

Afterward: Whole Language and the Pedagogy of the Absurd 20th Anniversary Edition What's Whole in Whole Language

The success of whole language in changing the nature of education, particularly literacy education, make it a highly visible target for political forces seeking to roll back educational change and shift education from a societal responsibility to a parental one. "It's the tall poppies that get cut down" say my Aussie friends and whole language has become a tall poppy, indeed.

Here are some comments that I made at an NCTE conference in 1991 which have proven to be prophetic:

In my workshops on whole language and in critical articles in journals people keep looking for the secret of whole language: a two word definition or a simple set of materials to plug into a conventional curriculum.

What whole language really is: Self-empowered teachers taking the best available knowledge about language, about learners, about curriculum, about teaching and about building the learning community and turning it into reality for learners in their classrooms. It involves a body of knowledge, and a humanistic philosophy that values all learners, but it is teachers who have proclaimed themselves professionals and who have turned this all into practical reality.

If you want to understand whole language you must, more than anything understand this new professionalism among teachers.

So I thought with all due respect for Eve Merriam's text that I would begin with a variation on her parable of the Wise Woman: (In Merriam's story the wise woman's neighbors are hunting for the secret to her wisdom)

Once there was a strange secret gathering. It was composed of a number of quite disparate groups. They had come together to try to understand a strange and powerful force which was sweeping the land: they knew it was powerful because it was shaking the foundations of the most important educational institutions in the country: the textbook publishers and the test makers. It was spreading from classroom to classroom, from school to school, from district to district, from state to state. Teachers infected by the force were exhibiting strange changes of behavior and students were engaged in really abnormal behavior: they were reading, they were writing, they were solving problems, they were asking real questions and finding their own answers.

A group of experimental researchers were the first to offer their explanations at the meeting: They had done careful meta-analyses of all the important research (that is experimental research) and had reached the unquestionably research-based conclusion that none of this could be taking place. What teachers were teaching and what learners were learning had been shown by their research to be impossible. Furthermore, said the researchers, they were outraged at the increasing frequency with which teachers were telling them that they, the mighty researchers, were irrelevant. They therefore concluded that these teachers are being deluded by evangelical gurus.

Then spake the publishers. They told tales of great upheaval: of nervous sales representatives carrying tales back from the field of teachers demanding real literature in reading text books, of refusing to use work books, of insisting on using money usually reserved for text book purchase to buy real literature for their pupils to read. The publishers had decided, they said, on a two tier response: they would capitalize on the temporary fad of using real literature which had increased the sales of kids' trade books by 500% in the previous ten years. Meanwhile they would embark on a campaign of disinformation. All their subsequent basals would henceforth be labeled whole language basals; thus they would fool the teachers into thinking that they were part of the whole language movement when

they were not. Though it was too early to evaluate this strategy, reports from the field were mixed. A surprising number of teachers, it was reported, appeared able to detect phony whole language materials.

Then the school administrators spoke. the new force was becoming increasingly troublesome. There was no telling where it might break out next. It was even spreading to private and religious schools. Outbreaks had been noticed in the bible belt, in rural schools- even in the suburbs. In its worst form it disrupted usual power relationships. Teachers were being emboldened to take power- they were even taking the notion of site based management seriously and demanding real power in their classes. Even worse there were frequent reports of infiltration into the ranks of administrators. As this was uttered the administrators began to eye each other strangely. We've issued mandates, said the administrators, but we're not sure we'll be able to enforce them.

Now it was the politicians turn: There they were, governors of the states led by a former member of their group, who it was reported sat at the right hand, of the President. Not to worry they said. You folks are taking teachers far too seriously. We, politicians have studied the educational scene in America- and we have found it to be a total failure. And we know why it has failed: the teachers and the pupils are to blame. We can solve that through a narrow national curriculum, a national test for teachers to weed out the trouble makers(and minorities) and a new test for kids. Leave it to us to leave no child, teacher or school untouched.

Writing anti-whole language into law

Strangely the greatest recognition of the soundness of whole language views of literacy and literacy education is that the so-called reading wars have been framed in the press and the speech and acts of politicians as for and against whole language. In the “ ReadingWars” direct instruction of phonics and phonemic awareness are presented as research based because they are not whole language) and the major premises of whole language are rejected as unproven or disproved though the evidence cited to support that claim does not examine any of the premises of whole language.

There have always different views of literacy and literacy education. And of course these views do not separate easily into two mutually exclusive views. But a sustained campaign framed as for and against whole language has had two goals. One is to present a single narrow view of reading based on direct instruction of phonics as the scientifically proven alternative to whole language. And the other is to characterize anything other than this narrow approach as whole language in disguise. By doing so, not only is whole language marginalized but so is the wide range of alternate views in theory and research in the field of literacy.

To seal the victory over whole language of anti-whole language it was written into law, first in the Reading Excellence Act and then Into the No Child Left Behind revision of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

I've argued in other works, In Defense of Good Teaching, and Saving Our Schools, that the real purpose of the attacks on whole language is to discredit public education and marginalize scientific views while replacing them with pseudo science. In the political climate of the early 21st century, as the Union of Concerned Scientists has argued, science is being shaped to serve the political agenda of the power elite.

The NCLB law serves the political agenda: each major principle of whole language is explicitly rejected and an opposite view is given legal status.

Differences in definitions of reading:

In whole language reading is construction of meaning during a transaction between the reader and the text. It is making sense of print. The federal law defines reading as rapid accurate, automatic word recognition, with

meaning the by-product. While we might agree that ultimately the reader must comprehend, what comprehension is, how it is to be achieved and judged are very different.

Those different definitions lead to different views of what learning to read is and how best to help children learn to read. They lead to very different research. The law draws on a summary of reading research by the National Reading Panel that excluded any research that was not an instructional experiment designed to teach phonics and word attack. Whole language relies on a wide range of research on the reading process, reading development and reading instruction. Research methods from several foundational disciplines: linguistics, anthropology, sociology, developmental psychology, and education among others.

And the two views lead to very different evaluation. Whole language relies, to a great extent, on self evaluation by learners and kid watching by teachers. Tests like the Dibels , which judges reading by how many nonsense syllables a kindergarten or first grade child can sound out in one minute, are mandated in the enforcement of the law and used to classify beginners as at risk and failing.

Differences in theories of learning.

In whole language, language is both a personal and social invention: human beings have the unique ability to think symbolically and to invent language both individually and socially. In this view written language is learned and develops in much the same way as oral language in the context of its functional use. The law takes the view that all learning is a response to direct instruction and there is little difference between how language is learned and how any skill is acquired. So materials for reading instruction are decodable built carefully only on skills taught out of context and sequentially. It rejects the whole language belief that learning needs to involve complete meaningful texts. In whole language, texts used in reading instruction are authentic and predictable for the learners.

Different views of teachers and teaching.

Whole language treats teachers as knowledgeable professionals who know language, learning and children and know how to support literacy development building on what children know. In this view teachers are educated not trained. They are professionals who shape the instruction to fit the learners.

The law takes the direct instruction view that teachers are technicians who need to be required to teach a prescribed, mandated and scripted sequence of skills and need to be monitored to assure that they do so. In this view teachers are trained and highly controlled. They are not permitted to deviate from the precise sequence of the program. The law provides for paradigm police who make sure teachers don't deviate from the scripted programs.

Different Views of Curriculum.

Whole language puts the focus in curriculum on starting where the learners are. The curriculum builds on the language, experience, interests and culture of the learners. The curriculum is based on problem solving and inquiry. While social objectives are important, personal objectives are also important so the curriculum is flexible to suit the characteristics of the learners.

In this view, pupils learn to read in the course of reading to learn and to enjoy literature.

Federal law says materials, methods, and objectives must be standardized and highly sequenced. The curriculum is the same for all regardless of differences in learners and progress is dependent on mastery of each set of skills before progress to the next. In this view, learners learn to read before they read to learn..

The future of whole language.

In the history of the world there have been many attempts to label new theories and understandings as unacceptable, illegal and even sacrilegious. But Copernicus and Galileo's view of the universe eventually triumphed over church and governmental rejection. Flat-earth views had to yield as evidence accumulated that the earth is a sphere.. Evolution became accepted even though laws were written to ban teaching it.

And in the future wise men and women will look back on this period in education as that of the pedagogy of the absurd in which invalid and unworkable methods and materials were the law of the land and sound and sane pedagogy was forbidden.

In North America and in many parts of the world, whole language is surviving in the classrooms of committed, professional teachers who know what they are doing in their teaching and why it benefits their students. The laws banning whole language and mandating anti-whole language promise an absurd level of success they can not possibly achieve while they turn classrooms into dismal unpleasant places in sharp contrast to the excitement and involvement in learning seen in whole language classrooms . Furthermore the penalties NCLB imposes on students, schools and school districts will produce a back lash among parents and state and local decision makers which will cause them to reject the law's mandates and turn back to the sane and sound alternatives.

Whether the term whole language survives as the term for what the movement has brought to education or not is not really important. Education which is optimally successful with the full range of learners in all societies will ultimately require professional teachers, who respect and are respected by their pupils. Whatever we call successful teaching in the future, it will depend on the knowledge teachers have of how language processes work and are learned and how language is at the center of human thought, learning and communication.

"Why Whole Language Is Today's Agenda in Education", Language Arts, Volume 69, Number 5, September, 1992.

"I Didn't Found Whole Language," The Reading Teacher, Vol. 46:3, November, 1992.

What's Whole In Whole Language, Toronto: Scholastic Ltd., 1986 and Heinemann Educational, Portsmouth, NH; Spanish translation, **Lenguaje Integral**, 1989, Merida: Editorial Venezolana C.A.; French edition: **Le Comment et Pourquoi de la Langage Integre**, Toronto: Scholastic Ltd. Translations also in Portugese, Chinese and Japanese