

TAWL Teachers Reach for Self-Help

In popular support groups patterned after Alcoholics Anonymous, Teachers Applying Whole Language (TAWLS) share useful tips and provide mutual help.

RICHARD T. SALZER

Q: *What does a whole language user do when tempted to pick up a basal reader?*

A: Phone a support group member to rush over and snatch the offensive volume from his hands.

That joke by a teachers' lounge humorist does have a certain validity. Most support groups today are patterned after Alcoholics Anonymous, the foremost example of what can be done when those with the same deep concern come to the aid of one another. While many groups form because of medical or social problems, others exist for those going through a

major transition in their lives, a definition that would include teachers desiring to make substantial changes in their professional practice.

Whole Language Groups

Whole Language support groups operate under such acronyms as SMILE, CLIC, or TLC but are most commonly known as TAWLs: Teachers Applying Whole Language (Watson 1991). The Whole Language Movement is arguably the most widespread and fastest-growing grassroots curriculum trend in American education (Goodman et al. 1991).



The Wright Group, Belmont, Washington

Programs consist of guest speakers, teachers with something to say about their own classroom practices.

Recently, the Whole Language Umbrella, a consortium of these groups, estimated that there are more than 200 in the United States and Canada, with a combined membership of more than 20,000 teachers and others interested in promoting learner-centered programs, especially in reading and the language arts.

While a few TAWL groups are affiliated with school systems, the majority are supported entirely by teachers from different school districts, who have come together voluntarily to advance the cause of their own professional development. These member-controlled groups began to appear in the late 1970s but have increased most rapidly since the mid-80s. The first groups were launched when a few teachers, supervisors, and college people got together to explore concerns about what they saw as unfortunate trends in education (dominance of basal readers, writing limited to completing worksheets, teaching of skills in isolation). One of their principal targets was the atomization of instructional programs into dozens, even hundreds, of small parts.

As they explored alternatives to existing kinds of teaching, group members focused on such issues as devoting greater attention to authentic writing experiences and using more children's literature in reading. Most of the interest came from elementary classroom teachers, but reading staff, special educators, and secondary people were also involved, as were administrators, professors, and parents. Because TAWLs serve an important need, they've grown dramatically in number and influence over the years. Now an international network, they sponsor conferences, hold meetings, publish newsletters, distribute materials, and in

many other ways provide support to individuals and clusters of like-minded people (Salzer 1990).

TAWLs as Support Groups

Kenneth Maton and his associates (Levine 1988a) list characteristics that identify organizations based on mutual assistance. Levine and Perkins (Levine 1988b) concentrate on the services that self-help groups provide. These characteristics and services readily apply to whole language groups.

First, members of support groups share a significant common concern. TAWL members are trying to promote a conception of teaching grounded in an emphasis on meaningfulness and the wholeness of the learning experience.

Second, TAWL members have joined a community of like-minded individuals, with each becoming, in Sarason's words, "part of a readily available mutually supportive network of relationships" (Levine 1988b). Here they find people they can identify with, those with similar hopes and questions. They also find people who have already taken steps that they, as teachers new to whole language, might want to try. A few of those they meet are role models to be admired and emulated but also to be approached for assistance. The mutual assistance circle is completed when the one extending help gains deeper understanding of shared concerns and an enhanced self-concept from providing encouragement to someone else.

Another similarity of TAWLs to self-help groups is that the members control the group. They establish the program and make all other important decisions. Further, attendance is voluntary, and the meetings are publicized and open, with perhaps a small charge to defray expenses. No one makes a profit (except booksellers when they are invited).

While there are stars and gurus in the whole language movement (several of whom are classroom teachers), these national figures are not often found at

local TAWL meetings. Programs usually consist of guest speakers and panelists, who are teachers with something to say about their own classroom practices. A psychological sense of community and a network of social relationships are two additional services self-help groups and whole language groups both provide.

Sharing sessions are, of course, the heart of the mutual assistance strategy. This is a time when almost anything is discussed: from helpful hints about new children's books to the baring of souls and "confessions" of faltering attempts.

Many people come to TAWL meetings to hear from others who've encountered situations similar to their own. Members try to provide what is requested, including suggestions about classroom organization, teaching materials, and specific procedures. These daily coping strategies are of fundamental importance to those seeking assistance.

Written material is significant, too; much of the practical information as well as theoretical base come from a rapidly increasing collection of books and articles. Certain of these resources constitute what Levine calls "the sacred writings" of a group, the ideology statements on which discussion and procedures are based. These materials help members buttress their own will and respond to critics or those unfamiliar with the movement. A support group seeks to inform its own membership and outsiders as well. Members of TAWLs frequently read and quote Don Graves, Nancie Atwell, Ken and Yetta Goodman, and other whole language authors.

Self-Help and Empowerment

Support groups of all kinds, Suler (1984) points out, proliferate because existing organizations do not meet important needs. Certainly, most teachers do not suffer from lack of conventional professional development opportunities. The rapid development of TAWL groups has been possible,

then, because teachers could not find what they wanted within the existing system.

The advent of whole language support groups is significant in the history of professional development. For the first time, a large-scale bottom-up process has occurred both in program innovation and identification of a leadership group to support the program. What's more, in most cases teachers did not wait for approval from "superiors" but moved ahead on their own to become implementers, facilitators, authors, and researchers. Equally important, thousands of other teachers have begun to empower these teacher-leaders by acknowledging them as professionals worthy of respect and support. □

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Richard T. Salzer is Associate Professor, University at Buffalo, State University of New York, Department of Learning and Instruction, 593 Baldy Hall, Buffalo, NY 14260. He was one of the founding members of CLIC, the Buffalo-area whole language support group.

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