Whole language: Why bother?

A leader in the whole language movement discusses the role and the importance of teachers in whole language literacy instruction.

Eight years ago at the International Reading Association convention in Philadelphia a friend and I overheard a man ask his luncheon companion, "Just what is this whole language movement, anyway?" He may not have captured his partner’s attention, but he immediately got ours. Before we could hear his answer, the waitress arrived and put an end to our eavesdropping but not an end to our speculation on why the question was asked.

My friend and I turned to the conference program for sessions this questioner might have perceived as indicators of "this whole language movement." We found something that neither of us recalled seeing before: sessions that actually used the term "whole language" in their titles. There were two: "It's Never Too Late: Applying Whole Language Learning Techniques to Secondary Remedial Reading Programs," and the preconference institute "A Close Look at What Works: Exemplary Programs in Whole Language Learning." There were other session titles that used terms often associated with whole language—process, ownership, comprehending and comprehension, psycholinguistics, miscue analysis, literature-based, even teacher empowerment; and I had a feeling that if we had attended "No Basals and No Worksheets: A Literature Based Reading and Writing Program," we would have heard about a whole language literacy program. But do two sessions constitute a movement?

We speculated on whether or not the questioner had been introduced to the works of Don Holdaway, Don Graves, and Frank Smith, or been captivated by Ken Goodman’s
then (1986) brand-new book What's Whole in Whole Language. Perhaps he had seen over 150 teachers foregoing the Tuesday night publishers’ parties to squeeze into a vacant meeting room to share with each other something more important and heady than free wine and cheese.

Perhaps the fellow had stumbled onto a booth at the outskirts of the exhibition hall (past the key chains, stickers, and rubber stamps) that had been given (publishers thought this booth was too far off the track to bother with) to a small group of enthusiastic educators who called themselves whole language teachers. He may have been drawn in by the comradeship of the teachers in that booth—teachers willing to spend as long as needed to talk about children and language and learning, as they showed examples of students’ work brought directly from their classrooms. These teachers from across Canada and the United States had found each other, struck up stimulating friendships, and were writing and phoning each other when they needed understanding and advice. This little booth, organized by Peggy Harrison in Ohio and Paulette Whitman in Nova Scotia, was more than a place to gather with friends and colleagues; it was a statement, a symbol, a milestone.

The seeds of whole language philosophy had been planted and nurtured long before 1986, but the shoots were becoming more and more visible. This attitude toward learning and teaching was a breath of fresh air, new and exciting. Observers perceived it correctly as a grassroots movement. Educators around the world were asking, right along with the fellow my friend and I overheard, “Just what is this whole language movement, anyway?”

In the years since the Philadelphia convention, teachers have rallied to answer this and hundreds of other questions about whole language. At the 1987 Anaheim IRA conference, dozens of educators presented findings from their whole language classrooms and were swamped with requests from other teachers who sensed the rightness and the potential of what had been shared with them. That same year the IRA Whole Language Special Interest Group (SIG) was organized with 175 members. The following year in Toronto, the whole language presentations were so numerous that teachers actually had to make choices, and many of the sessions were filled to capacity. The Whole Language SIG program filled a room of 300 and was repeated to accommodate the overflow audience.

A defining moment had come for whole language advocates, time to fish or cut bait. The challenge of survival was articulated by a handful of teachers, and then courageously taken up by 15 educators who, through the financial help of the Winnipeg CEL (Child-Centered Experienced-Based Learning) group, met in September, 1988, in Tucson to draft a constitution for an organization that would become known as the Whole Language Umbrella (WLU): A Confederation of Whole Language Support Groups and Individuals.

In Winnipeg, the following February, the constitution of WLU was ratified and a slate of officers accepted. The grass roots were growing deeper and stronger, and they were flourishing in often unexpected terrain—not only with young children in self-contained classes, but in cross-age groupings, special education, innercity and rural schools, academically troubled and academically savvy kids, and second language learners, preschool through adult.

The elected leaders of this fledgling organization made important decisions about its purpose and nature. For starters, teachers needed an immediately accessible way of finding out about each others’ work. Networking among the rumored 200 TAWL (Teachers Applying Whole Language) groups in North America became a major goal. The leaders believed that teacher networking would facilitate another priority of the WLU: To improve the quality of learning and teaching at all levels of education. This improvement was to be accomplished in at least four ways:

1. Encouraging the study of whole language philosophy not only in TAWL groups, but in school staff development, and in teacher education programs;

2. Promoting research and critiquing whole language curricula and programs;

3. Publicizing and disseminating whole language information to any interested individual or group; and

4. Facilitating collaboration among teachers, researchers, parents, administrators, and
teacher educators in the development of whole language theory and practice.

To make sure that these intentions had backbone, the WLU constitution declared that another goal of the organization was to support and defend educators who might be unfairly attacked in their attempts to promote whole language philosophy.

**Whole language tenets**

Although individuals and groups should never be subjected to a test of conformity as a prerequisite for identifying themselves as whole language teachers, or for joining either a TAWL group or WLU, there are tenets thought to be held by all whole language educators. The writers of the WLU constitution articulated that whole language teachers believe in:

1. A holistic perspective to literacy learning and teaching;
2. A positive view of all learners;
3. Language as central to learning;
4. Learning as easiest when it is from whole to part, in authentic contexts, and functional;
5. The empowerment of all learners, including students and teachers;
6. Learning as both personal and social, and classrooms as learning communities;
7. Acceptance of whole learners including their languages, cultures, and experiences; and
8. Learning as both joyous and fulfilling.

**Where are we today?**

Today there are over 450 TAWL groups and 600 individuals representing some 35,000 teachers affiliated with the Whole Language Umbrella. There may well be countless more whole language educators who are not affiliated with any support group or with WLU. The WLU membership extends to Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, Guam, Taiwan, Japan, Brazil, Bermuda, and Venezuela, as well as Canada and the United States. Despite the fact that whole language teachers are still a minority, at least in U.S. schools, our numbers and locations are multiplying. TAWL groups and WLU membership reflect that growth.

The signs of the movement were not immediately evident in 1986; today they are everywhere. Requests come to my office weekly for names of educators who will lead a district in their whole language professional development or speak at a whole language conference. It's almost impossible to pick up a literacy education journal without finding references to whole language theory and practice. Even publishing companies, in their zeal to keep up, are publishing materials that range from very useful to ludicrous to bogus—all under the banner of whole language.

**Why bother?**

To the question, "What do you think of this whole language movement, anyway?" we might add, "Why did all these nice teachers give up the comfortable status quo curriculum for something as politically and professionally risky as whole language practices?"

In my search for answers to these and other questions, I left my classroom 2 years ago to visit whole language educators who are by reputation outstanding teachers. I wanted to get the feel, the essence, of their classrooms. I was eager to fix my attention without interruption on real learners (teachers and students) and under their watchful guidance I needed to try my hand at some classroom strategies and then to talk about it all with these teachers whom I trusted and valued. Finally, I wanted to share my experiences with TAWL colleagues and with undergraduate and graduate students; and just as importantly, I wanted to be directly involved in learning and teaching experiences that would help me grow as a whole language teacher.

During my visits, the teachers and I inevitably addressed a question asked by both the advocates and detractors of whole language—"Why would anyone become a whole language educator? Why bother?" Every teacher's story was unique, but there were some common threads and some surprisingly similar experiences. We had been informed, touched, nudged, even irritated by many of the same people, research, and writings. We had been shaped by some of the same powerful experiences and emotions.

When I asked these teachers what had
caused them to move to whole language, I heard again what teachers have been saying for the past 20 years: The comfortable status quo wasn’t comfortable at all. Inquiry into whole language often started with an uneasy feeling about how students were responding when... (you fill in the blank), struggling with the sting of being in the low reading group, answering irrelevant end-of-the-chapter questions, dreading report cards that masked abilities, being tested on someone else’s (a publishing company’s or test maker’s) spelling words, writing weary book reports, covering a prescribed and irrelevant unit of study, and (my favorite) “practicing being quiet.”

One teacher told me that she kept getting angrier and more desperate as her years of teaching added up: “I was doing everything I’d been told to do by my supervisors and my college teachers, and my kids were still frustrated and frustrating; unsettled and unsettling; bored and boring. And there was no joy in either their learning or my teaching.”

Other teachers talked about the disheartening experience of writing the 25th behavioral objective on the 15th Individual Education Plan. Teachers told of spending precious hours preparing their students for end-of-level basal reader tests and for their district’s favored standardized test, only to awaken to the fact that tests had nothing to do with learning how to read and write, but had everything to do with Annie’s running home in tears after an afternoon of examination.

I also heard again about the shakiness of not having a well-thought-through theory base—“I didn’t know why I was doing things that I felt were useless and numbing. I just did them and moved on to the next prescribed activity.” Teachers said they felt as if they were walking in someone else’s “theoretical boots”—a test maker’s, a publisher’s, an administrator’s, a curriculum designer’s, a former college instructor’s—and the boots pinched. I learned that there are hundreds of reasons why educators turn to whole language. The questions then became “How did they become whole language teachers? What were the entry points? Is there a formula?”

**Entries into whole language philosophy**

I’m taking the liberty of grouping countless entries to whole language philosophy into three major categories: (a) practice, (b) theory making, and (c) belief formation. There is no hierarchical ability grouping intended in the order of my list, nor is there a formula for mastering and moving from category to category. All beginnings can be professionally and personally rejuvenating, and the journeys following the first steps can be equally exciting, scary, exasperating, enlightening, and fulfilling. The model may help us understand the journeys educators might take as they create their whole language philosophy.

**Practice prepares us**

For longer than I care to admit, I was what Ken Goodman calls a “wholier than thou” whole language advocate. I felt that before attempting any holistic strategy, teachers needed to articulate the underlying theories and the supporting belief system for that particular strategy or experience: Don’t “do” literature study, or writers’ workshop, or big books until you can convince your whole language colleagues that you not only know
what you are doing, but why you are doing it. I’ve changed my mind. After paying attention to exemplary educators, I’ve learned that teachers can begin to build a whole language philosophy by “doing” whole language strategies that they find appealing and that fit comfortably within their capabilities and expectations. I must add quickly that teachers begin at this point but are never willing to stand rooted, filling their curriculum with borrowed practices. That is, they can’t endlessly “do” whole language.

Serious whole language practitioners must, in their own good time, edge into the stimulating but sometimes disquieting discomfort zone of whole language; the borrowed practice must become a heuristic that moves teachers along a path that is often

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risky. Serious educators may begin their journeys with an activity, but they move and grow by asking questions and by collecting evidence. If there is no commitment to inquiry, teachers may find themselves discouraged and ultimately reject whole language in its totality. Even with the best of intentions, this might happen when we sponsor quickie workshops on whole language, offer clever activities, provide formulas for strategies, but fail to emphasize the necessity to study the underlying theories supporting the practices.

Lana, a first-grade teacher, was talked into exchanging pen pal letters with her friend Peggy’s fifth-grade class. Peggy explained the procedure, and Lana thought it would fit nicely into her well established language arts program. She borrowed the activity, having little to lose. If any part of it didn’t go well she could easily return to the conventional language arts program that she and her students had followed dutifully for years. Her investment in the pen pal experience was minimal and her commitment to it trifling.

At this point Lana was merely walking the walk of whole language. The responses of her students to the project made the difference. To Lana’s surprise, the children were not only immediately captivated and eager to read and write their letters, but a sense of community was emerging in the room and within the school.

As time went by Peggy gave Lana a book on pen pal writing, “Someday You Will No All About Me”: Young Children’s Explorations in the World of Letters (Hall, Crawford, & Robinson, 1991), and she took Lana to a TAWL meeting where she heard about kid/learner watching (Goodman, 1978; Watson, 1992). Then a crucial thing happened—Lana asked her first questions: “Is a pen pal experience working well because kids are doing something they think is meaningful and important? If this is the reason pen palling is successful, do I need to ask this same question about other activities in my curriculum? Many of the children are choosing topics for their letters. Should I encourage this, or should I tell them what to write about?”

Related questions emerged: “What will happen if I encourage kids to invent their own spellings? Can we substitute authentic spelling instruction for textbook instruction? If I study these letters across time, can I learn about my students’ language growth? What will happen if I share letters with parents, as part of their child’s evaluation?”

Lana’s practices prepared her to ask questions, then to actively theorize (hypothesize, guess, have hunches) about those practices. As Lana collected evidence (data) in answer to her questions, two things happened.

First, her borrowed practice became her owned practice. Ownership meant that Lana had to adjust and modify the pen pal experience so that it more comfortably fit her students and herself; in doing this, letter writing became an authentic and important part of the curriculum.

Second, as Lana inquired into the theory that informed the practice, and as she and her students assumed curricular ownership, she began to ask questions about what she valued and believed about working with children;
that is, Lana began to examine her own belief system. In turn, Lana’s beliefs were tested daily within the pen pal experience itself.

This teacher began her journey by “doing” whole language; she ended (if the journey ever ends) by understanding the theory that supports the pen pal experience, by modifying the practice for a better fit, and by strengthening her beliefs about learning and teaching.

**Theory prepares us**

I’m using theory synonymously with hypothesis, hunch, speculation, assumption, and even guess, as in “I don’t know for sure, but I theorize that children will be more likely to want to write if they choose their own topics.” Theories can be active or inactive, and they can emerge from the work of trusted teachers, theorists, researchers, or from inquiry into our own practices.

Happily, the insights into learning and language offered to us by Vygotsky, Dewey, Rosenblatt, Holdaway, K. Goodman, Y. Goodman, Smith, Graves, Harste, Burke, Calkins, Atwell, and countless others have made our heads spin and our lives turn around. Unhappily, we know educators, publishers, and curriculum designers who rattle off tenets of whole language grounded in the works of these thinkers; they talk the talk, but they never fully activate the theories by inquiring into how they can come alive in real classrooms.

For serious teachers, theories are heuristics that fill their heads with questions and move them, sometimes cautiously and sometimes boldly, into inquiry. Through inquiry teachers create a theoretically based curriculum. They move into practice, collect evidence from the classroom experiences, answer their own queries, and generate more questions and more theories.

Bryan, a first-year teacher, was excited by whole language theories in his undergraduate classes. Everything he heard and read made sense to him and fit comfortably with his beliefs, not only about how children learn, but also about how he saw himself as a teacher. Bryan read books and articles, saw videotapes, attended conferences, and even visited whole language classes. He could talk about whole language, but he had not had the opportunity to test out his theories.

As Bryan began his first year of teaching he activated a previously inactive roster of assumptions. Because he became a TAWL member, he knew he would not be working without a safety net. On the advice of his whole language colleagues, Brian got to work by articulating his theories and by deciding on the classroom practices that were consistent with them. That is, he brought his theories to life by researching them. He and his colleagues constantly asked questions about both the process and product of his efforts.

Bryan was lucky; he had a support group, and he also had an existing belief system that strengthened his theories and practices. He didn’t experience an anguishing inner struggle before articulating his belief-supported theories and getting to work. His inquiry reflected both his theory and his beliefs: “Since I’ve been taught and because I also believe that choice has a lot to do with motivation, ownership, and independence, I want my students to take over their learning by making choices. What experiences will ensure student choices? Since I’ve read and I believe that learning is social as well as personal, I want my students to have supportive experiences. What curriculum will ensure that they have a chance to work independently and within a community of learners?”

Bryan’s inactive theories became activated because he basically believed that these were hypotheses that could be proved in practice. Bryan answered his own questions as he studied the evidence collected in his own classroom. Just as for Lana, Bryan’s evidence helped him make decisions about which practices and theories were consistent with each other, which ones were in contradiction and therefore needed rethinking, and what all this had to do with curriculum. Also like Lana, his belief system was being confirmed, revised, and fine tuned as he made his round trips between theories, practices, and beliefs.

This isn’t to say there were no bumpy spots along Bryan’s journey into whole language philosophy. He was keenly disappointed when students didn’t enthusiastically respond to all his invitations to real literature, real writing, real inquiry. He was discouraged if the students were inattentive, not engaged in learning, or were downright rude to him.
and to each other. Without laying blame, his colleagues helped him think about the reasons why these fourth graders had been in programs that both underestimated their strengths and misunderstood their needs. TAWL friends pored over videotapes of his class, offering suggestions that came out of their own experiences. They helped Bryan with his inquiry into organization, scheduling, self-evaluation, and reflective teaching.

Belief prepares us

I see a distinction between theory and belief. Theory, for me, is panning for gold; we have a hunch something valuable is there, but we have to work at the panning again and again in order to see the nuggets clearly. Beliefs are identified, high-quality ore that we have securely in our possession.

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Beliefs can be carefully examined or not. We can blindly take on someone else’s belief system (fool’s gold), or we can bring into existence our own beliefs by examining our values and by studying evidence gained through our own theorizing and practicing.

Beliefs keep us sane. On Monday morning we don’t have to reconstruct what it is we trust, what we know is credible, what we accept as true. We are our beliefs. They direct everything that happens in or out of our classrooms. Beliefs, as a heuristic or driving force, must be articulated and held up for ourselves and others to see. When it becomes evident that we can’t go public with what we believe (for whatever reason), or when mounting evidence contradicts what we think is trustworthy, we must do something that is tremendously difficult and often very painful—critically scrutinize the credibility of our convictions. An examined belief system is set in theory and practice, not in concrete; only blind beliefs resist examination. Whether or not we discard, alter, or keep a particular belief often depends on the depth and honesty of our reflection, inquiry, and self-evaluation.

Whole language communities

What makes the teachers and their classrooms that I visited and continue to visit outstanding? It isn’t where the journeys began, it’s that the teachers chose the high road, a path that more often than not isn’t an easy one. Some educators aren’t up to it, and that’s okay too. (Once I was asked if I thought whole language philosophy was for everyone. My answer remains the same: I have yet to find a learner who could not be supported and helped to grow through whole language theories, beliefs, and practices, but I have met educators for whom whole language philosophy won’t fit. That isn’t to say that I won’t keep inviting them to read, inquire, and most importantly, study learners. I leave it to their students to convince them.)

When asked what keeps them going on the high road, whole language teachers give credit to two powerful communities, their classrooms and their teacher support groups. As a visitor to classrooms and to TAWL meetings I see commonalities between the two.

1. Classrooms and teacher support groups exist because of the commitment and dedication of enlightened teachers. The creation and continuance of these dynamic communities take a tremendous amount of effort. There are no teacher’s manuals, flow charts, or kits that can be bought, brought into the classroom or the support group, and followed so that we all turn out looking and acting the same. Just as no two learners are exactly alike, no two classrooms are exactly alike, and no two TAWL groups are exactly alike.

2. Both communities have a philosophical base that evolves slowly, personally, and with the help of other learners. That philosophical base includes and supports owned practices, active theories, and examined beliefs.

3. Both communities involve collective reflection. In whole language classrooms I’ve
seen teachers invite students to take a step back in order to look at what they have done and are doing; they help learners reflect on their actions not only after, but during the experience itself. Such reflection is the substance of the most powerful assessment—self-evaluation. Responsive and helpful communities reflect on their products and their processes as they are growing.

4. Both communities encourage inquiry. Ownership of a social studies concept, how to set up an aquarium, how to have a good discussion, or how to help a friend or colleague come about through asking questions that are personally meaningful and appropriate. Without exception, the teachers I visited had questions about things going on in their classrooms and in their professional lives. One teacher said it well: “If we don’t ask questions and encourage our kids to do the same, we will spend our time trying to answer questions asked by people who don’t know us, don’t know our strengths, and possibly don’t care about our problems.”

5. Within classrooms and support groups, students and teachers see themselves in roles not always rewarded in conventional groupings. First of all, whole language teachers make it clear that they are learners and that their students can be teachers—no room for omniscient dispensers of all wisdom. The membership in these communities is made up of inquirers, collaborators, representatives of their groups, apprentices to and for each other, organizers, and friends.

6. It’s obvious from the outset that both communities are places of intellectually important and stimulating experiences. In the classroom and at the TAWL meeting, participants are learners who expend their efforts on reading, writing, and talking about matters of importance.

**Why bother?**

Good fortune has allowed me to work with many inspired and inspiring teachers. They and their students have patiently taught me the meanings of whole language philosophy. Together we’ve asked hundreds of questions of ourselves and of the practices and assumptions of other teachers, researchers, and theorists. We’ve endured the tension of getting our own practices and theories sorted out. We’ve struggled with beliefs that were rock solid and with those that wobbled. We’ve endured both the honorable and dishonorable politics of literacy. We’ve stayed, we’ve nurtured our roots, and we’ve grown.

In 1986 when the fellow asked his luncheon companion, “Just what is this whole language movement, anyway?” I interpreted the question, and still do, to be “Why are all these teachers bothering?” Through the years educators have answered the questions again and again and in many ways, but ultimately for me the answer comes down to “This is the way I want the children I know and love to be treated, and...it’s the way I want to be treated myself.”

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**References**


