Whole Language Teaching and Learning: Is It For Everyone?

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Beginning the formal study of music theory well into mid-life has enabled me to focus with new clarity on a gnawing concern. This concern, which has pursued me as I have walked with my undergraduate majors into the era of whole language, has two dimensions — both young children and novice teachers. The first concern is those particular young children, who when immersed in a print rich environment, fail to make the inductive leaps which allow them to become emergent readers (O'Donnell and Wood, 1992). My second concern is the early childhood and elementary preservice teachers who are so indoctrinated in the practice of whole language that they have few alternatives when this approach fails to provide success for every child.

You might wonder how my personal experience with music theory has any bearing on my concerns about whole language. Let me elaborate. I grew up in a home where music was an integral part of life. One of my most vivid memories of large family reunions is gathering around the piano for an hour or more of hymn singing. As a child and adolescent, I had both keyboard and vocal instruction. As an adult, I have been a part of very fine choirs — most recently a choir so

accomplished that we performed Brahm's *Ein deutsches Requiem* and Bach's *Magnificat*.

I am not a stupid woman — but, after all these years of being immersed in music and reading notes and other musical markings with some proficiency, I still lacked any understanding of the relationship between the key in which a piece is written and the progression of notes and chords. At no point did I make the inductive leaps to allow me to understand the mathematical-spatial dimensions of music — a deficiency which I found extraordinarily frustrating. Finally, a sabbatical from university teaching responsibilities allowed me to enroll in an introductory level music theory course. The material was difficult, but given high motivation, weeks of direct instruction, and intense practice and review, I began to see some order in the chaos.

Young children and whole language

What I suspect is that my experiences with music are not too different from those of many young children who, despite immersion in print (O'Donnell and Wood, 1992), shared reading experiences (Holdaway, 1979), and the use of invented spelling (Gentry, 1982), fail to make sense, inductively of the graphophonic, syntactic, and semantic cuing systems of our language. A specific child comes to mind — a child I will call Ryan.

Ryan, an only child, comes from an upper middle-class, stable home. He began a part-time preschool program when he was three years old. His parents provided a nurturing environment rich with educational experiences. As a preschooler, Ryan was read to with great regularity by his parents and members of his extended family. He began kindergarten with the kind of background experiences applauded by teachers of young children.

Ryan's kindergarten teacher was committed to whole language. Her classroom was the epitome of a literacy rich environment. Children read big books together, explored books of choice independently, engaged in authentic writing activities, and were encouraged to use invented spelling. Parents were asked to read to their children every day. As the year progressed and his peers began to make sense of print, Ryan, a model child, made little progress in learning to read and write though he quickly picked up mathematical concepts. He was neither able to remember whole words nor to grasp the rudiments of the sound-symbol connections of the language. Despite persistent patience and encouragement from his teacher, class work papers were frequently covered with scribbles. He disrupted shared reading experiences by clowning and became increasingly aggressive. Though his mother was a regular volunteer in the classroom, by the end of the year Ryan was the most notorious behavior problem in the class.

The guidance counselor and Ryan's teacher, working closely with his parents and child psychologist, sought to understand the deterioration in Ryan's behavior. Eventually they determined that when Ryan realized that he could not be completely successful at a task, he refused to try and in his frustration, he engaged in acting-out behavior; the risk-taking required in a whole language classroom, especially guessing the meaning of unknown words from context and using invented spelling, proved too threatening for Ryan (O'Donnell and Wood, 1992). Likewise, the sound-spelling patterns of the language, easily assimilated by many children, remained an unintelligible jumble for Ryan. Further evaluation showed Ryan to be a very bright child with unusual artistic gifts. Given these discoveries, Ryan's first grade teacher was chosen with extreme care.

This teacher is highly structured. She has an eclectic reading program supplementing basal readers with heavy doses of children's literature (Bastolla, 1994; Cotheren, 1992; Erpelding, 1990; Griffith, Klesius, and Kromrey, 1992, Midvidy, 1990). Time is provided in every school day for self-selecting reading. New vocabulary is presented systematically with generous opportunities for children to practice these words both in context and in isolation (Adams, 1990). Children are expected to read a story from their basal reader with a caregiver every evening. Parents are also encouraged to read to their children. The teacher has a list of words children are expected to learn to spell correctly over the course of the year, and this list is made available to parents; frequently used words are displayed on charts around the room (Routman, 1993). Invented spelling is encouraged when children are using new words in writing but support is available for children who are less willing risk takers.

Ryan is thriving in this environment. He works hard at reading and writing and as he succeeds, his self-esteem and his behavior are improving. Certainly the structure, the direct teaching of both sound-symbol relationships and vocabulary, ample review and practice, and the scaffolding provided in terms of spelling when children are asked to write are contributing to Ryan's success at developing literacy.

I know Ryan is not alone. There are other children who fail inductively to discern the cuing systems of our language (Adams, 1990; Ehri and Wilce, 1985; Stahl, 1992). As friends "catch on," their frustration builds as it did in Ryan's situation. Many children express their frustration in "acting-out" behavior; others withdraw and reconcile themselves to failure. Immersion in print needs to be tempered with a good measure of direct instruction (Chaney, 1990; Smith, Reyna,

and Brainerd, 1993; Spiegel, 1992; Routman, 1992). Children need to be taught the grapho-phonic, the syntactic, and the semantic cuing systems of the language thus having at their disposal alternative ways of recognizing unknown words. Of course, these are appropriately taught in the context of authentic reading and writing with the overarching premise being that reading and writing should make sense.

Novice teachers and whole language

I can already envision the rising hackles of many in the whole language camp at even suggesting the "p" word (Ehri and Wilce, 1985; Freppon and Dahl, 1991; Stahl, McKenna, and Pagnucco, 1993). However, if you observe effective whole-language teachers working with real children, you would see them teaching the grapho-phonic, the syntactic, and the semantic cuing systems of the language. Good primary grade teachers, who buy whole language for all the right reasons (connections with oral language, good children's literature, authentic purposes for reading and writing, high interest, positive attitudes), intuitively weave direct instruction into literacy development. Indeed most scholars who promote whole language as an approach assume that children will be introduced to these cuing systems as the opportunity arises in the classroom (O'Donnell and Wood, 1992). This requires, of course, that early childhood/elementary teachers, themselves, understand the cuing systems of the language. This brings me to the second dimension of my second concern.

Having been a teacher educator with expertise in reading for almost twenty-five years now, I have come through psy-cholinguistics and the construction of meaning to whole language. My undergraduate students — on many different fronts — are persuaded that whole language, is THE way to teach literacy. Given the current emphasis on children's

literature, on connecting the new and the known, on reading and writing for authentic purposes, on cooperative learning, and on integrating the learning environment, preservice teachers must know whole language. However, their education remains stunted if a limited conception of whole language is their only alternative for reading instruction. Where can these teachers turn when a child like Ryan enters their classroom? How can they structure a classroom so that a child like Ryan won't have such a devastating experience in the primary grades.

For me, this problem requires a hard look at preservice teacher education programs. Given the current emphasis on children's literature, most preservice teachers have a rich knowledge of children's books. In planning a lesson, choosing the book is the easy part; the hard part is what to do with the book once it has been read, reread, discussed, and even dramatized. My students falter when expected to pull from the book examples of grapho-phonic relationships, patterns of word structure, examples of the grammatical structure of the language, examples of defining unknown words from context, examples of making inferences or identifying themes.

A major concern for many of our undergraduates is that they have little understanding of the cuing systems of the language. Knowledge of the relationship of sounds and symbols, the relationship of parts of speech to the structure of a sentence, and the relationship of supporting details to main idea is as foreign to many undergraduates as the relationship of key signatures and chord progressions has been to me. Novice teachers, deficient in understanding the cuing systems of the language are not prepared to help young children, much less older ones, unravel the mysteries of language. Many have expressed these very real fears to me — fears

tinged with frustration that their education has been inadequate.

My contention is that in order to teach young children effectively, especially young children like Ryan, novice teachers need greater depth in several related areas. First, they need intensive instruction in the cuing systems of their language so that they will be able to articulate and explain clearly to young children those dimensions of the language for which the child is developmentally ready. When a child is reading the pattern book about the old woman who swallowed a fly (Bonne, 1985) but persists in reading that she swallowed a bug, the child needs instruction in the significance of initial consonant clusters. A follow-up lesson should be based on a book which accentuates this same *fl*-consonant cluster. As they read independently, children could be asked to write in their notebooks other words they encounter which contain this consonant cluster (Routman, 1992). If children in the classroom persist in saying and writing "he done," even after the teacher has modeled "he did" repeatedly, the teacher first needs to understand irregular verbs and past participles and the correct use of *do, did, done*. Then the teacher needs to comment to students that there is another way to say the same thing (he did) and that in a school setting, it is better to say "he did."

In higher grades, the teacher may explain the difference in the past tense and past participles. Meanwhile, the teacher should continue to model the correct use of this verb though never embarrassing a student for using the vernacular form. When a child fails to recognize the word *unhappy*, the teacher needs to talk about the prefix *un-* in relation to not only the word *happy* but in relation to words like *untied* and *unclear*. When a child reading *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963) fails to understand that Max's mother really loves him,

the teacher needs to model making this appropriate inference and then to talk about other examples of inferences.

Novice teachers, in order to help children who are struggling, need to be able to analyze the reading process. What are the elements of word recognition? What are the elements of comprehension? Simply knowing that children don't understand what they are reading doesn't enable the teacher to prepare an appropriate lesson to address the deficiency. Is a lack of background knowledge interfering with the child's ability to understand the story? Is a lack of automaticity in word recognition interfering with comprehension (Adams, 1990)? Is some particular dimension of comprehension interfering with a child's ability to understand the story, e.g., inferences, main ideas? What specific lesson can a teacher design to enable the child to meet with more success?

Conclusion

A beginning teacher, including one totally committed to whole language, needs to weave into the structure of the classroom, eclectic approaches to beginning instruction in reading and writing. It is well and good to begin each day with a big book, to give students ample opportunities to interact with books independently, to encourage the use of invented spelling in authentic kinds of writing. However, the teacher should present the sound symbol (phonological-orthographic [Adams, 1990]) relationships as one tool for approaching unknown words. Considering syntax, the teacher should discuss inflectional endings on words and explain how these endings clarify communication. The teacher should talk about compound words, contractions, prefixes and suffixes. In the realm of semantics, children should be taught to use context as one source of information in identifying unknown words and to practice new words both in isolation and in context. The teacher should model making predictions,

making inferences, and identifying main ideas and give children practice with specific examples from real literature. The teacher should point out how the cuing systems of the language interact and reinforce one another. Always the teacher should emphasize that reading and writing should make sense. Teacher and children should be excited about print.

Teacher education programs need to be intentional about adequately preparing preservice teachers to go beyond the selection of good children's books. Novice teachers should know how to enable children to make the connection between oral and written language. Novice teachers should know how to build the complex scaffolding necessary for children to break the code through the use of the graphophonic, the syntactic, and the semantic cuing systems of the language. Teacher education programs need to emphasize that not all children learn in the same way. Teacher education programs need to emphasize the importance of early and continuing experiences of success in building children's self-esteem and children's positive attitudes about literacy and about schooling. Teacher education programs are responsible to their preservice teachers and to the children whose lives these preservice teachers will one day touch.

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