

## Whole Language

## Filling the Hole in Whole Language

Because both whole language and traditional skill-based instruction have strengths, educators should use a combined approach.

Education has found a new love—whole language. Proponents sing its praises as a child-centered approach that integrates a complex curriculum. Educators who have adopted it point to the high level of student enthusiasm and promise a future of great gains in student achievement.

Unfortunately, many whole-language advocates have abandoned effective elements of traditional skill-based instruction. This lack does a disservice to students. Written language is like a safe-deposit box: more than one key is needed to unlock it, and children need all the keys we can give them.

### What Is Whole Language?

Basically, whole language is an approach that teaches reading as a holistic activity: reading is at all times treated as an integrated behavior, never broken into separate skills. The emphasis is always on meaning, and materials are expected to be real and relevant (Goodman and Goodman 1981). Whole texts, many student-selected, are used from the very beginning.

Whole language opposes the current practices of (1) allowing basal readers to dominate the reading program and (2) focusing on subskills of reading, such as decoding, finding details, identifying main ideas, understanding cause and effect, and making inferences.

Moreover, the theory does not confine itself to reading instruction. The

underlying concept is that *all* the language arts are related and should not be taught as if they were separate subjects. In fact, whole language endorses integrating reading and writing instruction with content subjects too.

### Familiar Ideas

Traditionalists wary of new ideas can poke around the bottom of the whole-language closet and find many comfortable old shoes. Language experience charts and related activities play a prominent part in this new approach, as does the inclusion of lots of good children's literature. The whole-language emphasis on meaning fits traditional philosophy; good teachers have always seen meaning as integral to reading instruction. The tenet that readers construct meaning as they read sounds new, but when it is explained as a process of drawing on prior experience in order to make sense of a text, it becomes pleasantly familiar.

One aspect of the whole-language movement that has found early and widespread acceptance, even among teachers who are still grounded in a

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skill-based philosophy of instruction, is the integration of the language arts program. We see this especially in the area of writing. Once relegated to a once-a-week slot in which teachers and students alike suffered through absurdities such as "If I Were a Tennis Ball," writing is now a full-fledged part of our students' lives. They are beginning to see writing as the complement of reading and to use it as an effective tool of learning. This makes good sense, as both activities seem to require similar cognitive processes.

In spite of the similarities between whole language and traditional teaching, though, whole language is not just old wine poured into new skins. There are significant theoretical differences between the two approaches that have far-reaching implications for instruction. Advocates of each side, and all manner of people in between, are often fiercely committed to their positions, whether or not they have empirical data to back them. Therefore, to avoid adopting a sounds-good-but-doesn't-work program, we ought to evaluate carefully the available research.

### Phonics

Whole-language theorists (led by Kenneth Goodman and Frank Smith) come into conflict with available research on the subject of phonics. Because they believe that children will develop their own phonetic principles as they read and write, whole-language advocates oppose teaching phonics in any structured, systematic way. Research, however, shows us that children learn best when lessons are structured and skills are taught directly. We cannot depend on haphazard, amorphous instruction to teach something as critical as the alphabetic code.

In *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading*, we learn that "classroom research shows that, on the average, children who are taught phonics get off to a better start in learning to read than children who are not taught phonics" (Anderson et al. 1985, p. 37). Chall tells us, "While some children

may discover this principle by themselves, the research evidence over the past 70 years indicates overwhelmingly that direct instruction is needed and contributes to better development of decoding, word recognition, and comprehension, and provides a better transition to later stages" (1987, p. 8). Groff (1985) has compiled an extensive body of data that makes a very strong case for direct, intensive, systematic, early teaching of phonics.

With all this sound research in place, why object to teaching phonics? Objections fall into three categories. The first is that English is so irregular that we cannot teach a usable system of predictable correspondence between sounds and symbols. While there is some truth here, it is not a whole truth. Consonant sounds are reasonably constant, and in conjunction with the basic vowel rules they give a student a fighting chance at approximating the pronunciation of an unknown word. Children who are taught to attend to context and to demand meaning from what they read can parlay this approximation into accurate decoding.

A second objection from the whole-language advocates is that focusing on phonics interferes with meaning and makes children "word callers." This judgment is based, perhaps, on the fact

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that beginning readers who have not yet developed their word recognition skills to the level of automatic response do sometimes lose the sense of a passage. There are ways to avoid this problem, however. Teachers typically show beginning readers the pleasurable, *meaningful* side of reading by including activities such as read-alongs, language experience stories, assisted reading, and shared-book experiences. Basal readers control the vocabulary in early reading selections for the same reason: providing children with familiar words they recognize quickly frees their minds to attend to the meaning of the passage. As Chall reminds us, "without the fluent recognition of words, the so-called lower level skills, the higher cognitive skills do not function in reading comprehension" (1986, p.12).

Psycholinguists also object that skilled readers don't use the kind of skills we teach in phonics programs, and they ask why we should teach something to beginners that experts don't do. Maclean (1988), on the other hand, justifies phonics as a form of "instructional representation"—a technique for getting novices to a point where they can begin to use the strategies of the experts. He considers phonics to be a catalyst, a way of getting children off to a good start on the path of learning to read.

Clearly, phonics should be one of the strategies we include in our reading programs, although it is certainly not sufficient unto itself. Observing kindergarten classes that relied heavily on phonics instruction, Durkin (1987) noted that children who did not "make it" might have done better in a more eclectic program. Fox's (1986) collection of research also points toward combining strategies, since neither a phonics nor a whole-language approach guarantees success for every child. Samuels (1988) explores and supports the possibility of blending phonics into a holistic approach.

### Other Differences

The teaching of phonics is not the only point of contention between skills-based traditionalists and whole-

language educators. Whole-language advocates also object to teaching traditional comprehension skills. They assert that reading, as a holistic act, cannot be dissected into subskills that are arranged in a hierarchy and mastered gradually. For reading to make sense, they believe, children must begin with a meaningful whole; from the beginning, they should use all the behaviors proficient readers use. Whole-language advocates think we can enable children to do this by initially offering them familiar, predictable material. The hope is that the children will eventually recognize familiar parts in unfamiliar written matter and begin to pull the process together.

This linkage of the familiar and the unfamiliar is the core of what whole-language psycholinguists call the constructive process. Because each reader brings unique background experience to a reading task, all readers cannot have identical responses to any specific passage. Meaning does not exist independently in the passage but is constructed as the reader links old experiences to the new information being presented. In this process, the teacher becomes a facilitator, someone who helps students develop strategies for constructing meaning.

These strategies are quite different from the comprehension skills that have been so much a part of traditional reading instruction. Instead of learning rote procedures, such as reading isolated paragraphs and arranging ideas from the paragraph in sequence, students are guided in monitoring their reading to ensure that it is making sense to them. Palincsar and Brown (1986) have developed a procedure they call *reciprocal teaching* in which they teach children to use four main strategies: summarizing, asking questions, clarifying, and predicting. They have found this procedure to promote both comprehension and the ability to monitor (self-correct) comprehension. Others have been experimenting with approaches such as story frames, story grammar, story maps, and formal expository text structures (Cudd and Roberts 1987, Lehr 1987, Searls 1987, Piccolo 1987). These ap-



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proaches provide students with schemas that allow them to approach a new task and organize information for better understanding.

In criticizing traditional skills, whole-language advocates assert that competent readers never use skills as they are normally presented. No one suddenly stops reading to give a main idea title to a paragraph or to identify a sentence as a cause or effect of another sentence. They tell us that worksheets masquerading as reading rob our children of time for doing the real thing, and they warn us not to expect to make our students competent readers by drilling them in isolated exercises.

When we try to apply the idea of no separate skills, however, how do we help students who are unable to fully understand what they read? What happens in reciprocal teaching, for example, when a student cannot summarize? What do we do when children do not seem able to find those details that would help them make predictions? What if the questions they generate do not lead them to a clearer understanding of the text?

Studies of effective teaching in general suggest that we could solve these problems by using direct instruction with material that is well structured and presented in small steps (Brophy

1986, Rosenshine 1986). Of course, breaking reading into small steps puts us right back into a skills-oriented program. With one difference. Modern researchers are looking for ways to teach these skills as *strategies*; that is, to teach children to reason about what they are reading instead of drilling them and hoping they will respond automatically. Most skill-strategy training programs have the teacher explain the skill, model or speak aloud the mental process used in the skill, and give explicit step-by-step training followed by lots of guided practice.

A review of the literature indicates that we can call them *skills* or we can call them *strategies*, but we shouldn't leave them out. Chall (1987), who for years has carefully monitored the research, says that the direct teaching of skills and the opportunity for children to explore on their own are both necessary:

The research does not support the claims of some that skills and know-how develop naturally from "just reading." Indeed, it shows that development is enhanced by skills, particularly among those making slower progress—children from low-income homes and those at high risk for learning disability.

Researchers at the University of Oregon who have spent over 17 years developing and evaluating direct instruction in reading comprehension have concluded that we can and should teach comprehension skills (Gersten and Carnine 1986). Students given direct instruction in skills such as drawing inferences, detecting faulty arguments, or using knowledge of story grammar showed significant improvement in reading performance. Gersten and Carnine point out, however, that for a few skills, neither explicit teaching nor modeling has a strong effect, and suggest that much more research is necessary "to know exactly which strategies to use, for which skills, and with which children" (p. 77).

### **Workshops and Basals**

Whole-language theorists are not the only ones demanding that we put reading back into reading. Among

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skill-oriented educators there is much talk about "reading beyond the basal," and many schools are teaching with novels and nonfiction trade books as well as their basal readers. Some whole-language enthusiasts don't think this is enough, however. They want to abandon the basal and turn students loose in the library instead. They would replace the traditional three-reading-group classroom format with workshops where whole-language teachers would facilitate discussion of the children's reading (Calkins 1986, Hansen 1987).

Some teachers who have tried the workshop approach have good things to say about it, but before this entire nation goes scrambling after them, we ought to collect a lot more empirical information. We need to know whether the workshop structure will enable the average teacher to deliver a complete program to everyone in the class, including at-risk children. We need to identify specific goals and standards so that we can evaluate our students and ourselves in a workshop program. Most important, we need data from long-term

comparative studies to determine if, when, and how workshops are superior to traditional classes.

And we must be especially careful about tossing out the basal reader. Basals today are not the rigid, poorly written exercises some whole-language people would have us believe. They include favorite poems, excerpts from fine children's literature, and well-written nonfiction. They are convenient anthologies, in which stories and articles are all of a specific difficulty level, and are age-appropriate for their target audiences. If basals do not teach skills as we think they should be taught, then we should alter the way they present those skills; and if occasional basal selections are inadequate, we should remember that the same is true of a collection of trade books, which are not all high-quality literature either.

### Combining Strengths

Whole language is a way of teaching that brings energy and excitement to education. If we can make it work, we may be able to throw off the yoke of an overcrowded, fragmented curriculum and create a less stressful, more productive school day. Nevertheless, whole language lacks direct instruction in specific skill strategies. If we fill this hole by teaching phonics and reading comprehension skills, we will have a powerful tool for educating our children.

Purists tell us we can't have both whole language and a skills approach because they contradict each other. We have lived with other contradictions, however, and we can probably learn to live with this one. Each theory brings strengths, and until we have definitive data we should use common sense and experience to create a combination program. □

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