

The Future of Whole Language

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Abstract

Whole language is a dynamic and generative philosophy of education that started as a grass roots teacher movement. Throughout its history it has been lauded worldwide as well as being attacked. This article explores whole language through two lenses. First it examines the history of whole language through the eyes of someone who participated in the grass-roots movement. Secondly, the future of whole language is examined through the voices of whole language and literacy leaders. Their answers to questions about whole language's fit with progressive education, its greatest accomplishment and its future direction offer support and encouragement for progressive, holistic educators around the world.

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The Future of Whole Language

Whole Language, a grass roots progressive teaching and learning movement, has enjoyed monumental success and has endured venomous attacks over the last 35 years. Whole language represents a paradigm shift from a skill, drill and direct instruction model of reading and learning to a holistic and dynamic philosophy that is student centered and meaning focused. As Ken Goodman, one of the founders of whole language suggests, “whole language has had a profound influence on how curriculum, materials, methodology and assessment are viewed.... [it] has helped to redefine teaching and its relationship to learning” (1998, p. 3).

Goodman often says that he didn't found whole language, but whole language found him. In the mid-1960's Goodman's interest in reading as a language process led him to ask students to read stories aloud from a textbook called a basal reader. He taped their reading and then marked their deviations from print. Unlike practices of the time that focused on locating errors and drilling readers to correct them, Goodman likened reading to language emergence and viewed the assessment as a “window on the reading process” (1973, p.3). From that first study he coined the term *miscue*, meaning “a point in reading where the expected response (ER) and the observed response (OR) are not the same” (Brown, Goodman and Marek, 1996, p. vi). Miscue analysis grew steadily from that point, emerging as a valid and useful reading assessment tool (Goodman, 1981; Goodman, Watson and Burke, 1987/2005; Brown, Goodman & Marek, 1996). About the same time, Frank Smith (1971, 1973), in his exploration of psycholinguistics and reading, suggested that focusing on the smallest unit of language made reading more difficult and that “children learn to read only by reading” (1973, p. 195).

Canadian teachers who examined children's reading and writing and realized that they needed to move away from fragmented language first used the term whole language in the late 1970's. In print, the first reference to *whole language* occurred in a research article when Burke and Harste used it to describe one of their theoretical orientations (Harste & Burke, 1977). The insights discovered by Goodman, Smith, Harste and Burke and many others prompted a huge grass-roots teacher movement that was not static, but generative. Many of the practices still used today, including a focus on children's literature, literature study, strategies in reading and authentic reading assessment, have their roots in whole language.

In order to explore the future of whole language, it is important to visit the past. Thus, this article is divided into two parts. First, I examine whole language through a personal and historic lens. As a special education teacher and later a graduate student and professor at the University of Missouri- Columbia, I participated in the whole language movement as it grew from a few teachers in Canada, Missouri, Indiana, Arizona and Australia to the first Whole Language Umbrella (WLU) conference with over 2100 participants in 1990. My theoretical base is whole language, and I celebrate this bias. Although my personal timeline of whole language may be somewhat different than others, it demonstrates the dynamic nature of the whole language movement.

In the second part of the article, I widen the lens to examine the responses of ten international literacy leaders who answered three questions about the future of whole language. Each person was interviewed face to face or via email. Focusing on their responses moves the discussion from the history to the future of whole language.

A Personal History of Whole Language

My beginnings with whole language

Because my history is personal I highlight some aspects and omit others. Had I lived in Arizona, Indiana, Canada or Australia, some of the names would be different, but the main threads of the story would be similar. My apologies to those researchers and teachers who were so important and who have been inadvertently omitted.

My first encounter with whole language began in 1979 when I took Dr. Dorothy Watson's "Miscue Analysis" class at the University of Missouri, Columbia. Watson, a Ph.D. student of Ken Goodman, was hired to fill Sterl Artley's position upon his retirement. Artley was one of the authors of the *Dick and Jane* (4th grade edition) basal reading textbook series. Even though many of us in Missouri subscribed to a skill model and used scripted basal readers, by listening to children read and by looking at individual miscues in Watson's class, we began to question how reading and writing worked. We explored the function of syntactic, semantic and phonological cuing systems and wondered how understanding the cuing systems a child used (or didn't use) helped teachers make instructional decisions. Through class assignments, we learned the marking and the coding used in miscue analysis. We looked closely at various texts and predicted trouble spots for readers based on the nature of the text. As a requirement for that course, I gave my first miscue assessment to a high school struggling reader. I quickly realized the power of this evaluation. After completing the miscue analysis, I actually knew how to help him!

Dorothy introduced us to the research of Dewey (1938, 1943) Vygotsky (1978), Inhelder & Piaget (1959), Halliday (1975), Rosenblatt (1938/1976) and others that form the foundation for whole language. From this base, we generated holistic strategies to help readers become more independent. I remember trying, timidly at first, whole language strategies with my special needs students. I was amazed at the positive response from my students the first time I tried silent reading or journal writing without a prompt instead of relying on the color coded worksheets I normally used. Because my colleagues used skill and drill practices and depended on worksheets, veering away from the pre-set curriculum was a risky practice. Colleagues shook their heads at my techniques and were sure my students wouldn't progress –but they did.

The miscue analysis course quickly led to other experiences where classmates and I examined the scope of whole language. Dorothy helped us value children's literature and understand its central role in motivating and satisfying readers. We delved deeper into writing and reading strategies, and how young children learn. Drawing on the work of Graves (1981) and Calkins (1983) in the U.S. and Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, and Rosen (1975) in the UK, we explored the writing process. We read and discussed the work of Charles Read (1975) and Emilia Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982) and explored how very young children first spell what they hear. We immediately saw natural links to phonics. We read the "kidwatching" article by Yetta Goodman (1985) and began to observe students in a more informed way. Drawing on the work of Don Holdaway (1979), helped us think of possibilities beyond the basal. His comparison of "big books" to lap reading helped us understand alternatives to the basal readers that we were required to use.

As I considered the research that I was reading and the ideas Dorothy was sharing, I began to reconceptualize my thinking about child development and literacy learning. As I examined the drawings and writings of my three small children, I found that they knew far more about language and literacy than I had ever imagined! They became my teachers about how children learn and I began to understand

more deeply that closely examining children's writing, reading and talk can inform teachers (and parents) about children's curricular needs.

Watson's classes proved popular and more teachers in our area tried whole language practices in their classrooms. Simultaneously, educators from around the world—Jerry Harste and Carolyn Burke in Indiana, Ken and Yetta Goodman in Arizona, Judith Newman in Nova Scotia, Orin Cochran and Ethyl Buchannan in Winnipeg, Dorothy Menosky in New Jersey, Brian Cambourne and Jan Turbill in Australia, and many others—brought teachers together to examine whole language theory and practices.

In the mid-1980's Ken Goodman published an accessible and thoughtful primer, *What's Whole in Whole Language?* Teachers were asking for information about whole language, and his book gave teachers the confidence to try holistic practices in their classrooms. I recall in one school in Columbia, the principal gave this book to each new teacher as support! Teachers/researchers defined whole language from their own personal and professional histories (Watson, 1989), but it was important not to narrowly define the term, because that limited its dynamic and generative nature.

About that time Dorothy gave me and other graduate students—many of whom were also classroom teachers—another challenge. While editing a book of literacy strategies called *Ideas and Insights: Language Arts in the Elementary School* (1988), she challenged us to write a similar book for middle and high school. We collected whole language strategies from a variety of teachers, wrote many ourselves and in 1988 *Whole Language Strategies for Secondary Learners* (Gilles, Bixby, Crowley, Crenshaw, Henrichs, Reynolds and Pyle) was published by Richard Owen. This book extended whole language to middle and secondary teachers, helping them find ideas and strategies for readers and writers. It also reflected a basic tenant of the WL movement – teachers can use and generate professional literature and teachers working together can enhance their own practice while providing something meaningful to the profession. This collaboration among teachers, with and without university participation, can be found in the work growing out of many Teachers Applying Whole Language (TAWL) groups and further supported the teacher researcher movement and the teacher as professional movement.

Teacher support.

In the late 1980's another mile-stone in whole language history occurred. Goodman, Shannon, Freeman and Murphy published *Report Card on Basal Readers* (1988), which grew out of the Reading Commission of the National Council of Teachers of English. This book questioned the need for basal readers and showed a strong connection of basals to corporate America. Teachers began to question the lock-step nature of the basals and some eagerly turned to trade books and more open curriculum. Teachers were hungry for information about whole language and they sought out other teachers and professors to share practices and ideas. Those people who had taken classes on whole language became consultants to other districts. As a doctoral student, I offered the "Alternative Curriculum" class in many towns in Missouri. I traveled to New York, California, Arkansas and Alaska, sharing ideas and strategies about whole language. I was not alone. There was a small brigade of whole language advocates spreading the fertile ideas of whole language to teachers who were hungry for the professional knowledge needed to be informed decision-makers in their own classrooms.

Teachers supporting teachers needed systemic sustenance. Orin Cochran, Ethyl Buchannan and Orysia Hull recognized this fact and began a teacher support group in Canada, Child-centered Experience-based Learning (CEL) in the mid-1970's. In the U.S. Watson and Yetta Goodman started Teachers Applying Whole Language (TAWL) groups about 1978. (Watson in Wilde, 1996). All three groups provided a safe place where teachers shared their best student examples, supported one another in

holistic practices and extended this joyful teaching and learning. One cardinal rule was that everyone brought an idea or piece of child's work to share in order to focus on what children could do and not what they couldn't do. We shared children's literature, literacy strategies, exciting examples of children making meaning, as well as food and collegiality.

Many TAWL groups were begun by members of the Center for the Expansion of Language and Thinking (CELT), a group of educators who were committed to whole language. CELT, according to the website,

is a nonprofit educational corporation, international in scope, whose members believe in the principles of education for democracy with a focus on natural language learning and inquiry. These principles are supported by beliefs in learners and learning, teachers and teaching, and language and curriculum. The members of CELT are dedicated to the improvement of education through a greater understanding of the relationship between language, thought, and learning. (<http://www.ed.arizona.edu/celt/>)

CELT members brought interested teachers together and encouraged them to organize TAWL groups, generative grass roots organizations.

As TAWL groups began to spring up all over the U.S., there was talk at conferences of somehow taking this movement to a national level. The groundwork meetings were held and on February 18, 1989, the constitution of Whole Language Umbrella (WLU), an international organization of whole language teachers was ratified in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The first president was Dorothy Watson, someone who could galvanize teachers and keep the momentum going. Ken Goodman was designated the originator. The CEL organization added \$5.00 to an annual conference registration and the surcharge was given to WLU to fund an office and the first conference. By 1993 when I was Watson's assistant for WLU, I counted over 125 support groups in the U.S., and groups were beginning to spring up all over the world. This groundswell of support for whole language kept the ideas dynamic.

In 1990 the first WLU international conference was held in St. Louis with over 2100 participants. Although no honorarium was given, approximately 100 teachers and researchers presented. A feeling of camaraderie flowed, from the guitar music for people waiting to register to the student examples that covered hotel walls. There were small 'conversation' sessions for teachers to talk at length with researchers like Jerry Harste or Donald Graves. Teachers, not only were listeners, they also presented to the literacy giants. And the giants listened. Because I helped organize this conference, I remember worrying during the planning phase if anyone would come. By early July I was worried that we could not accommodate the numbers of registrants! The first conference brought a national face to whole language. It was not a fragmented movement in pockets around the country, but a real entity that united all the groups in a common purpose.

Curricular Explosions.

Curricularly the late 1980's and early 1990's erupted through a rash of publications extending whole language pedagogy. Constance Weaver drew together much of the holistic thinking about reading in her *Reading Process and Practice* (1988), which became a textbook for literacy courses around the U.S. Peterson & Eeds (1990) and Short and Pierce (1990) extended the reading curriculum through their work on literature study, an alternative to the basal reader. Controlled vocabulary, assigned stories and worksheets were replaced with literature discussions, powerful children and young adolescent books and small groups of students who read and critiqued them. Students read real books and talked and wrote about them. Literature discussion was based on a simple idea – that talk and writing were powerful ways to get kids to think deeply about literature. Of course, to get students reading, thinking and talking about

books, a community of learners had to be established and sustained. Ralph Peterson's work on building and nurturing classroom communities (*Life in a Crowded Place*, 1992) helped teachers realize that the routines they used and the celebrations and ceremonies they employed helped students feel safe in classrooms and ready to tackle challenging thinking. Using literature study also helped us think more deeply about the value of talk in the classroom.

About this time I decided to examine literature groups of special needs students for my dissertation topic. I met with a group of teachers from Columbia and St. Louis, who spent two years studying talk across the curriculum. We were guided by the work of Douglas Barnes (1978) who eventually visited the U.S. to work with us. Our work culminated in my dissertation and the book, *Cycles of Meaning* (Pierce & Gilles, 1993), one of the first examinations of talk across the curriculum in the U.S., although much had been done in England through the National Oracy Project. Examining talk opened still another avenue to whole language. We now were concerned with reading, writing, talking and listening. Because whole language was not narrowly defined, it could expand with new ideas and practices. Our broad definitions allowed Whole Language to expand according to our growing notions of literacy.

It is important to realize how particular threads in the whole language movement emerged, that all of these threads continued and wove the fabric of whole language. By the early 1990's many teachers knew of and some used miscue analysis, big books with young students, language experience, reading strategies, the writing process, and literature study. Educators may have even heard of talk in the curriculum. Each of these areas was supported by an influx of professional books from publishers such as Heinemann, Richard C. Owen Publishers, and Stenhouse. Teachers devoured professional books and attended conferences in record numbers to learn more about teaching with fewer directives from textbooks and mandates.

It made sense that whole language should move beyond reading and writing. Skeptics of whole language asked about evaluation. If whole language advocates rejected testing in favor of observation and kidwatching, then how could teachers be accountable? A number of assessment articles and books were published in response to such questions (Goodman, Goodman and Hood, 1989; Goodman, Goodman & Bird-Bridges, 1995; Harp, 1996). Informal assessment measures including anecdotal records, checklists, observational charts, scoring guides and student portfolios emerged as ways to measure students' learning. Besides evaluation from a teacher, whole language advocates looked to self-evaluation and peer evaluation as important parts of the assessment cycle. Of course miscue analysis continued to be refined as an assessment technique, and eventually retrospective miscue analysis was added (Goodman & Merek, 1996; Moore & Gilles, 2005).

Another area of growth was inquiry. As early as 1989, Watson, Burke and Harste wrote *Whole Language: Inquiring Voices*, in which they introduced teachers to inquiry as a curriculum model. They suggested that instead of depending on scope and skill charts from publishers that teachers organize the curriculum around children exploring their worlds in and outside the classroom. Using themes, children learned about reading and writing as they researched and explored their world (Manning, Manning and Long, 1994; Strube, 1993). Harste and Burke published *Creating Classrooms for Authors* (1988), which helped teachers understand the inquiry cycle. Carole Edelsky, Bess Altwerger and Barbara Flores (1991) extended this idea through theme cycles. Instead of constructing units in which the topics were used for teaching skills and content, the authors suggested that "symbolic skills and tools serve content (p. 65). Instead of working on specific activities usually generated by the teacher, students set the problem, found the resources, and interpreted the data with the teacher acting as a guide to their exploration. This in-depth study encouraged questioning of social and political norms and moved education to one "that fosters understanding, justice and compassion, which emerge equally from the content and process of

teaching and learning” (p. 68). This stance motivated at least some whole language teachers to begin to consider issues of social justice.

In the last five years or so, many whole language advocates have begun to explore the critical nature of pedagogy, including critical literacy and critical talk. Critical pedagogy, which first emerged from Australia, drew on the work of Friere (1970, 1985) and Bakhtin (1981, 1984). Brian Street (1995) suggested that children need an awareness of the ideological and social construction of language and literacy. Luke (1995) extended the argument to the social relations and power that surrounds texts. Cambourne (Taylor, 2001) furthered our understanding by defining three kinds of literacy: functional (reading and writing well enough to get by), literacy for personal growth and development (more interpretive literacy) and literacy for social equity and social justice (critical literacy). Although critical literacy is well supported with theory, the classroom practices are not as clear (Behrman, 2006). Many whole language advocates are now working on defining and describing classroom practices that are consistent with whole language principles and critical literacy (Leland, Harste, Davis, Haas, McDaniel & Parsons, 2003; K. Vasquez, 2003/2004; Van Sluys, Lewison, and Seely-Flint, 2006) and critical talk (K. Smith, 2001; Wilson, 2005).

Critical times.

With teachers reading professional books, trying new things in their classrooms and moving away from textbook materials, whole language made enemies. The criticism began in earnest in the 1990's with Adams *Beginning to Read* and continues today. Following are some of the reasons why whole language philosophy was attacked. This list is not exhaustive. For more information see Boran & Comber, 2001; Dudley-Marling & Edelsky, 2001; Goodman, 1998; Goodman, Shannon, Y. Goodman and Rapoport, 2004.

One unfortunate occurrence was that some school districts mandated whole language. This was the antithesis of whole language practice that called for choice, but it was done in the name of progress. Teachers who had little experience in or information about whole language were required to use it. Mandating whole language equated it to a collection of strategies or lessons, instead of a philosophy of language, teaching and learning. Some teachers rejected it simply because it was being mandated. Because whole language was seen as a reform movement, workshops often presented whole language practices in one column with the 'traditional' practices in the other. Although it seemed appropriate to contrast whole language with current practices, using a two valued orientation actually masked many of the complexities of whole language and, at the same time was polarizing. Teachers who found their beliefs termed as *traditional*, began to feel that they previously had been doing everything wrong, and consequently became hostile or tentative in their practices. They were skeptical of whole language and felt polarized by the rhetoric. Although many teachers claimed they “were whole language” because they had taken one workshop, their knowledge base wasn't strong and the practices they advocated were, for them, tentative and problematic. My favorite example was the teacher who had penciled in her plan book “whole language” 10 minutes before lunch. Instead of a philosophy that guided her practice, whole language was 10 minutes of reading aloud!

Parents, unaware of the benefits of holistic practices, questioned them. Parents were concerned that the familiar parts of the curriculum—the spelling tests, diagramming sentences, and vocabulary drills—were no longer used. Teachers wanted to save papers and put them in portfolios instead of sending them home. Parents put pressure on school administrators who pressured the teachers – the very ones who were vulnerable and alienated. (Church, 2001). Fundamental Christian parents were especially critical of whole language because they feared that classroom experiences would conflict with their children's religious upbringing (Brinkley, 1998). Weaver and Brinkley (1998) suggest that the political

far right played on parental fears about authority, control and tradition and attacked whole language through media and the pulpit.

About the same time whole language researchers felt pressure from more traditional reading theorists. At first the debates about whole language and phonics were academic and congenial, held at reading conferences (Smith, 1994). But rapidly the sides polarized into rather inflexible oppositions. Pearson reminded us that since both sides cringed at each other's rhetoric (from *errors* and *time on task* to *miscues* and *empowerment*) it "makes it difficult for individuals with different belief systems to find out what they have in common" (1989, p. 239). Gee (2001) suggests that each of the core values of progressive education has a 'double-sided' twin. For example, "child centeredness" conjures up "permissiveness" for some (p. 31-32). Each value stirs up some directly linked opposite. Thus the language itself intensified the opposition.

The media simplified these differences to the "Reading Wars" and defined the issue as a question of phonics versus whole language. At the outset such a dichotomy was inaccurate as whole language instruction includes all the systems of language, including phonics or graphophonics. The rhetoric was reduced to sound bytes and the battle lines had been drawn. Sharon Murphy looked at more than 20 articles from December 1994 to May of 1997 in five major U.S. newspapers (*Christian Science Monitor, Los Angeles Times, New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post.*) She found that only 24% were positive toward whole language. She concluded, "Given the alleged pervasiveness of whole language, the statistics reveal a lopsided position of the press" (1998, p. 164).

Last, on the national level, whole language was first caught in the standards and then in the assessment and accountability push. California attempted to adopt a holistic language and literacy program. When the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test scores were revealed in 1994, California's scores were low. The fact that California had no whole language staff development, the largest class sizes in the nation, severe budget cuts and the largest immigrant population in the country was ignored; nevertheless, whole language was singled out as the reason for the low test scores (Freeman, D, & Freeman Y., 1998).

In 2000 the National Reading Panel published their meta-study of reading research (<http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/nrp/smallbook.htm>). Narrowly defining "scientific research" to include only deductive, positivist, empirical research, the panel ignored a large set of data. They concluded that phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension were crucial to reading success. Since whole language was meaning-centered, founded in the belief that the smaller parts of language were learned in context, the NRP report was a blow to WL curricula.

The NRP data were used in the late 1990's when the Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (No Child Left Behind) was passed. The federal government mandated testing and accountability measures for schools. In addition, if schools received Reading First money they were required to use particular materials consisting of packaged programs and basal textbooks. Whole language practices and beliefs were outlawed in California and discouraged elsewhere. Goodman believes that NCLB was a "conservative movement to privatize American education present[ing] itself as a reform movement" (K.Goodman, Shannon, Y. Goodman & Rapoport, 2004, p. 5).

The Future of Whole Language

In 2006, is whole language in North America wounded or even alive? Although on the national front it seems discredited and embattled, there are quiet life-forms still at work. The Whole Language Umbrella merged with the National Council of Teachers of English and remains solvent. At first, membership sank and funds were scarce, but the last year looked more positive for the WLU. The summer conference registration was three times that of the previous year. Many of the practices that are currently in place in the United States (language experience, student-centered evaluation, inquiry, holistic reading and writing strategies, transmediation of knowing, literacy in the arts and sciences, etc.) can be linked directly to whole language. I still teach a course named “Whole Language Curriculum” at the University of Missouri and it fills.

Whole language has moved beyond North America. Yetta and Ken Goodman and others have been in Britain, Europe, Africa, and Asia where interest in WL principles is keen. Whole language is growing particularly in settings where teachers and principals appreciate the connections among language, culture and power.

Because whole language is a worldwide phenomenon, I chose to interview those people who had been influential in whole language or who were presently involved in literacy worldwide. I contacted 18 such leaders and ten responded. I interviewed founders and leaders in the North American Whole Language movement, (Ken Goodman, Dorothy Watson and Jerry Harste), current leaders in North American literacy (Rick Meyer, president of the Center for the Expansion of Language and Thinking; Amy Seely Flint, past-president of the Whole Language Umbrella and Randy Bomer, past president of the National Council of Teachers of English); and whole language/literacy leaders from across the world (Brian Cambourne of Australia; Peter Duckett of Cairo, Egypt; Elisa Waingort, past WLU board member from Quito, Ecuador; and Lian-Ju Lee from Taiwan.) Each responded to three questions that I hoped would frame the discussion about whole language’s future:

- 1) How does whole language fit into progressive education?
- 2) What has been the largest accomplishment of whole language? and
- 3) What is the future of whole language worldwide?

Each question is discussed below.

How does whole language fit into progressive education?

All of the leaders interviewed concurred that whole language is strongly connected to progressive education. Progressive education is defined by Harste as being “about the business of making schools more effective agencies of democratic community... Key principles involve a respect for diversity and the development of a critically and socially engaged citizenry.” Most leaders linked progressive education to the contributions of John Dewey (1938, 1943) who rooted the child firmly at the center of the curriculum and explored the role of democracy in education. Meyer suggests the basic tenets of progressive education are “teacher reflection, locally grown curriculum, child-centeredness, teacher research, a view of children as fundamentally good and curious, a view of learning as social and cultural and the importance of on-going teacher conversations.” Waingort defines it more locally as “forward looking and addressing the needs of teachers, schools, parents, students and local communities... [It] is finding new solutions to problems by using the expertise and knowledge of everyone that is impacted and impacts schools at a local level.”

Within progressive education, leaders varied somewhat about the role of whole language. However, many felt it extended knowledge in language and literacy. Harste felt that whole language is an “expression of progressive education” and as such contributes to “a deeper understanding of the role that oral and written language played in language learning specifically and all learning more

generally.” Goodman feels that “whole language brought to the philosophical base scientific understanding of how language relates to language and literature.” Bomer believes that whole language is a “continuation of progressive education under a different name with new insights from linguistics and reading.” He suggests the important contribution of whole language is that “ordinary readers are good enough to make something of what print says, that they can bring their interests, their aims, their daily competence and use it to make meaning.”

Seely-Flint sees whole language as an integral part of progressive education because both share a belief about developing curriculum that is “holistic, relevant and authentic.” She sees whole language as foundational to critical pedagogy and in particular critical literacy, which “invites students to consider the multiple and varied ways literacy practices matter to the participants and their place in the world.”

Cambourne suggests that progressive education according to Dewey fits whole language “like a glove.” He emphasizes the importance of literacy in a democracy. He believes Whole language is more of an ideology founded in social equity and the democratic process based on the assumption that schools must produce highly productive critically literate graduates if democracy as we know it is to survive. Given this assumption teachers and policy makers have no right to make learning to be literate any more complex than necessary and WL principles are currently the best principles that fully and correctly applied will make it as easy and barrier free as possible for all learners. One of Cambourne’s points that struck me was that in his view WL made learning to read and write easier than the more traditional literacy curriculum. This fits nicely with Frank Smith’s “12 Easy Ways to Make Learning to Read Difficult and One Difficult Way to Make it Easy” (1973).

Waingort, from Ecuador, finds whole language is progressive education because it “sees the learning of language as a holistic experience and therefore addresses classroom-based problems in much the same way. Whole language research takes a local issue and tries to find local solutions.” She finds whole language quite relevant to the issues faced by teachers today in Ecuador.

Lee speaks about whole language specifically in her country of Taiwan. She sees whole language as more accepted and influential in early childhood education (ECE) in Taiwan. She believes, “ECE and whole language have the same roots in progressive education.”

Goodman adds one more important aspect of whole language and progressive education. He maintains, “progressive education in the university never seriously affected a large number of teachers. Private schools were the most affected. Whole language helped established the emergence of a real profession.” Goodman feels that when teachers began asking for and receiving in-services, attending conferences and reading professional books and journals, they moved from “workers at the chalk face” to professionals. Whole language helped teachers make this move. Another progressive education movement, the National Writing Project also helped teachers be more professional and “help their students become successful writers and learners” (<http://www.writingproject.org>). Both movements are grounded in teacher study groups, teacher research and the importance of writing in the learning process.

In summary, these leaders find whole language sharing the same fundamental principles and theorists with progressive education. Whole language has added information about literacy and language, made strong connections to democracy and teachers as professionals and laid the groundwork for critical pedagogy, and especially critical literacy.

What has been whole language’s greatest achievement?

The ten leaders are quite diverse. Yet, surprisingly, their comments were similar and centered on three themes about the achievement of whole language: 1) theoretical breakthroughs in language and literacy, especially miscue analysis; 2) empowerment and professionalism of teachers and 3) changes in curriculum for students and teachers alike.

Cambourne believes that the greatest achievement of whole language has been the following:

development of a grounded theory of literacy learning and teaching that currently is the best, most elegant, parsimonious, robust and powerful (William of Occam would approve) explanation (theory) of how literacy is best learned/not learned, taught, not taught, given the assumptions about social equity and democracy.

Harste concurs that whole language was a “grass roots movement (meaning it was rooted in practice and therefore encouraged the development of practical theory of literacy learning); one teachers understood and identified with.” For Duckett, whole language’s greatest achievement is the “pulling together and naming of a salient set of principles that guides educators in supporting learners with respectful and engaging learning experiences.” All three of these leaders emphasize the power of theory/practice union in whole language.

Watson reminds us that whole language theory is dynamic and impermanent. She suggests “the skills people [more traditional teachers] think everything is permanent and you learn the permanent stuff or you are not literate, and you learn it in a particular order.” In contrast, whole language teachers realize that “language at whatever system or subsystem of the language is impermanent. It’s changing.... With all of these changes critical ideas and practices can emerge. Growth and richness of thought can’t emerge in a permanent literacy situation.” Watson helps us see why whole language theory has lasted and grown over 30 years. It is dynamic, generative and constantly seeks to outgrow itself.

Some leaders specified the reading process and miscue analysis as the greatest achievement of whole language. Meyer suggests that whole language gives “a deep understanding of the reading process” and that miscue analysis is the catalyst for changing the way reading is taught, the way nonfiction is approached and even “development and teaching are studied in a completely different and informative light using miscue analysis.” Seely-Flint also concurs that whole language’s greatest achievement has been “the identification of the cueing systems and the miscue work of the Goodmans.”

Literacy leaders also identified changes in teachers and curriculum due to whole language. Goodman suggests “teachers can rise to a much higher professional level if they are treated like intelligent professionals. Ultimately the teacher liberates the kids and the curriculum.” Waingort explains “Whole language empowered teachers and students. Whole Language has said to educators, ‘You are the experts in your classrooms. You know what the problems are. Now get your hands dirty and try to find solutions that will work for your students.’” Her comments signal a respect for teachers, but also an expectation that they will succeed. Lee believes that “whole language causes teachers and students to change, self-willingly. [It] helps teachers to see that they can help students to be better learners.” All of these statements focus on whole language’s respect for learners, including teachers and how that respect led to a deeper professionalism.

Bomer extends the idea of teacher as professional when he suggests that whole language has been successful in “helping many teachers to take on the identity of theorist and researcher [T]he best whole language teachers have understood that their thinking as professionals creates their interactions with their students, and that those interactions create the character of the learning (and living) that goes on in their classrooms.” This is a powerful comment, because prior to whole language

teachers consumed research from the universities. Whole language encouraged teachers to not only look to research to govern their practices, but to be researchers in their classrooms every day.

Curricular change is also considered one of the greatest achievements of whole language. Harste believes that whole language “taught and supported teachers in building curriculum from children rather than doing curriculum to children ... and it did this all without doing violence to what we know about language and language learning.”

Again we can see the respect for the learner in Harste’s comment. Goodman reminds us that “children were given opportunities to learn without ceilings and artificial grade levels,” so they learned more. He also suggests that the “greatest success were those kids who had not been successful—African Americans, Native Americans, Appalachian children.” Watson agrees that kids are put at the heart of the curriculum: “their interests, their lives, their culture, and literature, including all varieties of genre have the potential to be critical.” Lee suggests that as whole language has spread in Taiwan, it has caused teachers “to rethink language teaching” and made some of them “adjust their thinking and practice.” In all of these comments from whole language advocates the knowledge of both teachers and students is central to developing language learning.

In summary, literacy leaders see whole language as a robust theory that explains literacy and language in an accessible way for teachers to understand. It encourages teachers as professional researchers in their own classrooms and it supports students by putting them at the heart of the curriculum. There is a profound respect for all learners in whole language. In such ways, ideas of social justice beliefs are developed and nurtured.

What is the future of whole language?

Although all of the literacy leaders mention that whole language has been battered and attacked, every one of them is hopeful about the future. Their comments center on the continued development of whole language, perhaps under another name or in a slightly different form; learning to survive in the present day world, and looking to the world for the next iteration of whole language.

Harste suggests that whole language will survive, perhaps called *education as inquiry* or perhaps *critical literacy* that highlight principles of whole language. Bomer does not suggest a new name, but believes that “as long as there are people loving kids and wanting the best for them, they will find their ways to these traditions.” Bomer believes that there will always be those teachers who believe that progressive education is the best and most right fit for children.

Watson proposes that for whole language to survive, WL teachers must both learn to exist with those who don’t believe in whole language, and at the same time stand up for their beliefs. She says, “We’ve got to learn how to handle ourselves, how to get help from each other, and how to meet the other person who believes something 180 degrees different than we—we’ve just got to learn.” She suggests that TAWL groups still have a purpose and function to support teachers and that “the future of whole language is in the individual, in the individual holding the hand of their colleagues and holding the hands of kids.” Such collaboration of teachers and children is at the heart of whole language.

Cambourne suggests that WL advocates stand up for what they believe: “they need to use Lakoff’s (2004) work to reframe whole language so that it resonates with the moral and ethical beliefs that underpin the cultures of their countries.” This will help others understand WL in terms that are familiar to them and perhaps prevent some of the misunderstandings and polarization that occurred previously.

Waingort concurs with Watson:

The future of whole language is to recover its base: teachers in their classrooms doing awesomethings! We need to go back to our roots and meet teachers where they are. Whether or not they identify themselves as whole language educators is beside the point.

Seely-Flint suggests that whole language may be able to reach out to those parents “who are disillusioned with the results of federal mandates and testing.” In addition she sees the Whole Language Umbrella “offering meaningful and effective professional development for teachers wanting to explore alternative to what is currently in place.” As teachers become disenchanted with the highly prescriptive curriculum and mandates, the WLU will become a viable alternative, offering support to child-centered, meaning-focused practices.

Goodman captures the importance of whole language extending beyond the borders of the U.S., Canada and Australia to the wider world:

There is a rising tide of professionalism among teachers in Latin America, Asia and South Africa. A rising tide of professional teachers who are better educated, think of themselves as professionals and are backed by theory. They are moving ahead as we (US) are moving back. After our insanity, they will have a lot to offer us. They can share what they have achieved. We see this in the progressive movement over a long time. There will be another cycle, another time to re-emerge and be stronger. We must build on what we have learned. It is not a pendulum swing, but an ebb and flow in politics. Politics limit access to education. As we become strong the truth of what we are doing emerges. Bad ideas will keep coming up. We need to use common sense to give those bad ideas failing grades.

Goodman’s projections are already occurring. Lee suggests that in Taiwan, “more and more teachers, administrators, teacher educators and researchers are interested in finding out how whole language can be implemented within our particular social and educational contexts.” Taiwan is in a process of educational reform and people are seeking “more learner –oriented, flexible, problem solving rather than skill performing, autonomous, equal and less stressful kinds of educational opportunity for all students.” Whole language is becoming more popular where teachers and administrators are open to reform. Researcher such as Kathy Short, Yetta and Ken Goodman, Wendy Kasten, Alis Hedlam and many, many others are working all over the world to support and develop international views of curriculum based in inquiry and grounded in whole language principles. Progressive educators in schools around the world are asking for support to develop the kinds of classrooms that the U.S. is abolishing.

The Future Worldwide: A Postscript

Listening to the voices of literacy leaders worldwide helps readers see that the “Reading Wars” and the attacks on whole language weren’t actually about phonics, or spelling workbooks, or even diagramming sentences. Those issues hid the real concern, which was that some people feared progressive education was incarnate in whole language in the U.S., Canada and Australia. Whole language is against schools reifying society, sorting the haves from the have-nots, and empowering some while disempowering many. Whole language principles say everyone has the right to read and write and think critically and the job of the teacher is to support students to meet those challenges. There are no ceilings for students. Parents, teachers, and kids make the best choices for themselves, not politicians miles away from the classroom. Such thinking is powerful and frightening for many because it moves beyond class, color and race. Whole language returns the power of teaching and learning back into the hands of teachers and parents and kids. Whole language has been attacked by those who fear sharing power with “others” deemed less worthy of leading and making decisions about what goes on in classrooms around the world.

The principles of whole language, whether it is called *inquiry learning* or *critical literacy*, when coupled with the ideas of Freire (1970, 1985) leads to liberation pedagogy. Principles of liberation pedagogy are blueprints for people to empower themselves through literacy and create more democratic and critical societies. As messy as democracy is it still honors the individual within the group. Perhaps the lessons shared within this discussion will prove useful for educators worldwide who are contemplating beginning or joining a fledgling whole language movement in their country. Perhaps teachers and administrators will gain from the positive and negative experiences described here. I hope that teachers around the world will not make the same errors we did. The whole language journey may be fraught with dangers, but it is always stimulating, even intoxicating. And, as Goodman reminds us, "I'm an optimist. I believe that eventually good ideas will triumph."

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