

Whole Language: Three Themes for the Future

As whole language gains momentum, educators need to give attention to maintaining a balance between the use of narrative and expository text, to integrating subject matter areas, and to using a variety of instructional grouping strategies.

America is witnessing a revolution in classroom teaching and learning. In the new paradigm, knowledge is internal and subjective, learning is constructing meaning, and teaching is a dynamic combination of coaching and facilitating. While many ideas underlying this new paradigm have been around for decades and even centuries (see, e.g., von Glasersfeld 1983), their current incarnation as constructivism is increasingly influencing instructional practices.

Encouraging movements in this direction are evident within several subject matter areas. However, the whole-language or literature-based¹ movement in literacy instruction is far and away the most advanced in its development and use in schools. Since whole language represents the vanguard of a broader set of influences on education, the experiences of students, teachers, and others as they encounter it can either support a transformation or constitute yet another short-lived pendulum swing in educational practice. In its vision of literacy as a thoughtful and active process, whole language offers a promising alternative for the future. Our concern is that its initial success may be so great as to create potential problems. In other words, as new practices associated with whole language gain in popularity, new participants may assume that all of them are appropriate in all situations and that all the old skills-oriented practices are suddenly inappropriate.

In a recent study, we compared literacy tasks in classes implementing whole language and skills-oriented instruction (Fisher and Hiebert, in press). We examined 180 literacy tasks in 40 days of instruction in eight grade 2 and 6 classes. While the whole-language movement is by no means monolithic, the practices we observed were congruent with the underlying philosophy. We found that students in whole-language classes spent more time on literacy tasks, especially writing tasks and, more importantly, that their literacy tasks were larger and more cognitively complex when compared to tasks in the skills-oriented classes. In addition, students in whole-language classes had more influence in determining what literacy task to work on and what the task goal would be. Although whole-language classes had clear advantages, we identified three themes that require attention: balance between narrative and expository text, integration of subject matter areas, and variety in instructional grouping strategies.

Balance Between Narrative and Expository Text

Our observations of reading and writing tasks in whole-language classrooms revealed that virtually all lessons and materials read or written by students used narrative text. We also found an emphasis on student self-selection of reading materials and topics for writing. A preponderance of self-selected narrative text is an understandable reaction to the overcon-

centration on the prescribed materials and specific skills of past years. However, if these practices become exclusive, the benefits could quickly become detriments and, in the long run, do little to alleviate American children's problems with reading and writing expository text (Applebee et al. 1988).

Therefore, we must examine the question of balance between narrative and expository text and between self-selection and prescription for particular students, for particular aspects of literacy use, and at particular times in literacy development. As children are acquiring fluency in reading, extensive use of narrative text, with its more familiar structures and themes, may be most appropriate. Similarly, self-expressive writing may be appropriate for gaining fluency in writing (Graves 1983). As children attain the desired fluency, however, the use of expository text should increase.

This does not mean that narrative materials that interest children or serve meaningful functions for them should be discontinued. Topics in content areas can often be treated thoughtfully and effectively through narrative text (Levstik 1986). The challenge for whole-language proponents is to progressively increase students' use of expository material as they acquire fluency in reading, thereby providing more diverse contexts for problem solving and critical thinking, while providing autonomy for students to experience joy and creativity in reading and writing.

Integration of Subject Matter Areas

Second, we believe that teachers need to break through subject matter boundaries in their application of whole-language principles. Our observations of classroom practices over entire school days, for example, found the dramatic differences between whole-language and skills-oriented classrooms to be restricted to reading and writing periods. Even after teachers had participated in whole-language practices for several years, mathematics, science, and social studies instruction in their classrooms remained, for the most part, unaffected. Even when the same person taught all subjects, we found relatively crisp subject matter boundaries.

This situation presents two challenges to whole language, and to educational reform generally: (1) active promotion of analogous principles in other subject areas and (2) support of interdisciplinary tasks. At the very least, school tasks can be integrated through common reading and writing processes that cross subject matter lines. Interdisciplinary themes that provide opportunities to grapple with interpretations, understand others' perspectives, and solve problems require the content of social studies, science, and mathematics, not just of literature.

At first, teachers' attempts to break through subject matter boundaries may produce somewhat artificial connections. For example, reading *Charlotte's Web* may be accompanied by units on spiders or farm states. While this kind of curricular juxtaposition may begin to build some interdisciplinary bridges, it maintains the centrality of content-based knowledge.

What schools need is an infusion of authentic tasks. That is, students need to participate in activities that occur in action-oriented social contexts and that, when completed, make a difference in their day-to-day lives (Brown et al. 1989). For example, children in a Colorado school wrote reports and letters to the city council to lobby for a pedestrian walk light on a street adjacent to the school (*Boulder Daily*

Camera 1988). Authentic tasks such as this one are possible when students are presented with a real problem that has tangible consequences for them. This particular context provided many opportunities for reading, writing, science, mathematics, and social studies tasks, where subject matter knowledge boundaries were secondary to the problem itself.

Strategies for Instructional Grouping

Grouping patterns in whole-language classrooms showed a clear break from the rigid three-group structure that earned the epitaph "once a bluebird, always a bluebird." Students in whole-language classrooms, as compared to those in skills-oriented ones, spent more time in whole-class instruction and approximately the same amount of time working as individuals. However, our observations revealed no occasions when students in whole-language classrooms met with their teachers in small groups, as did students in skills-oriented classes.

Whole-class, cooperative groups, individual activities, and conferencing of teachers with individual students are the "new" organizational formats for classroom literacy experiences (see, e.g., the recommendations in California's *English-Language Arts Framework* 1987). But teacher-led small groups, regardless of the grouping criteria or substance of the activities, are conspicuously missing in guidelines for practice and in practice itself. This situation may reflect deep dissatisfaction with the three-group plan that has

dominated reading instruction for so long. For the record, however, it is not ability grouping per se that constitutes the problem, but *long-term* ability grouping (see, e.g., Allington 1983, Hiebert 1983).

Teacher-led small groups based on criteria other than generic reading ability are in danger of being a baby thrown out with the bathwater. Just as overreliance on ability groups created problems in the past, overreliance on whole-class instruction and peer interaction can be expected to provide less than optimal learning environments for students over the long run. Thus, teachers need to give more attention to appropriate uses of teacher- and peer-led small groups within their classrooms.

A Promising Alternative

As the whole-language movement expands its influence to more schools, educators must make choices that have extraordinary importance not only for the survival of the movement but also for reform in education. To lead literacy instruction, and instruction in general, into a new era, we must give serious consideration to the three areas discussed here: balance between narrative and expository text, integration of subject matter areas, and instructional grouping strategies. If left unheeded, overreaction to past practices may lead to another pendulum swing and our strong commitment to high-quality literature and authentic tasks will suffer. No one wants that to happen. □

International Network of Whole-Language Educators

The Whole Language Umbrella (WLU) unites whole-language support groups and individual professionals interested in using the approach in schools. In addition to facilitating collaboration among members, WLU encourages study of the approach and publishes materials about whole language. For membership information, write Debbie Manning, 4848 N. Fruit, Fresno, CA 93705; or Lorraine Krause, P.O. Box 1688, Huntingdon, Quebec, Canada J0S 1H0.

WLU's first conference will be held August 2-5, 1990, in St. Louis, Missouri. For information about the conference, write Peggy George, University of Missouri-Columbia, 344 Hearnes Center, Columbia, MO 65211.

—Information provided by Dorothy Watson, President, Whole Language Umbrella, University of Missouri-Columbia, 225 Townsend Hall, Columbia, MO 65211.

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¹For purposes of the current discussion, we use the term "whole language" to characterize literacy instruction that is heavily influenced by constructivist ideas about the nature of knowledge, teaching, and learning.

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