Is Whole Language Doomed?
by
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Over the past year, the whole language movement has taken a merciless pounding in the media. Particularly damaging have been the reports from California, where, as the story goes, whole language was officially implemented statewide for six years, and ended with plunging test scores. As a result, state education officials have scrapped whole language and ordered up a new back-to-basics curriculum, to be implemented next year. The moral of the California story: whole language was tried and tested and it failed.

As if to drive a final stake through the heart of the demon, ABC's 20-20 newsmagazine recently attacked whole language as another instructional "fad," labeling it the philosophy of "osmosis." As part of a highly flattering report on behaviorist "direct instruction," reporter John Stossel repeatedly dismissed whole language as an ineffective teaching method perversely adopted by "most" American teachers, apparently in an attempt to prevent their students' literacy and bring more wrath upon themselves. Meanwhile, in our nation's sub-media of right-wing newsletters and broadsheets, the true non-believers continue to wage a highly-effective grass-roots campaign to eradicate whole language and other Satanic practices from local schools.

Is whole language doomed - or is it already dead? What really happened in California?
Whole language was not mandated in California. The state’s infamous 1989 curriculum framework did not even mention whole language. Instead, it recommended the “literature-based” approach, which has a long history of classroom success and raised standardized test scores (Tunnel and Jacobs, 1989). Though similar to whole language in some respects, literature-based teaching is not identical, as whole language leaders will most emphatically explain (see Goodman, 1984). Basically, the 1989 California framework calls for schools to decrease their dependence on commercial-based reading programs, and to demand that students read more, bigger, longer, harder texts and do more whole, original pieces of writing across a wide variety of genres. The framework was certainly not a lowering of standards nor was it a mandate for whole language.

Whole language was never implemented in California. Neither was the literature-based approach actually mandated. Like most seeping, top-down mandates, California’s 1989 switch to literature-based reading did not really effect what went on in most classrooms. In some, teachers had already changed on their own toward a new model; in others, change remained nonexistent; in most, adoption of the mandates was very slow and incremental. My California colleagues estimate that at the height of the program, in 1995, at most 15% of the teachers in the state were practicing a full and coherent form of literature-based instruction.
The California test scores did not "plummet," they dropped slightly. Over the 30 years that NAEP has been tracking American students' achievement, California children have showed slow, modest improvement in reading. The minuscule drop in recent scores is well within NAEP's test-to-test variation, and may well prove meaningless upon the next round of assessments. Also, keep in mind that California's scores are a suspicious aberration where literature-based teaching is concerned; usually it raises scores. Indeed, literature-based programs have typically increased student performance elsewhere, including the scores of minority, non-English-speaking, and dis-advantaged children (Tunnell and Jacobs, 1989).

The test score changes - whatever they mean - were not caused by whole language, literature-based language arts, or any other
curriculum. If the infamous 1989 mandates caused California’s test scores to go down, then why did Illinois scores drop at the same time? Here in the Land of Lincoln, we have no mandate for literature-based or whole language teaching, and yet our state reading scores have also mysteriously declined of late. The point, obviously, is that state curriculum documents are not the only possible source of score declines in California or anywhere else. Changes are that California’s recent test scores mainly reflect the state’s pattern of growing poverty, the increasing immigration of non-English-speaking children, and its soaring class sizes, which are among the largest in the country.
But assuming for a moment that these recent score declines might represent something real about reading instruction, and realizing that California teachers were mostly not doing the new literature-based program, what could account for the changes? Maybe it was “implementation dip.” Some of my California colleagues tell of districts that threw out their commercial reading programs when the new framework was adopted, without offering teachers any help in learning and operating the new model. This inexcusable gap of leadership and staff development left some less resourceful teachers without a structure of model to follow. These teachers probably floundered, and their students experienced reading instruction that was unfocused and ill-structured. If these teachers could have done literature-based (or whole language) teaching coherently, with plenty of support, the scores would have caught up promptly.

But, as always seems to be the case with American school reform, the plug of innovation gets pulled the minute somebody panics.

The new replacement curriculum is not a back-to-basics model. In spite of the gloating of right-wing opponents across the country, the forthcoming California reading and language arts curriculum is not a wholesale victory for skill-and-drill, phonics, or direct instruction. Though its details are not yet clear, the new curriculum will mandate a “balanced” literacy program, retaining the emphasis on real literature and writing. Ironically, the new curriculum may ultimately be more true to the spirit of whole language than the program it is designed to replace.
Is It Over Yet?

Is whole language dead? Well, reports of the death of the movement are, as they say, greatly exaggerated. The fundamental principles of whole language are vibrant and unimpaired. The drive for student-centered learning and democratic classroom communities will continue, as it has for two centuries in America — and four millennia around the world. After all, whole language is a philosophy about the nature of human beings and the process of learning that, under many other names, has contended with authoritarian approaches throughout history, and will continue to do so (Daniels, 1994).

However, the name “whole language” may be finished. The label has been so savaged by misunderstanding, disinformation, media banalities, and the hubris of a few proponents, that its utility is now severely compromised. What classroom teacher would want to publicly affiliate with whole language in this climate - when virtually every school has at least one implacable right-wing parent, incited through newsletters and trained in
church-based workshops to undermine, humiliate, and root out educators who espouse the approach? Indeed, it seems easier to just drop the terminology - to simply be a holistic teacher, rather than talk about it. Why not just quietly attend the meeting of your local TAWL group (soon to be picketed just like abortion clinics, no doubt), and rename your classroom program “integrated.”

But why must the bad guys always win the propaganda war? The fact that opponents have been able to cultivate an image of whole language teachers as anti-skills, anti-phonics, and anti-correctness is one of the most remarkable and brazen doublespeak maneuvers in educational history. Whole language does not mean “no standards.” Genuine whole language teachers always teach children the so-called “basics,” most emphatically including spelling, phonics, and usage. The literature of the movement is replete with explicit, emphatic calls for teaching such skills in the context of authentic reading and writing experiences. The best-selling books in the field - like Regie Routman’s *Invitations*, Lucy Calkins’ *The Art of Teaching Writing*, and Nancie Atwell’s *In the Middle* - are jammed with specific and practical activities for teaching children spelling, phonics, and editing, right along with cultivating a love of books and fluency in writing.
Nevertheless, the reactionaries have won the word war once again, stealing and besmirching our vocabulary. In years past, they snatched terms like "open classroom" and "new math," which once stood for sincere reform efforts, and turned them into laughing-stocks of crackpot permissivism. Now they have done it with "whole language." Someday, progressives are going to get smart and start talking about the rigor of whole language, the challenge of critical thinking, the demands of collaborative learning, the requirements of student-directed inquiry, the scrutiny of authentic assessment, and the elevated standards of integrated curriculum. We are the ones who really challenge children. After all, what we want for kids requires far more of them, and expects more from them, and reams so much more for them, than the do nothing worksheets of the fundamentalists or the sing-song chants of Zigfreid Engelmann.

Make no mistake: the opponents of whole language want schools to teach submission and obedience. They want graduates who are just smart enough to throw the correct switch and just fearful enough to do it quickly. Unless progressive educators are satisfied to let this vision dominate our schools for the next few decades, we'd better start explaining ourselves better.

REFERENCES


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