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## Professional Book Review

Mary E. Hauser  
*Western Michigan University*

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## Professional Book Review

*This book was selected for review because of its compatibility with the subject matter of this special issue. Whole language approaches such as those described in this book require a rethinking of our ideas about grouping students as well as about the nature of the learning environment that we create to support learning. This book provides a theoretical framework for whole language instruction as well as examples of its application to classroom instruction. (MEH)*

*Early Literacy: A Constructivist Foundation for Whole Language.* C. Kamii, M. Manning, and G. Manning, Editors. National Education Association, Washington D.C. ISBN 0-8106-0355-1. 1991. 160 pp.

Reviewed by Mary E. Hauser  
Western Michigan University

Consideration of literacy education and whole language teaching from the perspective of constructivist theory and research is the stated purpose of this practical volume. The editors have collected chapters from many experts in the area of whole language teaching that advance educational practices based on a scientific explanation of how human beings acquire knowledge. The editors describe the whole language movement as part of a larger revolution in our thinking about learning and teaching. It is their desire to equip practitioners with information to explain, evaluate, and improve their knowledge of whole language.

The first chapter, by Kamii, presents a definition of constructivism drawn from the ideas of Jean Piaget. Kamii was a student of his and has written extensively on constructivist education. While a thorough discussion of Piagetian theory is beyond the scope of this book, the

reader unfamiliar with his ideas will acquire sufficient information to make the topics of the chapters that follow meaningful.

Chapter two, by Ferreiro, elaborates on constructivist theory from the perspective of the development of the representation of language. Questions such as *what should be introduced first, reading or writing?* and *how should letters be introduced?* are considered from a constructivist perspective. Ferreiro states that these questions cannot be answered as different teaching methods; rather the response should be based on the understanding of the process by which children construct knowledge.

Unfortunately chapter three, a study of how French school children construct their knowledge about written language, is difficult to get meaning from without an understanding of the French language. The authors attempt to provide comparable examples from English and point out that, despite the differences in writing French and English, there are similarities in the way all children go about solving problems. However, the examples presented in the chapter do not help readers who are not familiar with French. We have to accept the conclusions that the fundamental constructivist and interactionist view of Piagetian psychology appears to be a fruitful approach to the psychological study of writing without a good understanding of the presented evidence.

Chapter four looks at a comparative study of the development of spelling in two groups of young children: Spanish speakers and English speakers. It provides needed background information about invented or temporary spelling that is gaining acceptance in some classrooms. Also explained is the fact that use of invented spelling is

based on a developmental process of construction that children go through as they try to make sense of the writing they find in their environments. Subsequent chapters discuss aspects of literacy development and how they can be taught from a constructivist perspective. There is no specific formula to learn, as Ferreiro points out in chapter two. What is advocated is that teachers adopt a perspective that considers the activities in language learning as processes of making meaning instead of a collection of surface skills and bits of information. Indeed, the editors point out, *whole* language denotes an opposition to language fragmented into parts. Additionally, it is important for teachers to view the child as an actor in a social context who draws on the sum total of personal literacy experiences in learning. These themes are evident in each chapter.

While not based specifically on constructivist theory, the whole language approach that is used nationally in New Zealand is very compatible with constructivist teaching. Chapter five describes the five components of the teaching routine which carry out the idea that children learn to read by reading rather than by learning decontextualized skills. Big books, an integral part of the reading program, are discussed in chapter six by Holdaway, the “creator” of the shared reading experience. The shared book experience was developed to meet the challenge of a growing migrant population of Pacific Islanders as well as Maori people who were moving from rural districts to urban schools.

Chapter seven on modeled writing, prepared by editors M. and G. Manning can easily be seen as a variation of the language experience story approach used in many primary classrooms. This familiar activity provides a good vehicle to understand the constructive processes that can occur during such a lesson. Analysis of the interactions be-

tween the teacher and students provide the reader with an understanding of how this process enables the children to construct their knowledge about reading. Of special note is the classroom atmosphere that allows the children to respond informally and spontaneously during the activity both to the teacher and to one another. This element is essential to the constructive process.

The authors of chapter eight, Lewis and Long, use a Piagetian perspective to try to understand just what makes certain children's books so popular. Four widely read books are analyzed to determine how they foster the assimilation and accommodation of information that occurs during children's construction of knowledge. Their analysis suggests that certain books do a better job than others of allowing children to elaborate their knowledge. When children select such books again and again, it is likely that they are books that serve this purpose.

Chapter nine examines the assessment of early literacy using portfolios. The author, Engel, shows how the information in portfolios can provide information for everyone who needs and wants to know about children's progress – teachers, parents, administrators, school board members, and the community at large. She shows how portfolios can provide an informative alternative to standardized tests. Since one of the problems in implementing whole language instruction often is how to evaluate progress, this chapter will be helpful to teachers and administrators alike.

Teachers and preservice students who are working to deepen their understanding of the relationship between constructivist ideas of teaching and whole language instruction will find this book useful.