

# Rethinking My Roots as a Teacher

To embrace a whole-language approach, teachers must give up some popular beliefs, but in the process they gain the freedom to pursue their own and their students' potential.

When I began working with a student teacher last fall, I was forced to conceptualize and verbalize for her the ideas and philosophies that are the underpinnings of my classroom functioning. What had 15 years of classroom teaching taught me? What made me a whole-language teacher?

## My Search for Answers

These questions set me in search of answers upon which my student teacher might build. When I finally pared away various strategies, approaches, tricks, and theories, I was left with a single thought: *If a whole-language class is student-centered and therefore teacher responsive, then the teacher must have few of the preconceived notions and assumptions typically found in the classroom.*

One of the strengths of a whole-language approach is the impact its

philosophy has on teacher professionalism, which in turn advances student development. In order for the approach to succeed, however, teachers

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must relinquish a number of commonly held assumptions.

**False Assumption 1: Children perform at a specific level of functioning.** On the contrary, children perform at multiple levels of functioning concurrently. For that reason, I constantly regroup my students based on interest, ability, self-selection of materials, and the topic being addressed. In other words, there are no "Bluebirds," "Redbirds," or "Buzzards" in my class. Trying to pigeon-hole students and narrowly stratify their specific levels at a given point in time severely restricts and limits the realization of their potential. Statically leveled groups by necessity force teachers to address only parts of the child and parts of the child's learning.

*Therefore, we should recognize that children develop in different areas at different rates and should program appropriately to meet the various needs of each student.*

**False Assumption 2: Children's abilities develop in predictable ways that can be addressed by a stringently sequenced curriculum.** On the contrary, children and their various abilities appear to mature in a continuous lurch-forward-scramble-backward manner in multiple areas simultaneously. Because of this inconsistent developmental rate, a prescribed curriculum cannot precisely match where the children are when the scope and sequence says they should be there. We should view education as a puzzle—the order in which the pieces are placed in the puzzle is irrelevant as long as successful completion occurs.

*Therefore, within the curriculum objectives required by state and district mandates, we should develop our own programs to match our students' needs, abilities, and strengths.*

**False Assumption 3: Educationally, basal publishers know my students better than I do.** How could they? They've never met my class. They don't know the differences among my students in terms of abilities, interests, and development. Further, my students are never the same two days in a row. Publishers cannot know the "teachable moment" I have just "seized" nor the learning mosaic my classroom paints. How could someone thousands of miles away, who wrote the material months, perhaps years ago, be sensitive to what is happening in my class today?

*Therefore, we should have confidence in our own professional judgment about the appropriate teaching of what is relevant and useful. Further, we should inundate our students with primary sources rather than diluted material. We should be responsive to the immediacy of the teaching situation and assume the position of authority and knowledge inherent in our role.*

**False Assumption 4: Assessment should take place at regular intervals and can be accomplished with tests that accompany the basals.** Because the teacher must constantly respond to the student, assessment must be ongoing, constant, for-

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native, and summative. Preconceived measures limit responsiveness to evaluating the meaningful learning that takes place within the unevenly developing student. The true measure of assessment is the ability of the student to apply information and skills in a realistic, meaningful fashion and to transfer knowledge to enhance functioning.

*Therefore, assessment must take place while the students are in action and must be based on criteria relevant to the task at hand. To validly assess learning, we should increase our focus on process and not rely largely on product measures.*

**False Assumption 5: Children need to be programmed so that learning can take place.** Wrong. Children need to be inspired to actively take hold of a learning situation and explore the opportunities that the teacher provides for investigation. The

trick is not to have a multitude of tasks for students to do but to know how to "read" students so that we can motivate them to embrace the learning situation. Then, in order to match the situation to students' abilities, we must provide appropriate experiences, materials, and opportunities.

*Therefore, we should so involve students in learning that they develop a sense of ownership in their day-to-day education. When students have an investment in what they are doing, they are motivated, involved, and dedicated. That is when learning takes place.*

**False Assumption 6: Teachers are the source of all significant learning.** Although teachers do not have all answers to all questions, we have acquired considerable knowledge, and we can help our students connect with the knowledge they want or need. We can ensure that they know how to acquire knowledge for themselves after they've left school and teach them how to share their knowledge with others. When appropriately guided, students are quite capable of teaching each other skills, concepts, and attitudes. In particular, the group/cooperative learning activities common in whole-language classrooms help students learn the valuable social skills that will enable them to learn from each other and to function together successfully in the work world.

*Therefore, teachers should not function as if we are the core of all significant learning but, rather, should give students frequent opportunities for direct intellectual involvement with ideas, concepts, and learning.*

**False Assumption 7: Teachers are to maintain order and control at all times.** Teachers must define for ourselves (and for our supervisors) the meaning of the words *control* and *discipline*. For me, they mean ensuring that students are pursuing learning in an active manner that doesn't interfere with the pursuit of learning in which others are engaged. My active students are on-task and deeply involved in the business of learning, and the goals of their activities dictate the type of tasks

## Whole Language—What a Bargain!

Cathie Espe, Cindy Carlson Worner, and Maureen Myers Hotkevich

Whole language is not a program. It cannot be prepackaged, made into a series, or sold as a kit. Thank goodness! With today's budget cuts and rising costs, few schools could afford the expense of another new program. You don't need a large (or even a small) budget because current, relevant materials are the tools of a whole-language classroom. Also, whole language applauds using common sense, keeping instruction simple, and not getting in the way of the learner. The instruction is integrated and holistic, surrounding students with language. Isn't it nice to know a bargain can still be found?

Ken Goodman and Frank Smith, leaders in the field of whole language, might groan to hear whole language referred to as a bargain. Years of research in linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, child development, curriculum, composition, literary theory, semiotics, and other fields have contributed to the development of this concept (Newman 1985). So why call it a bargain? Because classroom teachers have had their dues paid by the dedicated experts, they need only read and assimilate the knowledge.

Adopting the whole language perspective does not require money; what it does involve is "kid watching" (Goodman 1986). Knowledge of individual class members and their interests is a valuable resource. Students' outside interests can be tapped and shared with their peers. In fact, some of the best units of study come from the students themselves.

In Cindy's junior high classroom, for example, one student's interest resulted in an exciting whole-language experience:

"Early in the year I became aware of Brian's intense interest in the *Titanic*. When I heard he had constructed a model, I asked if he would share it with the class. Brian brought the model to school and immedi-

ately became 'the expert.' Through Brian's enthusiasm, other students became curious. . . . They began to generate factual and fictional accounts of the catastrophe. After reading and writing about the *Titanic*, the class enjoyed viewing the National Geographic videotape which depicted the recent discovery of the *Titanic* on the ocean floor. Throughout this unit, students were exposed to historical facts while keeping abreast of recent scientific discoveries."

Another strategy is to capitalize on current issues. For instance, Cathie's elementary class learned about the Alaskan oil spill. She brought a newspaper article to class that sequenced in logbook fashion the events of the oil spill in Prince William Sound. To prepare her students to understand the article, she had her students participate in several background-building experiences. First, they used a world map, an encyclopedia, and library books to gather and share relevant information. Next, she simulated an oil spill by coating an object with oil. By then, the class was eager to read the article:

"After the article was read and discussed, I asked the class for possible solutions for preventing this tragedy. One suggestion included lining the hull of the tanker with a thick layer of rubber. Then if the ship hit the rocks, it would bounce back rather than crash. Some students were critical of this plan but were expected to support their arguments. The exchange of ideas was a joy for me to watch."

"The next week I shared a follow-up article, 'Illinoisans Can Help in Cleanup of Oil: Alaskan' (Kenyon 1989). I asked the class if they wanted to get involved. 'Yes!' came the response. Students made posters asking for clean towels and gave speeches explaining that the towels were needed to clean the oil off the animals. The school responded, and my class sent four garbage bags full of towels to Alaska. Not only did the students and I feel good about helping the animals, but we also enjoyed the learning process."

As Cindy's and Cathie's experiences demonstrate, educators need look only to their own backyards for instructional potential. For example, local libraries, museums, and historical sites offer rich educational possibilities. Teachers can also devise thematic units from past/present historical events that have occurred or may be currently happening. In addition, community members can be invited to share their expertise.

The possibilities for launching reading and writing projects are limitless. Listen to your students. Find out what they want to know. Use their "expert" knowledge in a cooperative manner. Let them share in both the teaching and the learning process.

A small school in Illinois estimates that it would cost ten thousand dollars to initiate a new basal reading program. Factor this against the cost of a library card, community speakers, and the pool of student knowledge.

Is whole language a bargain? You bet it is!

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Cathie Espe has taught at all levels, primary through adult, and is currently teaching at Glendale Elementary School, 1000 Bloomington Rd., East Peoria Rd., East Peoria, IL 61611. Cindy Carlson Worner has taught at the primary, intermediate, and junior high grade levels. She is currently a Chapter I reading teacher and can be reached at R.R. 1, Green Valley, IL 61534. Maureen Myers Hotkevich, a free-lance editor, is a junior high language arts teacher with 14 years' experience. She can be reached at 1401 Westminster Dr., Washington, IL 61571.

in which they are involved. Students who primarily stay in their seats and quietly work on papers do not necessarily accomplish meaningful learning. As long as I am able to involve and direct the behaviors of the children positively, I am in control.

Therefore, we should measure our control of our students and their behaviors not by the activity level of the classroom but, rather, by the produc-

*tive manner in which they function while involved in academic pursuits.*

**False Assumption 8: For learning to take place efficiently, teachers must be the planners.** It is my role to ensure that my students are mastering the objectives and moving successfully toward the goals of the curriculum. However, students are capable of

varying degrees of collaborating on and assuming joint responsibility for unit planning and for the direction learning explorations take. How better to make learning relevant for students than for it to be on their own agendas?

Therefore, teachers should share our practical life skills and knowledge and prepare our students so that they de-

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**We must test the  
reality of our  
supposed limits  
because teacher  
empowerment can  
come only from,  
within, and by our  
own efforts.**

*velop the important skills needed to  
formulate and execute plans. Further,  
we should ensure that, throughout  
their lives, our students can take and  
apply this knowledge.*

**False Assumption 9: Content areas  
must be addressed discretely.**

I have found it effective and efficient to teach integrated language arts in the content areas. For addressing process learning in the lower elementary grades, integrated learning broadens the areas for relevance and interest of those skills being taught. In the upper elementary grades, integrated learning is expedient and relevant: it addresses the goal of extrapolating information in content area materials. The reading expectations for content materials differ from those involving the acquisition of how to decode and comprehend; they need to be addressed by employing the material that is used as a part of real-life demands.

*Therefore, to strengthen the transfer of skills and knowledge from one area to another, we should integrate language arts and the content areas. We should teach what children need to know, both content and process, in a manner that mirrors life—interwoven, interrelated, and compacted.*

**False Assumption 10: If whole language is so good, everybody**

**would be doing it already.** Not so. For many years we teachers have allowed ourselves to be dependent upon others for direction regarding how and what we teach. Principals and administrators are often perceived as having their own fixed agenda of how we should function. To a certain extent, this perception may be accurate. I believe, however, that teachers have a lot of "wiggle room" and that principals will support impassioned teachers who are committed to student learning and will work diligently to prove the validity of their beliefs.

*Therefore, we should take ultimate responsibility for our students' learning, teach, lead and learn from other teachers, and experiment and trust ourselves and our students. We must test the reality of our supposed limits because teacher empowerment can come only from, within, and by our own efforts.*

**Freedom to Act**

As I sat with my student teacher, I pondered these weighty ideas and their importance. Each assumption, when translated into behaviors, has far-reaching consequences for successful student learning. I hope my examination of common assumptions and recommendations for action will serve as a springboard for other professionals to scrutinize their own beliefs and behaviors. Deciding to let go of these common assumptions removes (inappropriate) restrictions; it frees us to function in a manner that ensures achieving our own and our students' potential.

*Therefore, we need to develop a strong knowledge base for classroom decision making. We should develop a cycle of educating ourselves and of assessing our needs as educators—planners, implementors, and evaluators of instruction. We should think carefully . . . and then act. □*

**Zelene Lovitt** has taught at both pre-school and primary levels and is currently a 4th grade teacher in the Carrollton/Farmers Branch Independent School District at Farmers Branch Elementary School, 13521 Tom Field, Farmers Branch, TX 75234.

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