

Implementing Whole Language: Bridging Children and Books

By encouraging innovation, teachers in a small, rural school district in New Hampshire have constructed a whole-language program for their students.

As a child, I hated to read. The task was difficult and I couldn't excel. In 4th grade any hope that I might discover books a source of pleasure was lost. We had returned from our weekly visit to the library, where I had discovered a thin pictorial book on ants. I knew my teacher would not appreciate the book, but I wanted to know more about ants. I concealed the book in my lap and peeked into its contents. The legs of the ant looked like lofty columns holding together a mighty fortress—similar, I thought, to the buildings of ancient Greece. Suddenly my teacher jerked the book from my hands and thrust it high into the air. Proudly she announced that she had "captured an inappropriate book selection—too small in size, too few pages, and too many pictures." I was demoralized. Books were not my friends.

If I were a child today in the Contoocook Valley (ConVal) School District, I would love books. This rural district's eight elementary schools, scattered throughout the shadow of Mt. Monadnock, have achieved wonders with children and books. Every classroom is filled with exciting literature and children's books of all sizes and shapes. Teachers focus on what children *can do* as writers and read-

ers. Children read any and every book that interests them. Whole-language instruction and writing processes bridge each child's curiosity and life experiences to language and books.

Children as Readers and Writers

From the first day of school, children in ConVal believe themselves to be readers and writers. They read from the books that interest them; they

write stories that excite them. On large paper, using crayons and whatever lettering ability they have, children draw and write about a favorite toy or animal or place they have been. As each child reads his or her story out loud, the teacher transcribes it onto a corner of the paper, preserving the story so it can be read again in the future. By the end of 1st grade all students have published at least one book of their own creation. At "authors' teas," students read their books to parents and peers. They always include an explanation about themselves and their reasons for selecting their topic. By the end of 6th grade, students have published as many as a dozen books. Children discover that books preserve their ideas, pictures, and conversations. They learn that authors use written words to express feelings, tell stories, and provide information.

Reading and writing at ConVal are considered integrated processes. Writing generates an enthusiasm for reading, and reading creates the impetus for writing. As children write stories, they organize their thoughts onto paper and analyze them during peer conferences. During class sharing and response time, children listen for contextual meaning in stories written by their peers.

Continuous support of both a personal and a technical nature is essential if teachers are to successfully meet the needs of each student in their classrooms.

Whole-language instruction teaches the value of the writing process during reading activities. While reading "big books" and other children's literature, teachers demonstrate how different authors convey meaning through written language and illustrations. Students talk and write about their perceptions of the author's purpose, meaning, and style of presentation. Sometimes they emulate a favorite author's style as they work to discover their own writing voices.

Children read from "real" books they select according to their own interest and reading levels. Basals and worksheets are not used in any of the district elementary schools.

Ten years ago teachers in the ConVal District began to bridge children and books, first through the writing process and then through whole-language instruction. This movement was generated at the grass roots level by teachers who found a dramatic differ-

ence in achievement when students applied the writing process. With support from the superintendent and administration, writing process and whole-language instruction became major district goals. The results include:

- high scores in reading comprehension on the California Achievement Tests;
- an increase in the quantity and quality of books read and written by students;
- a dramatic drop in the number of students identified for special education services;
- recognition by the National Council of Teachers of English as a National Center of Excellence;
- the first ConVal Literacy Conference on Whole Language, which drew 300 educators from six states.

When we reflect over the past decade, it is clear that five distinct, yet interdependent, factors have influenced the widespread integration of writing and reading processes across the district. We believe these are our keys to success.

Innovation

At ConVal, innovation is highly valued. Teachers and administrators have created an atmosphere of cooperation, collaboration, and trust, rich in risk-taking and idea sharing. Teachers are encouraged to initiate instructional improvements and curricular adaptations. As Tom Peters (1984) said, "Innovation does not spawn from planning. It sparks from an idea."

And so it happened in ConVal. The writing process began as an idea: to find a way to make written language as meaningful as spoken language. This idea sparked one teacher, Paula Fleming, to integrate the writing process into her remedial reading program for elementary students. The dramatic jump in her students' reading scores gained districtwide attention.

Other teachers initiated instructional innovations connecting writing and reading. Amidst a growing belief that curriculum should be fully integrated and relevant to each child, early risk-takers discarded their basal readers. They developed theme-based, integrated units using trade books and

children's literature, creating lessons relevant to the lives of the children in their classes. They gave children time to read and write and the right to choose their books and topics.

Administrators supported these early risk-takers by budgeting for trade books and instructional materials. They provided time for teachers to

In ConVal, both the writing process and whole language are defined into usable frameworks that can be referred to during the stages involved in implementation, assessment, and teacher inservice.

New and Noteworthy

Marilyn Jager Adams' forthcoming book, *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print*, (scheduled to be released in March by MIT Press in Cambridge, Massachusetts), draws information from the fields of cognitive psychology, developmental psychology, educational psychology, education, linguistics, computer science, and anthropology.

The Center for the Study of Reading (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) has prepared a summary of Adams' long and scholarly book, selecting from this extensive body of research information particularly useful to teachers, school administrators, and parents. The summary is available for \$5.00; make your check payable to University of Illinois—Summary. For further information, contact:

University of Illinois
Summary
P.O. Box 2276, Station A
Champaign, IL 61825-2276
(217) 244-4083

work together, to share their ideas with other teachers, to attend workshops, and to visit other schools that practice writing process and a whole-language philosophy.

A Common Mission

As writing process and whole language gained wider interest across the district, a common mission emerged: the belief that all students can love to read and write. Love of language is fostered through teacher modeling, by focusing on what students can do as readers and writers, by building skills through relevant and meaningful child-centered experiences, and by connecting skills, concepts, and content through integrated, theme-based learning activities.

In support of this mission, three years ago the district made a commitment to maximize class size at 20 students and to minimize pull-out programs. By lowering class sizes and by keeping children in the classrooms, teachers can focus on creating an atmosphere of excitement about reading and writing that meets the needs of all students, including the handicapped and the academically gifted.

Teacher Support

Teacher support is essential to the success of a writing process and whole-language curriculum. Efforts to implement whole language and writing process will fail if teachers do not have consultants readily available to assist them. Teachers simply cannot be expected to implement, on their own after a few workshops, complex instructional processes embedded in an unfamiliar philosophy.

ConVal uses a teacher-consultant model to provide support and inservice training to teachers across the district. The model was piloted seven years ago in one of the elementary schools. For three years Paula Flemming served as full-time writing coordinator to train teachers in the writing process. Once again, her success gained districtwide attention.

The teacher-consultant model created by Flemming has since been implemented across the district. By reallocating staff and redefining job

Teachers must read and write when children read and write; they must share when children share; they must openly experience the process along with their students.

descriptions, ConVal administrators created four language arts teacher consultants who are full-time teacher trainers in writing process and whole-language instruction. They receive the same contract, salary, and benefits as other ConVal teachers.

Just as teachers identify the strengths of individual children in order to create successful reading and writing experiences, the consultants work with the strengths of individual teachers to create successful teaching experiences. Their services to teachers include individual confidential consultation, demonstration and team teaching, group presentations (including faculty meetings), mini-workshops, courses, and grade-level sharing sessions. They conduct response groups where teachers share their own writ-

ing, employing the same techniques used with students. The consultants help teachers diagnose and assess student achievement in order to design instructional strategies to meet the needs of each child.

The consultants have credibility with teachers because of their own successes as classroom teachers, their willingness to take risks, and their ability to listen and respond in a confidential manner to the needs of all teachers. As teachers interact with the consultants, trust builds between them, trust that is the foundation for growth and change.

This spring, two consultants spent three weeks in New Zealand observing and studying whole-language instruction. As a result of this exchange, an "early intervention" paralleling New Zealand's Reading Recovery program was implemented to remedy reading difficulties of first-year 1st grade students (ConVal has no public kindergarten program). In this program, two Chapter I teachers use writing process and whole-language techniques during daily individualized tutoring sessions to help students focus on their reading strengths, not on their deficiencies.

Another new project involves 13 high school teachers who developed a school-within-a-school called the "Pyramid Program." The writing process is the main vehicle for integrating core content areas (English, social studies, math, and science) for a heterogeneous group of 140 students in grades 9 to 12.

Fig. 1. The Writing Process

Rehearsal:	sensory experience, thought, reading, writing that is previous to the piece of writing
Drafting:	putting ideas into writing in a tentative form
Revision:	re-seeing the piece and making changes to it
Editing:	fixing the writing mechanics, spelling, grammar, handwriting
Publishing:	presenting the writing to others in its final form
Response:	receiving feedback from others about the piece of writing

Fig. 2. Ten Elements of A Whole Language Program

Reading to children—the teacher reads quality literature to children to encourage them to read.

Shared book experience—a cooperative language activity based on the bedtime story tradition; the teacher reads and rereads appealing rhymes, songs, poems, and stories.

Sustained silent reading—everyone, including the teacher, reads for an extended period of time.

Guided reading—the teacher assigns books to groups of 8 to 10 children to read independently followed by reading conferences; books are selected to keep the children on the cutting edge of their reading ability.

Individualized reading—an organized alternative to guided reading; grows out of guided reading; careful monitoring of individual progress is done by both child and teacher.

Language experience—oral language is recorded by a scribe or audio cassette and made available to children in written format; firsthand or vicarious experience is translated into written language.

Children's writing—ConVal uses the writing process described in Fig. 1 (similar to that described by Butler).

Modeled writing—the teacher models writing process and behavior; children see and hear an "expert" writer in action.

Opportunities for sharing—a finished piece is presented to an audience; ConVal uses author's teas and published books as two methods.

Content area reading and writing—students see demonstrations of each type of text (by subject content) and learn about varying reading speed and looking for context clues.

—adapted for use in the ConVal District from Andrea Butler, 1987

Initially the consultants were assigned to specific schools with a predetermined schedule that evenly distributed their time across all 11 schools in the district. This approach was not very effective because the consultant schedules took precedence over the needs of the teachers.

To remedy this situation, the consultants developed a new strategy, which they refer to as "intensified service." Essentially, this means that they flex their schedules to meet the needs and services requested by teachers and administrators. For example, Antrim Elementary's principal and faculty of 10 teachers decided to focus on guided reading as an alternative to traditional reading groups. The principal, the teachers, and a consultant brainstormed different ways to proceed. As a result, three consultants devoted the majority of their time over a six-week period to meet with individual teachers, model specific techniques, and conduct inservice training during faculty meetings.

The consultants make an effort to demonstrate their sensitivity and responsiveness to the needs of teachers through personal gestures. They pick up books at the bookstore and deliver them to teachers, write notes of encouragement, extend personal invitations to at-

tend workshops, and highlight teachers' successes in newsletters. Continuous support of both a personal and a technical nature is essential if teachers are to successfully meet the needs of each student in their classrooms. And student success is the greatest motivator of teacher growth.

Structure Within the Philosophy

In ConVal, both the writing process and whole language are defined as usable frameworks that can be referred to during the stages involved in implementation, assessment, and teacher inservice. This provides a concrete structure and a common language within a philosophy that can appear nebulous without close investigation.

The writing process is defined by these six phases: rehearsal, drafting, revision, editing, publishing, and response. They are described in Figure 1.

As children apply the writing process, the phases are explained and modeled. Publication of books written by students is managed by parent volunteers, who operate publishing houses in each elementary and middle school. Parents type children's stories into book form, laminate the covers, and bind and distribute them to children, classrooms, and school and town libraries.

Teachers draw on *The Elements of Whole Language* (Butler 1987) for a meaningful structure to whole-

The following resources were especially helpful to the teachers of the ConVal School District:

Cochrane, O., et al. (1984). *Reading, Writing, and Caring*. New York: Richard C. Owen Publishers, Inc.

Goodman, K. (1986). *What's Whole in Whole Language?* Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc.

Graves, D. (1978). *Balance the Basics: Let Them Write*. New York: Ford Foundation.

Holdaway, D. (1980). *Independence in Reading*. Exeter, N.H.: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc., 1980.

Newman, J. (1985). *Whole Language: Theory in Use*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann Educational Books.

New Zealand Department of Education. (1986). *Reading in Junior Classes*. New York: Richard C. Owen Publishers, Inc.

Fig. 3. The Ten Elements of Whole Language:
Guidelines for Time Allocations

Elements:	Grades 1-2	Grades 3-6	Grades 7-8
Reading to Children	Daily 10-20 min.	Daily 15-30 min.	Daily 15-30 min.
Shared Book Experience	3-5/Week 10-30 min.	only occasionally	
Sustained Silent Reading	Daily 10-20 min.	Daily 15-30 min.	Daily 15-30 min.
Cultured Reading or Individualized Reading	Daily 20-45 min.	Daily 20-45 min.	Daily 30-45 min.
Language Experience	3-5/Week 10-20 min.	only occasionally	
Writing Process	Daily 15-30 min.	Daily 30-40 min.	Daily 30-40 min.
Mini-lessons (Modeled Writing)	Daily 5-10 min.	3-5/Week 5-10 min.	3-5/Week 5-10 min.
Opportunities for Sharing	Daily 10-20 min.	Daily 10-20 min.	Daily 10-20 min.
Content Area Reading and Writing	Daily	Daily	Daily
	specified for the specific content		

—constructed by ConVal Language Arts Teacher Consultants, 1988

language instruction. Based on Brian Cambourne's (1987) theories on the conditions of language development, each of 10 elements identifies specific instructional strategies. A brief overview is shown in Figure 2.

To help teachers effectively implement the 10 elements of whole language and the writing process, the consultants have developed a teacher handbook that provides definitions, methods for managing a whole-language classroom, time allocation guidelines (see fig. 3), book lists, suggestions for assessment and evaluation, and methods of communicating student achievement to parents. The handbook is intended for use during inservice programs as a reference and resource guide.

Discussions and debates have occurred among the ConVal teachers and administrators regarding the what's and when's of phonics, grammar, and spelling. Although they do not underestimate the importance of these language tools, they agree that they should be integrated within a meaningful context.

Writing and reading are defined into separate instructional processes, but they are considered interrelated and inseparable. Student achievement is strongly affected when reading and writing are taught as integral and con-

nected processes (Flemming 1988). Writing, which creates a personal relationship between the child and the printed word, builds reading skills, and generates enthusiasm for reading and books, cannot be taught well in exclusion of reading.

Perhaps the most important, and yet most difficult, aspect of the writing process and whole-language program is teacher modeling. Teachers must read and write when children read and write; they must share when children share; they must openly experience the process along with their students. Through modeling, teachers not only encourage children to imitate their actions, but they also help their students feel that they are sharing in an interesting process rather than having it imposed on them.

Voluntary Involvement

Teachers are more willing to become involved with new instructional techniques when they feel they have a choice. ConVal teachers have always had this choice, and their participation in district inservice programs on the writing process and whole language has increased dramatically over the past five years. This year the consultants and other ConVal teachers have scheduled 22 different courses and workshops to enhance instruction in

the reading and writing processes. Although teachers do not receive extra pay for their involvement in these programs, which are conducted after school, they can apply inservice hours toward their certification and movement on the salary schedule.

Bridging Children to Books

Bridging children to books is critical if children are to become literate citizens in the complex world that lies ahead of them. Using whole language and the writing process connects a child's life experiences to the learning activities of the classroom. Teachers are empowered to make curricular decisions in order to address the needs of their children: the curriculum conforms to the child, not the child to the curriculum.

When teachers are empowered, students are empowered. The result in ConVal is a powerful bridge of love for books—one that connects a child's curiosity and life experiences to the world of books and language through the writing process and whole language.

In ConVal, there are no books that are "too small," with "too few pages and too many pictures," like my selection made in 4th grade. But there are many children in our district who have discovered books and who excel at reading and writing. □

References

- Butler, A. (1987). *The Elements of Whole Language*. Crystal Lake, Ill.: Rigby.
- Cambourne, B. (1987). *Language, Learning and Literacy*. Crystal Lake, Ill.: Rigby.
- Flemming, P. (1988). "The Write Way to Read," in *Understanding Writing*, edited by T. Newkirk and N. Atwell. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Peters, T. (1984). "The First Steps to Excellence." Recorded speech from Listen and Learn, Old Greenwich, Conn.

Patricia A. Robbins is Director of Curriculum and Instruction, ConVal School District, Route 202 North, Peterborough, NH 03458.

Copyright © 1990 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.