

Restoring Power to Teachers: The Impact of “Whole Language”

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There has been an increasing interest in whole language over the past few years. Many school districts are actively promoting whole language in local curricula, teacher support groups have developed in other areas, and publishers have begun to develop whole language teaching material. Unfortunately, much of what is called whole language is simply a generic offering of some specific teaching/learning strategies which are delivered according to a “whole language formula.” Such an approach denies the best of whole language. Whole language in its essence goes beyond the simple delineation of a series of teaching strategies to describe a shift in the way in which teachers think about and practice their art. In essence the term “whole language” outlines the beginning stage of a paradigm shift. As a movement whole language encompasses prior research information then goes beyond to extend thinking about language and learning into new realms. Whole language as it develops in schools, with teachers and children, can be most aptly described through an actual story about teachers, children, learning, and dreams.

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Once upon a time. . .

In one school not so very long ago one teacher decided that the only way to survive with a grade one class of twenty boys and six girls, seven of whom were born in December, was to abandon the basal reader lessons and begin planning with the children's interests in mind. There was begging, borrowing, and pleading to get sand and water tables. There were raids on the library for children's books; the reader workbooks were packed safely in boxes; there was work, laughter, tears.

The teacher next door came by and said, "I've just run off these dittos. Perhaps they'll help you organize your phonics program." The first teacher smiled sweetly, accepted the offering, filed the dittos, and went on reading.

The principal came with visitors from central office. "Please close your door. It's much too disturbing for our visitors." The teacher smiled sweetly, closed the door, and went on writing.

A parent came by asking, "Why isn't Johnny in the same reader as Mary from Mrs. Smith's class?" The teacher talked quietly to mom for some time. Mom looked at the books the children were reading; mom listened to Johnny read on tape. The parent left. The teacher smiled sweetly, nodded, and the children went on dancing.

One day children began to leave the room. Quietly they headed towards the teacher next door, the principal's office, the custodian, and Mr. Hopeful, the area superintendent who just happened to be visiting. Quietly, insistently, the children read the stories that they had written. Day after day children left the room to demonstrate for the school that they were, indeed, readers and writers.

The principal called the teacher to his office. The conversation was long. Doubts were expressed. The teacher showed writing folders. The principal was uncertain. The teacher played tapes of children reading. The principal wavered. The teacher led the principal back to the classroom where a little girl came rushing up saying, "My God, would you look at what I have just written! It's humongous!"

The principal said, "I am beginning to learn and there is so much more to know. Let me share what I am learning with my colleagues. Help me to understand."

The teacher smiled and invited him to join the local support group.

In another school not so very long ago a teacher, much like the first teacher, was experimenting. Basal readers provided security but something was missing. The teacher began to try corporate reading with big books. The teacher began to experiment with children's literature. One day the

teacher even let the children write-and they did. The teacher was excited! The teacher called the principal who called the superintendent, Mr. Basic. After all, these children had been identified as the potential special education candidates. They were the late birthday boys. They weren't expected to do so well this year. The superintendent arrived. The teacher engaged the whole class in reading *The New Baby Calf*. The children were enthralled. They wanted to reread the story. They wanted to write. They wanted to talk. They wanted to sculpt. They were interested, alive, reaching out.

The superintendent called the teacher aside. "You have had these children involved in a single task for forty-five minutes. That is beyond their attention capacity! It would be better if you ran your regular reading program, especially since I noticed that some children didn't really know all the words. They just said what their friends said."

The teacher tried to explain.

The superintendent said, "Now, now, my dear. This new approach is too much work for someone like you. You do have a young family and I know that you work hard at home too. You can run an effective program the old way and the children still learn."

The teacher sighed, closed the classroom door, and began to plan two lessons for the next day. One for the superintendent and one for the children.

Whole Language: An Attitude, not Methods

The actual situations just described reflect what can and does happen to teachers as they begin to move towards using whole language in their classrooms. It could be suggested that the teachers mentioned in this story were whole language because in their classrooms children read and write daily. There are opportunities for children to interact. Talk is important. Children's literature is present. Both teachers belong to a support group. The teachers and the children keep journals. There are library and creative corners. These are the surface features that make a whole language program. There are many classrooms which incorporate all of the above features and then some, but which are far from being whole language in its best sense.

What is whole language? There is no formula for whole language. There is no published material, whether it be newsletter or reading text, that can literally be whole language. Certainly such material can be supportive of whole language but then an article by Jerry Harste or Ken Goodman, a local newspaper, or a neat story written by a child is supportive of whole language. Some material conscientiously attempts to delineate techniques which are by their very nature whole language. These techniques are obviously

beneficial for all teachers because our teaching can always improve, but the whole language teacher is much more than a technician. The true whole language teacher demonstrates that the answers to the theory-to-practice question do not reside in a text but within the self. In classrooms which are truly whole language one can almost hear an echo of Frank Smith (1981): “. . . The decision to be made is whether responsibility for teaching children to write and read should rest with people or programs, with teachers or technology. This is not a matter of selecting among alternative methods of teaching children the same things. . . The issue concerns who is to be in control of classrooms, the people in the classrooms (teachers and children) or the people elsewhere who develop programs. Different answers will have different consequences.” Whole language teachers have made a conscious choice to opt for people. The answer to the question “What is whole language” is that it is an attitude of mind which provides a shape for the classroom.

Who is the whole language teacher? In whole language classrooms there is a sense of caring for children and childhood. Teachers engage with children carefully, cooperatively so as to help the children enter the literacy community. Just as the children’s parents assumed that each squalling, mewling infant would become independent and rejoiced at each approximation towards independence, so the whole language teacher assumes that each child will become literate and celebrates each approximation. Materials are used to fit the needs of children rather than the children being put through the material to accomplish someone’s identified objective.

True, there is a certain insecurity in this. I receive numerous calls from teachers saying “Sharon, it’s February and Theodore’s still only memory reading,” or “Sharon, it’s February and Maria keeps reading the same books over and over. What should I do? Last year these children would have been in *Toy Box*.”

“Would they be reading any better?”

“No, and I would hate listening to them and they wouldn’t like to read.”

“What can Theodore and Maria do?”

“Well they are writing stories. The spelling is coming in their writing. Theodore wrote a whole page yesterday. He had all initial and final consonants but no vowels. I guess you could say he is taking risks with writing now. Theodore can read all of the signs around the school and Maria reads to a buddy in Junior Kindergarten but they don’t know many words in isolation.”

My final question, “What have you learned from Theodore and Maria?”, usually leaves the teacher reflecting on her program both present and past and resolving to move ahead in her present manner.

Because whole language teachers choose people over programs, they reflect a belief in the learner that must be central to any real education. Basic to whole language is the idea that children are intrinsically motivated to learn, to make sense of the world. Whole language teachers know that using language helps children make sense of the world and of language. In their classrooms they arrange the environment so that children have opportunities for interaction. The priorities have been firmly established as being supportive of language and children. There are no questions about "Where do I find the time to read to the children?" "How do I accommodate children's writing?" The simple truth is we make time for those things we perceive to be important.

No two whole language teachers are likely to have identical programs although there will be a common thread running through every program. The classrooms will be comprehension-centered and child-centered, but the methodologies will be as varied as the teachers and the children.

The teachers may well be eclectic in their approach to teaching but that eclecticism is informed by their knowledge of the child and the situation. For example, one teacher in an open area school in responding to children's demands to do workbook pages like the other grade two recognized that this group of children had particular needs. Instead of throwing up hands in despair, the teacher cheerfully cut up two workbooks and put the pages out for the children to use. The children who had made the request picked up the pages, looked at the worksheets, and responded disdainfully, "This isn't really reading!" and went back to their reading corner. The teacher had recognized a need expressed by these children, provided them with the experience they wanted, and allowed the children to make a choice.

Now, it should not be interpreted that the whole language teacher abdicates the teaching role or leaves the children to make all of the decisions or find their own way. Instead, whole language teachers put the child at the center of schooling and learn with the children. In so doing they discover much about the way learning goes. They provide children with the power to shape their own learning, to shape their own reality. This means that the whole language teacher may decide upon a broad topic or theme with which to work in a class but then will provide many opportunities for negotiation within that so that individual needs can be met. The teacher may establish a framework because the teacher has a greater experience with life. There are, however, plenty of opportunities for the children to share in decision making and incorporate their personal experiences into the curriculum. Because of the way learning goes for children, no one program or set of materials will satisfy the whole language teacher. There is always more to share, more to discover, and more views of reality than that of the teacher.

Whole Language, Insecurity, and Learning

Not only does the whole language teacher trust the child's desire to learn, the whole language teacher is a learner who remains open to new experiences, new learnings. This teacher has engaged in a clarification of beliefs. She understands and acknowledges the assumptions which are subsequent to those beliefs. Previous assumptions about the way learning goes have been questioned and the belief system underlying these old assumptions examined. (As the Wiz said to Dorothy when she tried to find her way back to Kansas, "It ain't enough to know where you're goin'; you gotta know where you're comin' from.") The whole language teacher knows where she is coming from. The process of discarding the old beliefs was a painful one for many whole language teachers. For a time many of them clung to the whole language teaching strategies they were learning and applied them without much thought. Sometimes when all didn't seem to be going well they had doubts and questions but like children pretending their way into literacy, they were pretending their way into whole language teaching. One day the surface structure of whole language was in place. The teacher began to analyze the nature of this peculiar phenomenon of whole language in the classroom. The teacher read, asked questions, learned, and began to construct a personal reality of whole language. Inspired by some of the language process research, the teacher looked to the children for demonstrations. The teacher found that sometimes what had been read and heard reflected the reality of the classroom, but at other times reality was different. The teacher asked questions and always wondered, "Is all this as it seems? Is this really how learning goes?" Yet the essentials remained and the teacher was always struck by the power of children to construct meaning. The teacher had changed. Like the children the teacher had become a learner. Now when attending workshops or lectures, the teacher listened, questioned, and shaped personal meaning. The teacher no longer came back from a conference saying "my life has been changed-I now have the formula to make everyone literate." Instead the teacher took that which was useful, which fit a developing belief system and personal knowledge of children and learning. Confidence grew along with willingness to share knowledge with others. The teacher presented workshops, shared children's work, but always suggested that everything was in process, that today's conclusions were tentative and that there were many more questions to ask. Sometimes the teacher would laughingly suggest that the light that sometimes seemed to flicker at the end of the tunnel was a train coming to challenge assumptions once more. Then the teacher paused, reflected, and discarded the tunnel image as inappropriate for learning. Learning was multidimensional, a kaleidoscope rather than a tunnel, a view from the mountain tops, not the valley.

Whole Language: A Political Activity

Whole language teaching, in its best sense, can be seen as a political activity since a true whole language notion returns power where it belongs—to the children and teacher in the classroom. Whole language is radical in that it assumes that everyone is a learner and everyone can become an expert. Because the curriculum is shaped by teachers and children together, sometimes central offices become uneasy, concerned that there is not sufficient attention paid to accountability. At other times, central offices mandate whole language, even to the extent of developing whole language curricula. It takes time to come to understand that whole language cannot be mandated. It is an idea, a concept that must be gently nurtured, facilitated. A booklet of whole language techniques can come from a central office, but the booklet remains cold, a slab of black on white until the reality of live people takes the concept, shapes it and develops ownership. The teachers must take the techniques and using these, determine the ambiance of classrooms, the degree of collaborative negotiation that must ensue, the nature of group work, and the freedom to learn without fear of error. Whole language in its best sense is frightening because it implies a restructuring of traditional schools and an opening of the curriculum with parent education as a part of the total school package.

There is a second sense too in which whole language is political and that is the sense in which whole language teachers are not content to be quiet about those beliefs which are imperative. Whole language teachers become passionate advocates for children, for learning, and for the concept of teachers as colearners. They cannot afford to be otherwise. Whole language teachers believe that they must speak for those things which they know to be true about children, learning, and language. They know that each child is unique, full of language, and eager to learn. They recognize that all too frequently schools abuse children by taking from them their natural instinct to question, to make sense of their environment. This abuse is a subtle one, but in its own way just as damaging as physical or sexual abuse because it takes away the child's potential. Children need foundations, the basics, the roots. But they need wings more because wings encourage the children to soar, to think, and to test what they might become. Whole language teachers try to sustain the child's intrinsic motivation. They recognize and try to fulfill the ideal that the primary purpose of teaching is to help children claim kinship with humanity.

In achieving that goal whole language teachers are deliberately, quietly assertive, sometimes verifying beliefs through simple demonstrations of children's ability. At other times whole language teachers refuse to be subjected to the complaints of teachers next door and the cries of "What do your children really know?"

When confronted by those who suggest that school as it used to be did not do them any harm, that they hold jobs and are productive members of the community, whole language teachers do not react defensively. They simply ask, but what *might* you have become if you had been given the power to ask questions, to shape your own learning? Whole language teachers want to open doors to children so that the children can dream better dreams than we have ever known. Whole language teachers want to give children the power to become literate, the power to learn, the power to dream.

Whole language teachers know their children. They are well versed in child development, understand learning theory, and keep up to date with research. Yet, they do not accept everything that they encounter in print without question. They risk challenging the theorists, the experts, because in their own classrooms they are in the business of theory making. They shape reality together with their children and filter their developing knowledge through the screen of prior knowledge discovered by others. The whole language teacher is above all a responsible, caring human being who knows about theory, children, people, and, above all, life.

Whole language teachers believe in political action if political action means returning power to children. Not the power to dominate, to destroy an environment, but the power to learn. In giving that power teachers ensure that children have ownership of the program, of the learning. They create a classroom ambiance in which children can make choices, make mistakes, and learn the consequences of those mistakes. The environment created by whole language is one characterized by trust, security, and interaction. There is a community of colearners in each classroom who help each other move towards claiming a full human identity.

Whole Language: Freedom and Co.

The above beliefs should not be taken to mean that the whole language teacher believes in total freedom. The responsibility of the teacher extends to establishing a broad framework of curriculum planning which allows for negotiation. The framework is necessary because children cannot make intelligent choices without knowing the full range of choice available. The whole language teacher establishes a delicate balance between freedom and control. Children learn the delicate art of accepting responsibility for their own actions, of shaping their own lives and of caring for others.

The whole language teacher then is somewhat like nine-year-old Maria who, when asked of her response to creative dance, said, "In dance, you put joy together, take someone's hand and move to the beat."

In whole language classrooms teachers engage in a similar dance. They start with the belief that learning is joyous and that they too are learners. They provide daily demonstrations of themselves as members of humanity, of the literate environment. They stretch out their hands to the children, inviting them to join in the dance. At times they slow their steps to accommodate their young partners, at other times they must dance faster to follow where the children lead. The joy is in the dance. The reward is in claiming the potential of humanity.

Reference

Smith, Frank. "Demonstrations, Engagement and Sensitivity: The Choice Between People and Programs." *Language Arts* 58 (1981): 634–642.

Come to the edge, he said.
They said: We are afraid.
Come to the edge, he said.
They came.
He pushed them . . . and they flew.

– Guillaume Apollinaire
