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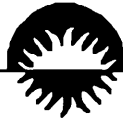


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Planning Effective Whole Language Staff Development Programs: A Guide for Staff Developers

Barbara Moss

Whole language is sweeping the country. It has been described as part of a “revolution in teaching and learning” (Hiebert and Fisher, 1990), “an exciting grass-roots teacher movement that is changing curricula around the world” (Watson, 1989), and “the newest manifestation of progressive education” (Veatch, 1991). Several factors help provide evidence for its impact. First, approximately five percent of elementary teachers nationwide are using aspects of whole language and more are becoming users daily (O’Neil, 1989). Second, twenty-three states have literacy programs centered upon the use of literature (Cullinan, 1989). Third, membership in the Teaching About Whole Language Umbrella, a network for whole language groups, is numbered at 20,000 (D. Watson, personal communication, 1990). Whole language is clearly the classroom innovation of choice for many teachers in the 1990s.

Whole language is mandated in some states or districts, but is more commonly “a grass-roots movement led by teachers” (O’Neil, 1989, p. 1). It began as a “bottom up” innovation, with individual teachers initiating implementation on their own. The enthusiasm and success of these

teachers has brought whole language to the attention of educators at all levels of the power structure.

As the movement has gained momentum, the heightened interest of teachers, administrators, and curriculum directors has intensified the need for well-planned, effectively-delivered staff development programs. This article will provide some principles, considerations, and cautions for those creating staff development programs in whole language.

Understanding whole language

Whole language represents "a view of literacy, literacy learning, and teaching that is driven by key assumptions about how students learn" (Tierney, Readence, and Dishner, 1990, p. 26). Whole language is more than an "approach" to teaching reading; it represents a philosophical orientation toward teaching and learning in general. Edelsky (1990) describes whole language as originating with Goodman's (1969) work on a psycholinguistic model of reading, evolving into a view of reading (Harste and Burke, 1977), emerging into a view of literacy education (Watson, 1982), and finally coming to represent an overall perspective on learning and teaching in general (Newman, 1985).

The assumptions undergirding the whole language approach include the views that 1) the child's language is the basis for all reading instruction; 2) language is used primarily for communication, and meaning is central to all language development; 3) speaking, reading, writing, and listening are interrelated; 4) writing is a central component to literacy learning; 5) skill instruction is presented not through isolated drills, but within the context of the material being read (Klein, Peterson and Simington, 1991). The goals of whole language instruction typically include involving

children in reading and writing on a daily basis, helping children develop the desire to read and write, providing opportunities for children to interact meaningfully with texts, helping children develop strategies for identifying words as well as comprehending text, and encouraging children to take risks as literacy learners (Routman, 1988).

Prerequisites for success

Staff development is the vehicle whereby change is most readily effected (McLaughlin and Berman, 1977); it can inform, support and promote efforts to move toward whole language. However, the successful implementation of whole language, or any innovation, requires the active support of the school district, particularly the building principal, as well as a positive school climate which encourages teacher change (Loucks-Horsley, et al., 1987). Additionally, it requires time for allowing school personnel to adjust to change. Change must be viewed as a process, not an event. According to Ohio teacher Diana Budney (personal communication, 1990), successful implementation of a whole language program requires four years: one year to master teaching through literature, a second to develop skill in process writing instruction, a third year for integration of content area instruction, and a fourth year devoted to "refinement." Finally, successful implementation requires parental involvement in the initiation and implementation phases. In schools where whole language implementation has been successful, parent involvement has been substantial (Routman, 1988).

A model for whole language staff development

Siedow's (1985) content reading inservice education model provides a framework for developing a whole language staff development plan. The six stages in the model

include 1) assessing staff needs; 2) determining inservice objectives; 3) planning content; 4) choosing methods of presentation; 5) evaluating inservice effectiveness; 6) providing follow-up assistance and reinforcement. The advantages of this model are that its elements are cyclical rather than linear, it represents an integrated, long-term approach to staff development, and it provides opportunities for participant feedback at every stage (see Figure 1) (Siedow, 1985).

Needs assessment. The first stage in the Siedow (1985) model is needs assessment. The needs assessment stage is crucial for staff development efforts, since through careful needs assessment schools and individuals can clearly identify where they are in terms of whole language and where they want to be. Needs assessment can be divided into three components: creating awareness, data collection, building-level needs assessment and individual needs assessment.

The first step in creating interest in whole language is to build awareness of the innovation. One technique is to provide an inservice session which gives an overview of the concept. Another is to encourage teachers to attend workshops, seminars, university courses, or T-A-W-L (Teaching About Whole Language) group meetings and share what they have learned with other staff members. A third way to enhance awareness is to involve teachers in reading professional journals such as *The Reading Teacher* and *Language Arts*. Finally, teachers can visit whole language classrooms (Heald-Taylor, 1989).

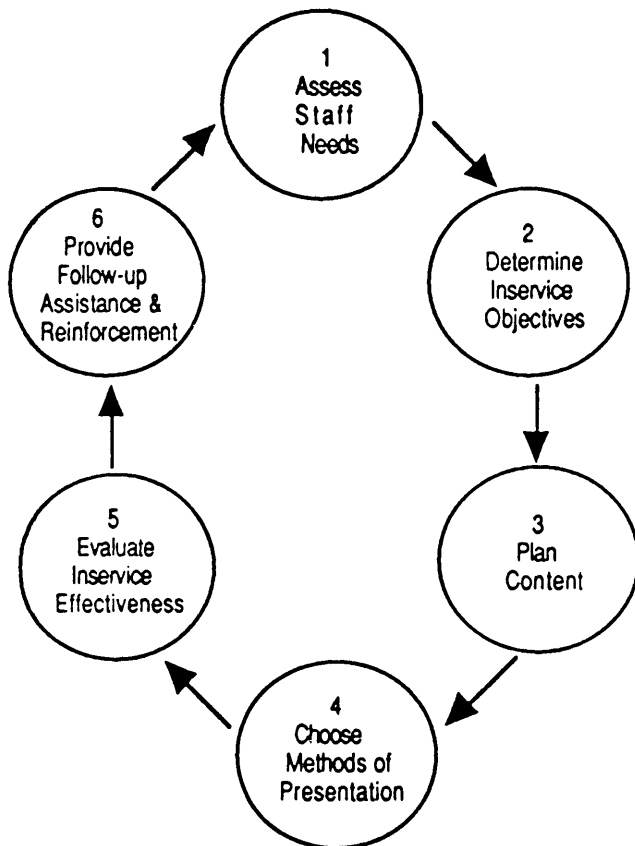
Building awareness. After general awareness of whole language has been developed, a committee of interested teachers, administrators, staff developers, and parents should be formed. This committee should represent

teachers from a variety of grade levels and disciplines. Its members will first decide whether or not whole language should be implemented; if they decide to try whole language, they will be responsible for charting the course for its implementation. Next, the committee needs to determine who will carry out the innovation. Rather than requiring all teachers to use whole language, it is often best to begin implementation with individual volunteers or with a particular grade level team. As Carnine (1988) points out, "Starting out small enough to succeed may allow the innovation to grow large enough to survive" (p. 89).

Data collection. Needs assessment provides the baseline data which the staff developer needs in order to promote change effectively (Witkin, 1975). Through the collection of data, the committee responsible for planning the implementation of whole language can find out the level of teacher interest in the innovation, the extent to which the innovation is already being used, and teacher concerns about the innovation. Ultimately, the data collected during this phase can be used to formulate building-level and individual objectives for implementation of the innovation.

During the data collection phase of needs assessment, committee members must be trained to gather the information the committee will need to formulate its objectives. Data collection can be informal as well as formal; it can be as simple as asking interested teachers to brainstorm ways in which they could use whole language, or it can involve the use of interviews, classroom observations (Hollingsworth, Reutzel, and Weeks, 1990) or questionnaires. All of these forms of data collection can help provide needed information about building-level as well as individual needs.

Figure 1
A model for planning, implementing and evaluating whole language staff development



Adapted from Siedow, M.D., Memory, D.M., Bristow, P.S. (1985). 'Inservice education for content area teachers. Newark DE International Reading Association.

Building-level needs assessment. The best building-level needs assessment provides planners with a portrait of present school practice in language arts instruction compared to an ideal vision. This ideal whole language program, for example, might include all of the characteristics

for effective language arts programs identified by the *California English Language Arts Framework* (see Figure 2) (California Department of Education, 1987). Because of limitations including time, resources, etc., not all schools will be able to achieve their ideal vision of whole language instruction. They can, however, identify realistic goals based upon their own unique situations.

Figure 2
Guidelines for effective language arts programs

- An integrated literature based program.
- A systematic kindergarten through grade twelve developmental language program.
- A process writing program.
- An integrated oral language program.
- A phonics program taught in meaningful context and completed in the early grades.
- A school environment where teachers of all subjects encourage reading, writing, speaking, and listening.
- A school environment where parents model effective speaking, listening, reading and writing.
- An assessment program providing alternate forms of testing.

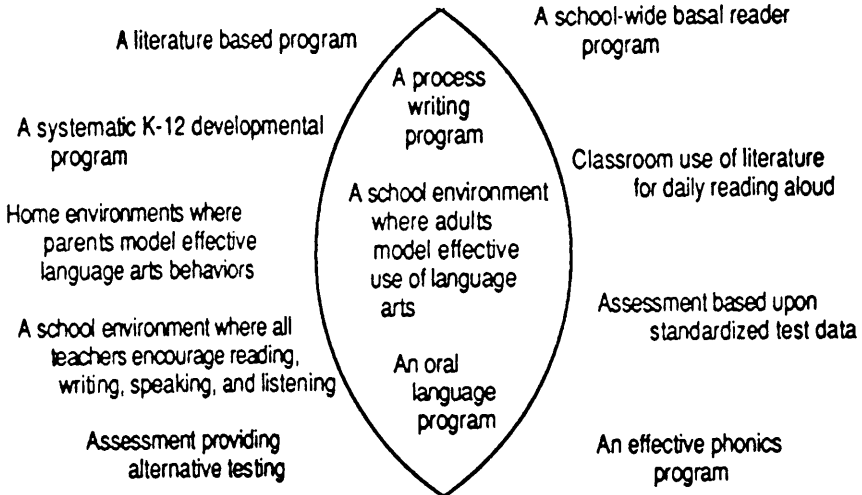
Adapted from California State Department of Education (1987). English Language Arts Framework. Sacramento: CA California State Department of Education.

The use of a Venn diagram, a visual organizer often used in whole language teaching, can provide a means of comparing a school's present literacy instruction program with an ideal one. This comparison, coupled with information collected during the data collection phase, can help a district or school identify goals for implementation of whole language.

Figure 3
Venn diagram comparing ideal whole language programs with one school's reading/writing program

Characteristics of Whole Language Programs

Our School Program



The left circle of the Venn diagram identifies characteristics of an effective whole language program, while the right circle indicates actual practice in a given school. The overlapping portion of the diagram illustrates those areas in which the ideal is being achieved. For example, Figure 3 illustrates a school which presently uses a school-wide basal reader, but has already implemented a process writing program. They do not yet have a literature based program. From this comparison, committee members can see which aspects of whole language are being addressed and those which need further attention. This information will be used to identify objectives for the staff development program.

Individual needs assessment. The committee must be careful not to only identify general needs through examination of aggregate data, but also consider individual needs of teachers, many of whom may already be using some or many aspects of whole language (Lentz, 1983). Classroom observation and questionnaires can provide information about teachers' perceptions of this innovation. For example, by using a brief structured interview with interested teachers, committee members can determine their extent of knowledge about whole language, their use of whole language, and their willingness to learn more. Moreover, this information will help the committee identify teachers' understandings and misunderstandings about whole language. Questions such as: 1) *How would you define the term whole language?*; 2) *What do you already know about whole language?*; 3) *Here are some techniques associated with whole language – language experience approach, shared reading experiences, process writing, sustained silent reading. Are you already using some of these? Which ones?*; 4) *Which aspects of whole language would you like to learn more about?* can provide data gatherers with valuable information about a school's readiness to implement whole language.

Determining objectives

Stage three of Siedow's (1985) model involves determining objectives for the staff development program. Examination of building-level and teacher needs can help the committee identify and prioritize objectives. This process is particularly complex because whole language represents not just one innovation, but a variety of innovations. The guidelines for the California Language Arts Framework, for example, address the use of literature, process writing, oral language, higher-order thinking skills, and informal assessment, each of which constitutes a possible topic for a

long term staff development program. Again using the school in the Venn diagram as an example, a school which has predominantly used basal readers may identify several possible building-level goals including implementation of a literature based program, development of an alternative assessment program, creation of a systematic K-12 developmental program, or a parental awareness program designed to help parents model effective language arts behaviors. At this point, the school must determine which objectives will have priority. To do this, the committee must consider at least two issues. First and foremost, they must consider their own resources. It is impossible, for example, to implement a literature-based program without having a great many trade books available. Therefore, a district which cannot readily acquire those books may wish to make implementation of a parental awareness program, a virtually cost-free innovation, a priority instead. Second, the committee should consider teachers' present use of various aspects of whole language. If a number of teachers are already implementing literature based units, for example, they can serve as "in-house experts," thus providing assistance for other teachers just beginning such use.

Once building-level goals have been determined, the committee needs to identify the steps required to meet these goals. To do this, each goal may be divided into sub-goals which can be put on a time line and be considered in terms of materials, beliefs, methods and student outcomes (Siedow, 1985). Likewise, teachers, in concert with their building principal, may identify individual goals pertinent to this building-level goal. A teacher who already uses literature extensively may choose to identify the development of literature units as her goal; one who uses very little literature may make providing time for sustained silent reading of literature a goal.

Planning content

Stage three of the Siedow Model involves planning the content for the staff development program. Prioritized building goals provide direction for the type of content to be included in staff development sessions. Planning of program content should proceed collaboratively with the identified staff developer. If, for example, classroom use of literature is a goal, the following topics might provide the framework for year-long staff development sessions: reading aloud to students; learning about recent children's literature; integrating literature with the basal reader; building reading/writing connections through literature; developing classroom literature units; and using literature across the curriculum. If sessions are presented in the order given, content will be sequenced so that participants are taken gradually from familiar, easier to implement ones. This practice is consistent with Goodman's (1986) suggestion that teachers move from the basal reader to authentic reading in a gradual manner, and with research indicating that teachers implement easier aspects of innovations more rapidly than more difficult ones (Moss, 1988).

Choosing methods of presentation

Stage four of Siedow's model involves making decisions about how effective inservice can best be delivered. During this stage, planners must consider the *where*, *when*, *who* and *how* of staff development. Staff development sessions should be held in areas with comfortable physical surroundings; they should be presented at times most convenient to participants. This may be on Saturdays, during the summer, or in the evening. After-school inservice programs are generally undesirable.

Selecting presenters. Determining who will conduct staff development sessions is crucial. Teachers prefer

presenters who are enthusiastic, knowledgeable, organized and actively involve learners rather than those who simply lecture (Vacca, 1981). Schools should carefully screen potential presenters to ensure that they possess these characteristics. A district may wish to engage a single presenter for the entire program or have a variety of presenters with expertise in particular aspects of whole language. They may also elect to combine the use of outside consultants with local talent.

Content delivery. How staff development is delivered is yet another crucial consideration. Good teaching and good staff development are parallel processes (Carnine, 1988). Therefore, principles of good teaching should apply to all staff development efforts. Three components of good instruction which should be considered include: 1) linking new information to the known; 2) presenting information in ways consistent with program objectives and whole language practice; 3) allowing teachers to practice new learnings in a non-threatening setting.

Link new information to the known. Good staff developers, like good whole language teachers, consider participants' background knowledge when presenting new information. K-W-L (Ogle, 1986), a content area reading strategy, can help to achieve this goal. In an inservice program on literature, the staff developer might ask teachers to brainstorm in small groups what they already *know* about using literature in the classroom. This helps teachers recognize they already have a storehouse of information about this concept. Step two, *Want to know?* requires that teachers formulate questions indicating what they want to know about using literature in the classroom. These questions provide a framework for the staff developer, clearly identifying teachers' interests. Finally, at the end of the session,

teachers brainstorm a list of *learnings* derived from the session. Through the modeling of K-W-L, teachers' background knowledge is activated, questions are formulated, new learnings are summarized, and an excellent classroom strategy is modeled.

Present information in ways consistent with whole language. Material should be presented in ways consistent with the objectives of the program and with instructional precepts associated with whole language. Andrea Butler (1988) suggests that whole language learners benefit from demonstrations, require time and opportunities to practice what they are learning, and learn best when assured that learning represents the process of "approximating" particular behaviors, not replicating them. These guidelines closely parallel Joyce and Showers' (1980) five components for effective staff development: presentation of theory or description of skill or strategy; modeling or demonstration of skill or strategy; practice in use of the strategy; structured or open-ended feedback; and coaching for application and transfer of the strategy to the classroom.

Provide time to practice new learnings. Teachers involved in staff development programs must practice what they have learned and obtain feedback on their performance. Teachers need "coaching" in order to gain feedback (Joyce and Showers, 1982). Ideally coaching should come from peers who observe the introduction of new strategies in the teacher's actual classroom and should continue until the teacher gains control over the innovation.

Evaluating inservice effectiveness

The fifth stage of the Siedow model involves evaluation of the staff development program's effectiveness. The

evaluation phase mirrors the needs assessment stage. Attainment of identified building-level and individual objectives is assessed at the end of the staff development program, using many of the same instruments suggested for the needs assessment phase. At this point, committee members might again use the Venn diagram to identify their progress toward various goals and conduct further classroom observations and interviews. Other aspects of the program which must be assessed include the content of the program, the effectiveness of presenters, and student learnings resulting from teacher implementation of new instructional strategies.

Providing follow-up assistance and reinforcement

The final stage of the Siedow model involves providing teachers with assistance and reinforcement following the staff development program. In many ways, classroom implementation of whole language represents the beginning of the staff development process rather than the end. Implementation does not equal delivery of an innovation (Hord and Huling-Austin, 1986) and the first year of implementation is usually the most stressful and anxiety producing (Berman and McLaughlin, 1975; Orlich, 1989). According to Fullan (1990), implementation of innovations requires that teachers change their methods, materials and beliefs. For example, teachers incorporating a literature program may be using new instructional strategies such as thematic units or shared readings, substituting children's trade books for the basal reader, and struggling with the disequilibrium created when teachers change the way they teach. Not surprisingly, such teachers require active support from their building principal, peers, and parents. The lack of such support may cause teachers to abandon innovations long before they have had a chance to get

results. Barriers to whole language implementation include lack of resources, teacher concerns regarding accountability, misconceptions about whole language, and resistance to change (Ridley, 1990). Effective follow-up and reinforcement of inservice learnings can help teachers to overcome many of these obstacles. Such efforts may take many different forms; they can include, for example, informal buzz sessions, demonstration lessons, and parent information sessions.

Summary

According to McCaslin (1989), "the future challenge for whole-language advocates as I see it is to attend to issues of practice from the perspective of teacher learning and feasibility of implementation" (p. 228). Effective implementation of whole language programs is predicated upon well-designed staff development programs. To be successful, whole language staff development programs must be long-term sustained efforts which follow the six stages of the Siedow model. In addition, whole language staff development programs should effectively model the tenets upon which whole language is based; they should be participant-centered, effectively move learners from the known to the new, and provide opportunities for participants to try out new learnings. Staff development programs based upon the principles described herein will require time and commitment on the part of all school personnel. Change is never easy, but effective staff development can make it less difficult. Moreover, long-term staff development programs which consider the needs and concerns of teachers and approach the change process through incremental steps will be more likely to result in the successful initiation of whole language programs than those which do not. Through effective staff development, school personnel can obtain the skills, attitudes, and values which will make their

involvement in this innovation a rewarding opportunity for professional growth.

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