

## Whole Language

# Transforming Literacy Instruction

A university-school collaboration can effect change if teachers are given supportive environments and opportunities for frequent reflection and sharing of ideas.

Three years ago, as university consultants, we agreed to a public school-university collaboration in the Denver Public Schools' Elementary Chapter 1 Program. We were committed to helping solve the literacy problems faced by urban school districts with multi-ethnic student populations.

We began our work with more than 70 Chapter 1 teachers in more than 40 elementary schools, and we found ourselves challenged. We were dealing with more than just a new method of reading and writing instruction that could replace or be added to the curriculum; we were negotiating fundamental change.

## Whole Language

We are proponents of "whole language," a model of instruction based on theory and research in reading process,<sup>1</sup> writing process,<sup>2</sup> and the development of literacy.<sup>3</sup> Whole language instruction<sup>4</sup> has been gaining a foothold in schools over the past five years. Teachers have recognized that, compared to traditional skill-based instruction, whole language instruction helps children become enthusiastic readers and writers in ways more compatible with their natural approach to language learning.

Whole language focuses on the construction of meaning. Beginning in kindergarten, children compose stories in "writing workshops" (Graves 1983 and Calkins 1986) and learn to read from their writing (Hansen 1987) and from shared reading (Holdaway 1979) of high-quality literature and stories. The teaching of skills occurs as teachers observe that children are developmentally ready and have a functional need for them in reading<sup>5</sup> and writing.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, attention to skills occurs within the context of a whole story or text.

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Interest in whole language instruction in Colorado is high because of a strong state International Reading Association council, plentiful graduate and inservice offerings, and grassroots teacher support groups called TAWL, Teachers Applying Whole Language.

## The Processes of Staff Development

To encourage teachers to transform their literacy instruction, we provided the same things that we wished them to provide students: supportive environments and opportunities for frequent reflection, sharing of ideas, and problem solving.

*Supportive environments for teaching and learning.* We established settings to support teachers' explorations in the teaching and learning of literacy. We provided many materials for instruction and choices in staff development, and we encouraged teachers to take risks in instruction.

At a minimum, teachers participated in one meeting per month to discuss recent research and theory. The teachers also received (1) professional reading materials to extend group sessions, and (2) materials for students (children's literature and magazines) to replace the basal readers, workbooks, and skills kits used previously.

Although teachers were required to participate in staff development, they chose their staff development option each year. Some teachers selected staff development that encouraged great change. Others opted for staff development that eased them into reconsidering literacy instruction. Reluctant teachers gradually began to take risks, their confidence bolstered by the successes of colleagues who had risked change earlier.

*Frequent reflection on teaching/learning.* Teachers help children become effective readers and writers by encouraging them to reflect about the content of their reading and writing, to consider how and why they read and write, and so on. Similarly, we encouraged teachers to learn from frequent reflection on their own literacy use and teaching (Katz 1985). For example, teachers participated in book discussions and reflected on their experiences in order to better guide book discussions with children. They also considered strategies; for instance, they reflected on how they themselves chose books to read, in order to determine how to guide children in choosing books.

Teachers studied videotapes of their own instruction to examine how their interactions supported children's literacy development. They also developed action research projects to study self-selected aspects of literacy instruction. They clarified problems to study in their classrooms, determined how to study them, and reflected on the meaning of the collected data.

*Sharing reading and writing instruction.* We believe that teachers' ownership of program redesign is fostered by opportunities for presenting and discussing techniques, problems, and successes with one another and with others in the teaching community.

We encouraged the sharing of ideas and issues in a number of ways:

- Our meetings with teachers were interactive, to encourage them to share their thoughts, ideas, and problems with one another and with us.

- Many teachers participated in before- and after-school sharing ses-

sions, where they exchanged curricular ideas and materials.

- Teachers presented their work to other Chapter 1 teachers. For example, some teachers presented instructional units they had created; others presented action research findings.

- A group of teachers made presentations for a principals' study group on whole language theory and practice. A classroom simulation allowed the principals to experience whole language instruction and provided a basis for discussing what principals could expect when observing a whole language lesson.

- Many Chapter 1 teachers presented ideas and articles to the school faculties with whom they work. Some presented regularly scheduled mini-lessons, five-minute presentations during faculty meetings. Others led study groups for interested faculty.

Making presentations and discussing ideas with others encourages teachers to reconsider their beliefs and to learn at a deeper level. Talking about literacy instruction with others in the educational community has been key to empowering teachers to affect the direction of the Chapter 1 program and their own growth as professionals.

*Teaching as problem solving.* We encouraged teachers to solve their instructional problems. Just as teachers wanted their students to become independent learners, we wanted teachers to become confident about their decision-making abilities. We encouraged teachers to generate solutions collaboratively within the theory and research we presented. Gradually, their self-confidence increased.

Teachers have often been insightful in observing students, identifying problems, generating potential solutions, and evaluating solutions. But some teachers continue to require support in problem solving; we attempt to provide this support through meetings and coaching. In addition, we have designed and implemented student evaluation instruments and procedures to help teachers carefully observe children's reading and writing, the first step in defining an instructional problem.

These teachers now comment frequently about their feelings of increased professionalism. They admit that their jobs are more demanding because they consciously make more decisions, yet they find satisfaction and increased confidence in solving problems. As one teacher commented, "I like the power . . . of being able to choose and invent the curriculum for my students" (Lyons 1987).

Not until teachers enjoy the power of making decisions and solving their own problems will they encourage students to do the same. And since students must continually make decisions and solve problems as they learn to read and write, release of control is as fundamental to students' growth as it is to teachers'.

### **The Challenges of Staff Development**

Based on our experiences, we believe that teachers, administrators, and university consultants can anticipate certain problems in transforming literacy instruction if significant change is to occur.

*Challenges for teachers.* Teachers are often leery of educational innovations, regarding them as fads to be tolerated until program monitoring fades (and they can get back to normal) or the inevitable next innovation is introduced. If teachers are to view educational change positively, they must overcome immediate rejection of alternative views.

Of course, skepticism among teachers is healthy; as professionals, they must make judgments as to what is in their students' best interests. Consultants ought to anticipate and encourage such skepticism (Fullan 1982). However, if educational change is to occur, both parties must collaborate with the understanding that all have the best interests of children at heart.

Second, teachers need to overcome their fear of taking risks. That will happen if (1) teachers have the backing and encouragement of administrators and (2) staff developers offer a wide variety of both small and large change options. The progress children

make will encourage teachers to continue to take risks.

It also helps if teachers view coaching as a welcome vehicle for supporting their teaching and learning (Costa and Garmston 1985, Garmston 1987, and Little 1985). Many teachers first viewed our visits as evaluative, asking what we were looking for or if they were "doing it right." Trust, and then change, occurred only when teachers recognized that we didn't have all the answers and sincerely wanted to learn with them.

*Challenges for administrators.* Administrators may encounter challenges to their concept of, and commitment to, staff development. Joyce and Showers (1980) claim that the usual vehicle of staff development—presentations by experts—results in a 5 percent implementation rate, while a combination of presentations, demonstrations, and coaching results in a 95 percent implementation rate. Our own experience has shown that staff development should be sustained and frequent, conducted by the same consultant over time, and should include demonstrations and coaching components. Such a model requires a serious commitment of financial resources and released time for teachers.

A second challenge for administrators is to develop enough knowledge of whole language instruction to support teachers who use it. Thus, vehicles for principal staff development must be in place. In Denver, principal study groups and simulation experiences conducted by Chapter 1 supervisors and teachers have helped principals develop knowledge and deal with issues such as teacher evaluation, the limitations of curriculum guides, and assessment.

Of the challenges facing administrators, the most crucial may be their interpretation and use of standardized test scores. Many administrators do not understand that tests of reading achievement have serious measurement flaws (Farr and Carey 1986) or that efforts are being made to construct standardized tests that will measure reading as an integrated process (Valencia and Pearson 1987). Further,



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little consideration is given to the fact that tests are not designed to tap all the goals of high-quality literacy programs. Children's attitudes toward and uses of reading and writing—important qualities if children are to continue to use and develop literacy throughout life—must be considered.

Finally, when administrators do commit to change and engage university consultants to begin transformations, they must train their best teachers to facilitate continued learning (Joyce and Showers 1983, Kent 1985, and Neubert and Bratton 1987). Once change begins, university consultants will not be able to assist everywhere they are needed, nor can the cost of using them be borne indefinitely. Teacher facilitators can regularly share ideas, experiences, and problems with a district staff development consultant and university content specialist (Calkins and Harwayne 1985).

*Challenges for university professors as staff developers.* Staff development has not been easy for us as university consultants, either. Day-to-day congruence between theory and practice in schools is difficult to achieve. Our belief that teachers and children negotiate instruction together has meant that we must be willing to learn from teachers and to modify our own ideas. We had to become part of the change,

we couldn't just stand by and observe without risking change ourselves.

We learned to be patient and to persevere when teacher change was very slow. We have come to understand that the change process and what causes transformations are different for each teacher (Joyce and McKibbin 1982, Loucks and Zigarmi 1981, and Wildman and Niles 1987). Like teachers constantly considering new ways to encourage children's learning, we were constantly refining and thinking of new means of staff development. We have come to understand that change comes from teachers' own initiatives, some of which we spark, some of which other persons or events ignite.

Another major challenge we encountered concerns coaching,<sup>7</sup> including peer coaching (Brandt 1987, Showers 1984 and 1985). Coaching requires openness and the courage to be vulnerable and reflective on the part of both participants. Staff developers are no exception; teachers must feel free to voice complaints and concerns, and we must listen to what is said and how it is said. When coaching worked, teachers looked forward to our visits, requested them more frequently than we could manage, and directed the observation and the conference that followed. We relished the individual contact with teachers and children and the opportunity to test out our ideas in real situations.

Probably our hardest lesson has been shifting responsibility and decision making to teachers and administrators. In initial classroom observations, we had been struck by the teacher-dependency of the Chapter 1 students. We encouraged teachers to release some control to students so they would discover that they could use reading and writing for their own learning purposes. In the same way, we had to relinquish our wish to control goals and how they were realized, so that teachers and administrators would feel ownership and learn to make effective decisions. We had to come to value the change process itself, even when it was painfully slow or the product not what we envisioned.

## Transforming the Evaluation of Literacy

Further, we have designed and implemented an evaluation model more consistent with literacy research and the instructional methods teachers use. The complexity of the evaluation design and instruments reflects the complexity of the reading and writing processes. In addition to the norm-referenced standardized test mandated as a pre- and post-measure by federal requirement, the Chapter 1 teachers administer a number of other instruments:

- A miscue analysis and retelling procedure that provides a profile of the quality of errors made during oral reading and the strategies students used as they read, as well as information regarding students' comprehension of text.

- An "Emergent Reader Evaluation" designed for students who could not independently read text and therefore could not be evaluated with miscue analysis procedures. The instrument examines knowledge of literature, book handling, and letters. It also allows teachers to observe students' retelling of text read to them, story dictation, and reading of dictated text.

- A writing sample, administered at all grade levels, that provides information regarding the quality of the students' writing, the process by which students composed, and some quantitative product measures such as number of words written and words correctly spelled.

- Student interviews that tap children's metacognitive knowledge of reading and writing as well as their attitudes toward reading and writing.

Using these instruments, the teachers collected the means for making well-grounded instructional decisions about individual children. Using miscue analysis procedures, they more clearly understood the strengths and weaknesses of each child's processing during reading and the relationship of that processing to the child's comprehension. On the basis of that information, teachers wrote individual plans for reading instruction.

## University-school collaboration should focus on creating structures that allow educators to examine and reflect on the teaching and learning of reading and writing.

Evaluation data also were useful in helping teachers view reading and writing differently. For example, the writing sample analysis required teachers to examine children's in-process writing behavior. For many teachers, this was the first time they had observed such things as children's revision strategies, children's organization of the writing task, and children's comments during writing. The teachers' efforts resulted in significant differences ( $p < .001$ ) between the pre- and post-test analyses on all process and product measures for the 1986-87 school year.

Evaluation data were also used in program planning. For example, during the 1985-86 school year, the Emergent Reader post-test revealed lower scores than desired on the book handling portion of the test. In addition, there were concerns over the fact that so many 1st graders were still emergent readers at post-test rather than being able to read text independently enough to be post-tested with miscue analysis and retelling. As a result, greater attention was given to emergent reader instruction in staff development during the 1986-87 school year. The 1986-87 data reveal the impact of this emphasis: 55 percent of the 1st graders who were post-tested

moved on to reading text independently by the end of the school year. The other 45 percent of the 1st graders, post-tested on the Emergent Reader Evaluation because they did not read text independently by the end of the year, showed statistically significant growth ( $p < .001$ ) on all elements measured by the instrument, including the book handling subtest.

Without teacher change, changes in how children viewed reading and writing were not possible. To capture changes in teachers' views toward reading, the Theoretical Orientation Toward Reading Profile (TORP) (DeFord 1985) was administered pre- and post- in 1985-86 and 1986-87. In addition, teachers were asked to evaluate the extent of their learning and the effectiveness of the inservices they participated in. One of the best indices of change was the increasing sophistication of teachers' responses to the question, "What questions do you still have about reading and writing and reading/writing instruction?"

## Tools for Discussion and Reflection

Static, pat answers can be a major problem in transforming literacy instruction. University-school collaboration should focus instead on creating structures that allow educators to examine and reflect on the teaching and learning of reading and writing. Because children and the contexts of education are ever changing, the need for educational transformation is endless. Educators need tools and institutional mechanisms for continuous discussion and reflection about literacy and schooling. With these tools, educators can construct a practical theory of literacy instruction that works with children. □

1. Eco 1979, Goodman 1967 and 1984, Rosenblatt 1978, Smith 1982.

2. Calkins 1983 and 1986, Graves 1983, Murray 1987, Shanklin 1981.

3. Clay 1982, Goodman and Goodman 1979, Harste, Burke, and Woodward 1984, and Holdaway 1979.

4. Butler and Turbill 1984, Goodman 1986, Goodman, Smith, Meredith, and

Goodman 1987, Hansen 1985, Harste 1985, Newkirk and Atwell 1988, Newman 1985.

5. Goodman and Burke 1980, Goodman, Watson, and Burke 1987, Rhodes and Dudley-Marling 1988.

6. Calkins 1986, Hansen 1985, Romano 1987, and Rosen 1987.

7. Costa and Garmston 1985, Garmston 1987, Joyce and Showers 1982, and Little 1985.

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