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Adopting a Whole Language Program for Learning Disabled Students: A Case Study

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The study of how children learn has moved from examining the accumulation of isolated pieces of knowledge to the current research position that it is appropriate to study children's acquisition of complex subject matter and development of learning strategies. Resnick and Klopfer (1989) believe that "[k]nowledge is acquired not from information communicated and memorized but from information that students elaborate, question, and use." As researchers become concerned with how students develop and utilize learning strategies, Resnick (Brandt, 1989) warns that "strategies will not be effective unless there is also attention to self-monitoring and motivation."

Classroom instruction for many children is dictated by teachers and school districts depending upon textbooks as guides. Wilkerson (1988) cautioned against such reliance upon textbooks in her response to *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, stating that "...continuity and quality control through textbooks, and accountability based on tests that have been denounced as inadequate, do not help us accomplish our goal in excellence in literacy education." Unfortunately, the desire for control over the sequence and

accountability of learning often continues to have priority over the student's role in learning when the emphasis remains upon the product rather than the process of learning.

The whole language approach is a contrast to the teacher and curriculum centered educational view in that the students and their needs become the heart of schooling (Reutzel and Hollingsworth, 1988). Reading strategy instruction, building upon students' prior knowledge and language strengths, is a part of this meaning centered curriculum as students are taught to integrate learning and become flexible in their application of efficient and effective reading strategies (Slaughter, 1988).

This article is a case study of a learning disabilities teacher who struggled with the traditional instructional approaches and who adopted a literature-based, whole language program. Her reflective comments are presented along with references from the literature of whole language researchers and theorists.

Rationale

As a teacher of learning disabled junior high school students, I have seen many students who have had difficulty in learning to read, comprehending what they read, and having no desire to read. Over the years, I have experienced a growing dissatisfaction with the behavioral approaches in which much of my training and educational background have emphasized almost to the exclusion of any other methods. The philosophy of the whole language approach is one which is diametrically opposed, but which holds the promises of all new approaches — fresh excitement and a possible solution.

In special education, students' problems with reading have been assumed to be due to a deficiency in previous skills necessary for reading, and remediation has included the use of precise teaching methods in specific skill areas. The basic premise has been that once students know the parts, they will be able to combine the parts to form a whole. In my experience, there has been little transfer from isolated drills to actual reading, where skills must be integrated.

The predominant reading instructional technique in regular classrooms has been the skills-oriented and teacher-centered basal reader. In special education for many years, students' reading problems have been met with rigid, structured methods to insure that the students acquire and master the missing skills or pieces of knowledge that are essential for comprehension to occur. However, Reutzel and Hollingsworth (1988) recently stressed in an article that "[t]he solution to the problem for many learning disabled children is to put language together again for the LD learner[s] and help [them] rediscover the meaningful relationships that exist in our language."

Basal readers contain a wide range of selections written by well-known children's authors; however, due to the need to control the length of the selections, the majority of the selections are reduced or modified to meet publishers' specifications. This results in shortened sentences and a limited vocabulary as less frequently used words are exchanged for those more commonly used. According to Ken Goodman (1988), "In the process of controlling the vocabulary and syntax, the style and wit of the original is lost and the language becomes much less natural and thus less predictable." He goes on to state that, "[w]hat we now know is that authentic, sensible, and functional language is the easiest to read and to learn to read. When we tamper with

narrative language, try to control the vocabulary, or tinker with texts to lower their readability levels, we make them less predictable, less cohesive, and less interesting. And that makes them harder to read."

Literature-based reading programs have been found to be successful when compared with basal reader and/or mastery learning programs. In Tunnell and Jacobs' (1989) review of the research in this area, they found that "...even older children who have experienced years of failure with reading and writing have been exposed to literature-based, whole language programs with notable success."

The change from a basal reading program to a literature-based approach can help to break the cycle of failure experienced by most, if not all, remedial and learning disabled students. Students with reading problems often are given reading materials which are less interesting, and therefore less motivating to read, than those given to good readers. In addition, the materials provided for the learning disabled students are often written for younger students. A change to a literature-based reading program can result in the improvement of self-esteem and a positive attitude towards reading. Literature can revitalize and enrich their experiences. A paperback copy can excite them and challenge them. My students hated carrying around a "babyish looking" reading book last year. There are no complaints about being seen with a real book.

In Holdaway's (1980) view, "[i]t is difficult to provide natural motivation for reading in an environment where books are things you work through rather than things you come to depend on for special pleasure and enlightenment." In a literature-based approach, rather than being asked to read material two to three grade levels below their grade

placement, students are allowed to read high interest materials which have excellent language models. Instead of being embarrassed about their reading level, they aspire to read more challenging materials.

Reading aloud

A characteristic of literature-based reading programs is that teachers regularly spend more time reading aloud to their students. This was my entry point into a period of change in my teaching methods and philosophy. In the summer of 1988, while browsing in a bookstore, I came across a copy of *The Read Aloud Handbook* by Jim Trelease (1985), and bought it for my summer improvement reading. Over the years my program had become so fragmented with students coming and going from my resource room, I had stopped reading aloud to my students. Even though I was now teaching junior high, I decided to incorporate read aloud time on a daily basis in my classroom. Much time during the rest of the summer was spent in locating appropriate books and reading them to myself. I rediscovered the sheer enjoyment of reading children's literature.

It took a while for my students to get into the swing of things, but I soon began to notice little changes. They asked to borrow books from my collection. They noticed authors and brought up their names in class. I also learned something important about my students' strengths in reading that were usually overlooked in the push to learn more basic skills. The "worst" reader had the strongest skills in prediction, in story sense, in analyzing and synthesizing information orally. He was hooked on listening!

Trelease (1985) urges adults to, "[r]ead aloud to children to awaken their sleeping imaginations and improve their deteriorating language skills." Children with reading

problems often can listen and comprehend at levels above their own reading level. According to Chambers (1983), "Listening to books read aloud bridges that gap, making available to children books they are mature enough to appreciate but which they cannot yet read with ease themselves."

Self selection of reading materials

I read an article by Henke (1988) who reported that the West Des Moines Schools use whole class reading because they believe that a learning community is built on shared experiences. I began in January of 1989 with a similar structure in one of my reading classes. The class selected several books from an educational book club. I ordered the books, and they have become a major component of our reading class. I felt this was important in order to get a handle on how my LD students would react to reading real books, and to have a common ground to begin working on reading strategies. Independent reading of books of their own choosing has also become a part of the class. Letting students select their own reading materials is advocated by Atwell (1987) and Calkins (1986). Atwell believes that students should have complete choice and read independently in class; Calkins supports having students read from a thematic web or common genre, with each student selecting a personal book.

Written and oral responses to literature

Students responded to the books they were reading using reading journals, spiral bound notebooks in which they recorded all written responses. They included self-selected vocabulary as used in context, with their interpretation of the meaning of the word; diary entries written from the point of view of a character; character descriptions, traits, comparisons and contrasts; their personal reactions

to the book at various points in the story, including why they thought the way they did; as well as any other written responses they wished to record. Effective instruction research indicates that active learning time is an important variable in student achievement (Levin and Long, 1981). Writing in a response journal cannot guarantee that the student will be actively engaged in learning, but this type of activity makes it difficult for the student to be passive (Fulwiler, 1980).

The writing process causes the student to be actively engaged in discovering and stating relationships between newly acquired and old information (Van Nostrand, 1979). Manipulation of the random flow of thoughts one has during response writing allows the individual to discover meaning by creating connections and verifying or rejecting knowledge and information already possessed. Acting as a memory prompt, such writing facilitates reflection upon the ramifications of an idea and allows for evaluating a particular stance or viewpont (Moffet, 1984). Atwell (1987) states, "[w]ritten dialogues about literature can work to open up texts to young readers and compel reflection."

Typically, learning disabled students have been taught primarily through teacher directed activities. Because they are so conscious about giving the "correct" answer, they tend to be hesitant about speaking in student directed group discussions. It is as though the students have been trained to let others do their thinking and talking for them (Koeller, 1988). In addition to their reading journals, students participated in group discussions at points throughout the book. I guided their discussions by focusing on higher level thinking skills and away from literal questioning. They were encouraged to look back into the book for support of their opinions. I found that after a few discussions they automatically went

back to the book, even if they were talking among themselves. The students also demonstrated much better recall of literal information than I expected. They were constantly surprising me with their insights.

Sustained Silent Reading (SSR)

Sustained silent reading is a time provided for students and teachers to read materials of their own selection without interruption. Everyone in the classroom, including the teacher, reads for a set duration of time (McCracken and McCracken, 1978). I incorporated time for silent sustained reading during class with the current trade book students were reading as a group. Students were given 15-20 minutes each day to read the book at their own pace. If they had finished reading their group book, they read a book of their own choice during this time.

Conclusion

Throughout my years of teaching learning disabled students, I have done my share of looking for the "magic" solutions that would allow my students to "catch up" and join the mainstream. Unfortunately, I never found the cure. A literature-based reading program may not be the answer for all students, but it is a desirable alternative. The research is still continuing to be gathered in comparing traditional with whole language programs. Motivation to read seems to favor the whole language program. Whether or not students will become lifelong users of the learning strategies they develop in a whole language program remains to be seen.

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Reading Horizons welcomes suggestions for innovative teaching ideas for inclusion as "Expanding Horizons" features. (See page 38 of this issue for an example.) Submit two typed copies of your idea to Editor, *Reading Horizons*, Reading Center & Clinic, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI, 49008, with two stamped self-addressed envelopes.