Readers It has been known since late in the 19th century that short, familiar words can be read as fast as single letters and that, under some conditions, words can be identified when the separate letters cannot. More recently it has been shown that a meaningful context speeds word identification (Anderson, et aI, 1985, p. 11).

Because instruction so frequently overemphasizes the graph-aphonic aspects of reading at the expense of meaning, many readers develop a view of reading as one which is more concerned with accurate word pronunciation and identification than with understanding. Many hours of school time are spent on worksheets "drilling" sub-skills intended to make reading easier. But skills taught out of context have little meaning for children. "Whole language teachers understand that there are other ways of teaching reading and writing that can be more effective" (Cutting, 1992, p. 49). Research has shown these teachers the importance of using whole concepts and that children learn to read by reading, and to write by writing. The emphasis is on using skills to read, rather than learning skills as an end in themselves.

According to Holdaway, "Children master the syntax of their language almost completely by the time they are five years old, without knowing about nouns or verbs, tenses or agreement" (Holdaway, 1979, p. 85). Traditional methods of teaching believe that it is necessary to know the names and rules of all these terms in order to use language properly. But, if we must apply a rule before we can utter a word we are more apt to become anxious and self-conscious and even stammer as we speak. Fluency is greatly reduced, and so is comprehension. Holdaway believes that the whole notion of conscious rule is "ridiculous and self-defeating." He says one only has to analyze the behavior of children failing in literacy to realize the truth. "As students struggle to apply rules for a single skill they overlook the implication of cues in different skills areas" (Holdaway, p. 99).

Whole language advocates do not advocate doing away with phonics altogether. They just believe that phonics should be taught in the context of language and that other cues should be used as well. Good readers utilize three different cues in developing personal strategies and use them interactively to make sense out of print. The first cue is semantic. The reader asks what is happening and derives meaning through both the text and the illustrations. Good readers use syntactic cues. They use their knowledge of language patterns and grammatical structures to decipher new words. And good readers use graphophonic cues. Their knowledge of letter-sound relationships helps them decide if their hypothesis of a word is correct or not. All three of these cuing systems work together. None can work in isolation from the others (Routman, 1988, p. 41).

READING

Children's trade books are the cornerstone of a whole language curriculum. Their value lies in the natural language children's writers use. There are neither "controlled" vocabulary, nor simplified syntactic structure. Illustrations provide support and the stories are relevant to children's lives (Newman,1985, p. 64). The use of literature for teaching literacy is tried and tested, grounded in research, and based on natural learning theory. New Zealand, the country with the highest literacy rate in the world, has been teaching with literature for over twenty years (Routman, 1988, p. 18).

Research has shown that basal readers put far too much em-

phasis on isolated aspects of language and so called sub-skills that don't really exist except in the minds of textbook designers. "They're badly written, the sequencing of skills is absolutley arbitrary, and they don't involve kids' higher-order thinking skills. They don't relate to kids' experiences and they cost too much" (Cazden, 1992, p. 79).

Recently there has been an attempt by basal textbook companies to introduce well-know children's authors, but very often these stories are shortened or altered and the natural language flow, emotional quality, and interesting story line are lost. This deprives the child of the literary language necessary for the development of imaginative writing as well as a love of reading (Routman,1988, p. 22).

Learning to read is a process of experiencing language. Activities which involve fragments of language,which discourage children from taking risks, and which do not encourage the exchange of ideas can only make learning to read more difficult for children.

Whole language classrooms use book projects to reinforce reading, writing and thinking. These take the place of traditional dittos and workbooks. "Students have unlimited options to integrate skills in a meaningful context and still have fun doing it" (Routman, p. 70). This independent work occupies less than twenty percent of the total reading instruction time. The rest of the time is spent in actual reading. Studies done by Anderson and his associates for _Becoming A Nation of Readers_ have shown that skill and drill seat work takes up as much as seventy percent of the total reading instruction time in the traditional classroom (Routman,

p. 70).

The literature extension projects of whole language classes play an important part in the language arts program. They extend as well as complement the literature. There is no busy work to keep the students quiet. Instead they are actively involved in their own learning. Such activities include any meaningful extension of a book and include such activities as rereading for a different purpose, retelling the story, comparing one book or character in the book to another, illustrating favorite scenes, rewriting alternative endings or acting out the story. Whole language teachers believe that "the links between language arts and the related arts are important in the enhancement of learning; Language arts flow naturally, one into the other, and to related arts - drama, painting, music, etc., flourish in their own right as part of the program" (Cutting, 1992, p. 50).

Reading instruction in the United States is noted for its reading groups. In an average class of twenty-five to thirty students, the kids are homogeneously grouped by their ability to read, with six to ten children in each group. The students usually read in a round-robin method where the children take turns reading as the other students follow along in their own books. Each child only gets to read between two and five minutes total, and they only hear the reading of their peers with like ability. Accuracy is overemphasized at the expense of understanding and the lesson turns into a performance skill with potential threat to some students. Strategies are almost impossible to use and it is an uneconomical waste of time (Holdaway, 1979, p. 142).

Whole language teachers group their students flexibly, de-

pending on the purpose of the lesson. Sometimes they are grouped by interest, sometimes by skills-need. Sometimes the children are grouped in pairs. But the groups are rarely the same each time. Whole language teachers believe that the purpose of reading-groups is reading together for pleasure while developing and reinforcing skills and strategies. The emphasis is on understanding and appreciation of literature (Routman, 1988, p. 126). The slower readers get to hear better readers, and the better readers get to assist the slower readers. Skills that are needed by only a small portion of the class are taught just to them, saving the time of the other students for actual reading.

Whole language students learn confidence by reading in unison. They are also read to daily by the teacher who models fluent, expressive reading, and they read by themselves to practice their skills.

Whole language students have been accused of memorizing their texts. But there is good reason to believe that memory always plays a significant part in competent reading at the early stages. "The degree of fluency and connectedness required for 'real reading' is dependent on the ready recognition of most words in the text and on a high enough level of predictability for the beginning reader to assure himself or confirm that his responses are appropriate" (Holdaway, 1979, p. 127). Being familiar with the text helps the student sustain active reading without the need of supervision and helps him concentrate on meaning. But no matter how children are introduced to words early in the reading program, they should have experience with reading these words in meaningful texts (Anderson, et aI, 1985, p. 43).

WRITING

Children want to write the first day they come to school. They have already marked on anything they could get their hands on: walls, sidewalks, newspapers. They have used whatever writing implements they could get their hands on: crayons, Pens, chalk, Pencils. Once in school, however, most teachers ignore the child's urge to show what he knows. They take control away from the student and "place unnecessary road blocks in the way of their intentions. Then we say they don't want to write'(Graves, 1983, p. 3).

Data shows that almost ninety percent of children entering first grade believe they can write. This is in contrast to only fifteen percent who believe they can read (Graves, p. 18).

The production of written language can be a hazardous process in a correcti ve instructional environment. When letters must be formed correctly, words must be spelled correctly, grarrmatical structures have to be correctly formed, and canmunicable meanings have to be encoded children escape the dangers by writing as little as possible (Holdaway,1979, p. 27).

Whole language teachers believe that children learn the process of writing by writing. Journal writing is done daily and is often an interactive activity between the teacher or a parent. Many students choose to write during free time, independent work, or before or after school. Progress in writing is developmental like speaking and reading and practice makes perfect. The sheer act of writing everyday has a positive effect on handwriting, length, content, spelling, and mastery of writing conventions. And most important of all - children view themselves as writers (Routman,1988, p. 108).

Whole language teachers make no distinction between the writing of children and the writing of professionals. Both "should be treated as important writing with the same scrutiny given to the information in each by using the same process: receive the work, discuss what is contained in the piece, then formulate questions for the author" (Graves, 1983, p. 76). When the children's

ownbooks are "published" and placed on the classroom shelves for other students to read the children experience the joys of authorship themselves.

The skills children acquire in the first grade through daily writing allow them to write with a clear and authentic voice in second grade. Because second graders have fewer physical restraints they are capable of rrore effort. "Wenotice enriched vocabulary, greater attention to detail, improvedgrammatical structure, and unexpected adaptations of an author's style, as well as increased use of description and dialogue" (Routman,1988, p. 129).

SPELLING

Traditional classrooms teach a weekly spelling list with a pretest on Monday and a final test on Friday. WordsSPelled incorrectly must be written a certain numberof times with the premise that then the wordwill be drilled into memory. Research has shown,however, that the heavy emphasis on drill and weekly spelling tests does not increase good SPelling in writing. High scores on wordlist tests do not transfer to writing context. "Like the language process, spelling is developmentaland the child needs support for his approximations and risk-taking" (Routmanp, 132). Throughdaily writing practice and the support and guidance of teachers and Parents the child gradually rroves towards conventional spelling.

Wordsthat children use frequently in their daily writing can be used as the spelling programfor the whole language classroom. Each student can have his ownindividual list or words taken fran the students' journals or other writings can be used to canpile a whole group list (Routmanp. 132).

Learning to spell is a function of experience: the rrore writing children do, the rrore opportunities they have to spell, the rrore likely they are to spell conventionally. Spelling competenceis not a matter of memorizingwords for the Friday spelling test but a matter of first trying out words as they

are needed in writing, and then learning the limits of invented spelling a-gainst social conventions (Goodman, 1986, P. 41).

An overemphasis on spelling (or punctuation or handwriting) can actually provide a situation where children view the conventions of writing as more Impor-tant than the meaning they are trying to convey (Newman, 1985, p. 28). When students are inhibited by conventional spelling they confine their writ-ing to words they know how to spell. By encouraging children to use inven-ted spelling writing activities can provide a good opportunity for them to apply and extent their knowledge of letter-sound cor-respondence (Anderson, et al, 1985, p. 12).

HANDWRITING

Whole language teachers feel "handwriting is for writing." Children win prizes for fine script and parents and teachers nod approval for a crisp, well-crafted page. But these Pale next to the substance they carry (Graves, 1983, P. 171). The content must take precedent over the script as handwriting is simply "the vehicle carrying information on its way to a destination. Handwriting, like skin, shows the outside of the Person. But beneath the skin beats the living organism, the life's blood, the ideas, the information" (Graves, P. 171).

Like spelling, handwriting is developmental and the more it is practiced during real writing, the better it will become. "Children develop their hand-writing by acting on a page" (Graves, 174-178).

Donald Graves has divided the development of handwriting into five phases, all of which are visible in a child's first year of schooling. The first phase, which he calls the "get-it-down" phase is when children Persist in putting letters, numbers, and drawings on the paper like "waves rolling on the shore." They observe some conventions, but just putting words on paper

is enough. In the second stage, called "f'Lr'st;aesthetics II the children want the paper to be clean and fresh for writing. The eraser is the child's best friend, although fine motor skills often hinder control of it and the effort is so great that the child rubs through the paper and rips it. The IIgrowing age of convent.Lon'appears toward the end of first grade whenchildren become fussy about spacing, margins, and writing above and below the lines. Spelling and punctuation are also affected positively. Content often takes a backseat for many, and their output decreases. The fourth stage "break.inq conventionII is almost canpletely dependent on the teacher's approach. The children hate rewriting at this stage but are taught that first drafts are only temporary. By stage five the children have learned to line-out errors instead of erasing them. They nowaccept the paper as only a draft and that the text can be re-worked. The child sees the progression fran rough to smoothand the future copies becomemuchmore pleasing. Children take pride in their final work and usually copy with great care.

Whentraditional teachers insist on handwriting mastery, the writing pro-gression tends to neglect the insight that embodieslinguistic meanings, and instead movesonly towards acceptable form. liTheformation of letters and the mere ability to copy accurately constitute a deeply impoverishedview of what is involved in mastering the production of written languageII (Holdaway,1979, p. 34). In addition to learning to print children need to knowthat writing is composinga messageusing their ownwords to communicatewith others (Ander-son, et al, 1985, p. 33).

ASSESSMENT

Assessmentof each student's abilities takes place numeroustimes during each school day. It is through these assessments that the teacher knows whether or not her class understands her lesson and she can go on, or if she must remediate in order for the lesson to be understood. Constant assessment

guides a teacher's lessons and daily lesson plans. In the traditional classroom teacher-made or textbook company tests are given frequently to assess what the students remember about a certain lesson. Worksheets and dittos featuring true, false questions and "fill-in-the blanks" dominate seat work.

Most children take a "standardized" test each year, and some children take several reading tests a rrorrth, These tests give an individual's performance on a given day, in a group situation, and in comparison to other children. These tests grade students on how well they do on these tests, taking nothing else into consideration. But grading and evaluation are not the same thing. "Grades do not indicate individual strengths or weaknesses. They emphasize comparison and foster a:xnpetition" (Routman, 1988, p. 211).

Whole language teachers do not canpare students to each other, but rather look for developnent in each student. They know that the "evaluation for learning is continuous - a natural part of the program based on observation of what is actually happening as individual children learn to read and write" (Cutting, 1992, p, 50). Children need to be convinced that they can read. Failing regularly on tests is the best way to convince them otherwise.

Teachers are under great pressure to be accountable to students' progress but there are alternatives to multiple choice and "fill-in-the-blank" assignments. Dramatic changes in today's instruction methods demand that assessment nove form adult-centered procedures to child-centered activities. "We can only define growth by reviewing observations and descriptions of children at work" (Glazer, 1992, p. 63).

The portfolio has been identified as one of the top three curriculum trends by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (Vaurus, 1990, p. 48). A portfolio is an assessment tool that yields nore than a single score. Rather it is a "systematic and organized collection of evidence used by teachers to nonitor the growth of the students knowledge, skills, and attitudes" in certain subject areas (Vaurus, p, 48).

Portfolios are "authentic testing." They are performance based, realistic, and instructionally appropriate. Portfolios put the student in a self-disciplined, self-regulating, and self-assessing position as they choose (with the help of the teacher) what will go into their portfolio.

Representations of real learning activities go into the portfolio: samples from a variety of daily and weekly assignments, samples from writing folders, literature logs, audio tapes of oral reading, lab reports and science projects, anecdotal records, reflective records, self-evaluations and reflections, and notes from conferences between student and teacher. At the end of the year the portfolio is passed on to the next teacher assuring continuity of the student's education.

Our states, school systems, and individual schools are attempting to vary assessment procedures so that they match instruction. These various changes have resulted in some confusion but they are also resulting in an upheaval that is helping to change the way Americans think about school work (Glazer, 1992, p. 64).

Test scores and grade levels are still valued, but are slowly becoming only a small part of the greater context of a child's abilities.

CONCLUSION

"Children learn what they live, what they hear they try to speak, in a context of meaningful, functional use with people who care about them and have confidence that they will learn" (Cazden, 1992, p. 11). This is the core message of the whole language movement

With the language the children have already learned they bring to school their natural tendency to want to make sense of their world. When schools break language into bits and pieces, sense becomes nonsense (Goodman, 1986, p. 8).

Wholelanguage is firmly supported by four humanistic - scientific pillars. The first pillar is a strong learning theory - language learning is easy when it is whole, real, and relevant. "Languagedevelopnent is a holistic, personal-social achievement" (Goodman, P. 26).

The second pillar is the language theory that states language is inclusive and indivisible. The whole is rrore than the sumof its parts.

The whole language view of teaching makesup the third pillar. This view is that the respect for and understanding of learning and language is matched by respect for and understanding of teaching. Wholelanguage advocates view teachers as professionals.

The fourth pillar of whole language is its view of curriculum. Integration is the key principle for language developmentand the learning through language. This meansdrawing on the interests and experiences children have outside of school.

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