

Whole Language

Whole Language *Is* Whole: A Response to Heymsfeld

As a coherent philosophy of language, whole language does not need to be "patched" with skills instruction.

Carla Heymsfeld wants to accept the new and hang on to the old. In trying to assimilate whole-language concepts into her existing schema, she accepts incompatible and contradictory concepts. One cannot reconcile direct instruction with natural learning. Meaningful, predictable, authentic texts are incompatible with carefully controlled vocabulary and decontextualized phonics instruction. Teachers *have* lived with contradictions, but they don't have to. Whole-language teachers are evolving internally consistent views that enable them to make the instructional decisions necessary to support literacy development.

Heymsfeld likes the logic of whole language. She likes its focus on function, on meaning, and the way it builds on the learner's experience. She likes the emphasis on integrating whole-language instruction. She likes process writing. She likes the idea of "putting reading back in reading." And she likes the energy and enthusiasm whole language engenders in teachers and pupils.

But she also likes "direct, intensive, systematic, early teaching of phonics"—so much so that she devotes over one-fourth of her article to the subject. Whole language doesn't ignore phonics; it puts it in proper perspective. We understand that children invent spellings as they begin to write; these inventions show they are building their own rules for how the sound system of the language relates to the spelling system (Reed 1971, Goodman

and Wilde 1985). Students must read and write whole, real texts so they can invent their systems and bring them into harmony with conventional spelling. Because we free the kids to take risks while we support their development, there is an explosion of reading and writing in whole-language classrooms.

Heymsfeld also likes the rhetoric of direct instruction. The notion of controlling what kids learn (and how teachers teach) in a very explicit way is apparently appealing to her. And, though she sees some defects in basals, she likes them very much too. Basals have defined reading as a series of skills and a collection of words; stories in basals are nothing more than the means to practice certain skills and words. Consequently, the literature in basals is censored, abridged, purged, and rewritten to support the skill sequence and controlled vocabulary. In one current program, Judy Blume's *The One in the Middle is the Green Kangaroo* becomes *Maggie in the Middle* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston 1986). A realistic story of sibling rivalry and family conflict is soothed and smoothed so that both Blume's voice

and the authenticity of her portrayal are lost. In another basal, *Little Red Riding Hood* has more to say about the "big red apples" in the little girl's basket than about her encounter with the wolf (Scott, Foresman 1985).

Another Way to Teach Reading

For a generation of reading specialists and teachers who have been educated as technicians, it is difficult to visualize any other way of teaching reading. That's Heymsfeld's problem. She senses that "whole language is not just old wine poured into new skins," but she keeps falling into the fallacy of seeing it as an alternate way to do the same things the basals do. Thus she finds missing pieces: no direct instruction, no neat sequence, no pre-graded anthologies. Her answer is to patch the gaps she sees with the missing pieces.

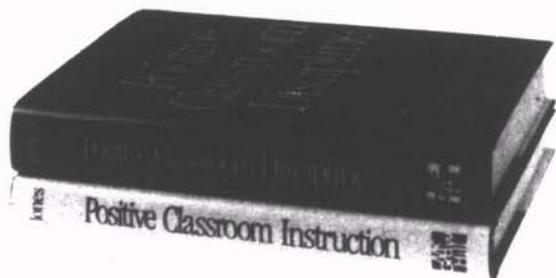
But whole language is much more than an alternative to basals. It is not a reading methodology at all; it is a philosophy of curriculum, of learning, of teaching, and of language. Whole language redefines reading and writing as processes for making sense out of and through written language. It redefines the teacher as a professional decision maker, the curriculum leader in the classroom. It redefines the learner as someone who is strong, active, and already launched on the road to literacy before school begins. It redefines the relationship between teacher and learner as one of supporting development rather than controlling it. And whole language redefines

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the curriculum. Whole language unifies and integrates oral and written language development with development of thinking and building knowledge. Students learn to read and write *while* they read and write to learn and solve problems.

As teachers implement whole language, practice gets ahead of theory and research. Heymsfeld is not alone in recognizing the energy and innovative genius these empowered teachers are generating. It is not the psycholinguistic gurus but the teachers who have created the whole-language movement. Much of this development is passed from teacher to teacher in personal contacts, in teacher support groups, and in local conferences.

There are explicit, functioning whole-language curriculums in many, many classrooms now. There are schoolwide whole-language curriculums in many, many schools. There are systemwide whole-language policies and curriculum frameworks in many school systems. And there are state and provincial frameworks in most of the states of Australia, in Quebec and Nova Scotia, and emerging policies in some states in the United States. New Zealand has a national whole-language framework and policy. What all these educators share is a common philosophy and a common set of criteria based on theory and research for implementing whole language. They also share a belief in teachers and learners. So they empower teachers to teach and learners to learn. □

References

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