Whole-Language
Practice and Theory

Whole-Language
Practice and Theory

Victor Froese, Editor

University of British Columbia

To all teachers striving for professionalism

Preface

Whole-Language: Practice and Theory is intended as a primary text for prospective kindergarten to Grade 8 teachers in their professional year of teacher training. Because there is not yet unanimous agreement as to what constitutes "whole language," we begin the book with an operational definition, namely that it is a child-centered, literature-based approach to language teaching that immerses students in real communication situations whenever possible. When used in this way we hyphenate "whole-language"; when it is used in its generic sense we do not.

We often hear that "whole language" is not an approach but a philosophy. Our experience does not indicate that beginning teachers start with a philosophy and then carefully structure their methodology, materials, and strategies around it. We observe, and research also indicates, that teachers begin with decisions about content and activities rather than with specific objectives (Borko & Niles, 1987). While classroom activities may reflect a certain type of philosophy that may be deduced by inference, most often decisions about the selected activities are pragmatic rather than philosophic. That is, teachers want to engage students in meaningful learning activities first. In most instances, introspections about philosophies come much later—after basic routines have been mastered. We do not think that a prospective teacher needs to be at that stage of career development before benefiting from knowing about how to teach using the whole-language methodologies described in this volume. In short, while we encourage the development of strong philosophical views, they are not a prerequisite to whole-language teaching and learning.

Another goal of this book is to help prospective teachers learn how to structure, to plan, and to execute a whole-language program. This requires considerable knowledge about how children learn and how they use language, and hence such information is provided throughout in a practical way together with suggestions for appropriate activities. This is why we put "practice" first in our title. We

do not minimize the importance of the reasons for engaging children in meaningful learning activities. In fact, the final chapter is unique in entry-level texts—it carefully reviews the extant research on whole-language and presents it in a readable and understandable form. Instructors may wish to deal with the research throughout the course or to use it near the end of the course as a way to underscore the importance of various aspects of whole-language.

Books like this are often criticized for their subdivisions (chapters) when they claim to emphasize holistic methods. We believe that it is a courtesy to the reader to make it easy to locate particular information. We also realize that we cannot predict the order in which our readers may wish to access the information in our book. Often the reader is interested in a particular topic—how to improve writing, for example—and hence should not have to read halfway through the book to discover what we have to say about improving writing. For these and other reasons, we have produced chapters that stand on their own and that may be read in almost any order, although we recommend reading Chapter 1 first to get an overview of the text. Our experience in using this book in our courses indicates that those teaching kindergarten to Grade 3 often prefer a different order from those teaching Grades 4 to 8. This reflects the varying abilities of the students—the lower grades can handle oral language and dramatization from very early in the year, whereas those in the upper grades are relatively fluent in the media of reading and writing and can sustain themselves easily in these activities. To some extent the order in which the chapters are read may be dependent on when school experiences are scheduled in the program. We believe the independence of the chapters gives the reader and the instructor considerable flexibility in using this text.

Throughout the book we have tried to assist the learner in acquiring the vocabulary of instruction and learning. We have indicated key vocabulary items by presenting them in boldface type for easy location and identification. We have also included a Glossary of terms, which clarifies those words that may not have been defined adequately in context in the chapter in which they are found. At the end of each chapter are Discussion Questions, which may be used in small-group class discussions (see the Grouptalk technique in Chapter 9, which may be useful) or they may be used for individuals to test their own understanding of the chapter contents. Often the questions ask the reader to go "beyond the text," to explore or ex-

tend ideas and hence the answers will not be found in these pages but instead in the journals and references we ourselves consulted. Finally, in some chapters we have included appendices to lead the reader to sources of practical ideas, books, and materials.

This book is a testament to collaborative learning. The authors are all members of the same department, the Department of Language Education at the University of British Columbia. All felt a need for a rational approach to what was being called *whole language* (*whole-language*, as we use it) by teachers, writers, and university instructors. We met to discuss our mutual interests, we discussed our varying views of the subject, and we debated the pros and cons of whole-language. Then we acted. We prepared a conference presentation, which began with a dramatization that we eventually called "Whole Language on Trial" (Scholastic-TAB, 1988). A representative of Scholastic who saw our live presentation persuaded us to produce a video, which we did. The video presents a courtroom trial in which a Grade 1 teacher is charged with using a nontraditional method of instruction, thereby harming children's reading achievement, skills development, and spelling ability, and with implementing a writing program before children are supposed to be ready to write, thereby adversely affecting the development of their writing ability. The presentation consists of the case of the prosecution, the defense, and the judge's summation. The audience becomes the jury and is asked in the accompanying discussion guide to deliberate the judge's charge to them.

Next we turned our conference presentations into a collaborative course that eventually became our "traveling road-show" since it was requested by teachers around the province and was offered in various localities. Our notes expanded into "chapters" and the chapters into a book (via desktop publishing), which we could not keep in stock due to the demand. Since we could not respond to all requests, we initiated an annual conference for those interested in whole-language. At this point, Patrick Ferrier, an acquisitions editor for Prentice-Hall, entered the picture and this book was born.

A book cannot be produced without the assistance and support of many people. First, we are indebted to the teachers, administrators, and school divisions who invited us to work with them to develop our ideas about whole-language. We trust that above all, children have benefited from these collaborations. Particularly we would like to mention the schools that allowed us into their class-

rooms for observation and photography: Hillside Elementary School, Mission, British Columbia; Bennington Heights Public School, Toronto, Ontario; St. Lucy's School, Toronto, Ontario; and Macdonald Drive Elementary School, St John's, Newfoundland, who provided the artwork for the original edition. We are thankful for the patience of our secretarial staff—Carol, Ginette, and Isgo— who typed, formatted, copied, corrected, and mailed pages, chapters, and draft copies of the book, and Sandra, who proofread the manuscript and prepared the indexes. We are also indebted to Sean Wakely and his staff, who enthusiastically supported our revisions for the Allyn and Bacon edition, and to Nancy Benjamin, who patiently edited and prepared this volume for production. We would also like to thank the following reviewers: Samuel Perez, Western State University/Washington; Joyce Willis, Youngstown State University; Lee Manning, Columbia College; Marcia Modlo, Vestal Central Schools.

Finally, we invite feedback from teachers and prospective teachers using this book, since that is how we extend our learning. Please write to the chapter author at the Department of Language Education, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C., Canada V6T 1Z5.

References

Borko, H., & Niles, J.A. (1987). Descriptions of teacher planning: Ideas for teachers and researchers. In V. Richardson-Koehler (Ed.), *Educators' handbook: A research perspective*. White Plains, NY: Longman.

Department of Language Education. (1988). "Whole Language on Trial" videotape and discussion guide by M. Crowhurst. Richmond Hill, Ontario: Scholastic-TAB Publications.

Contributors

Butler, Syd
Assistant Professor, Department of Language Education, UBC
Ph.D. University of British Columbia
Experience: Classroom teacher, school librarian

Froese, Victor
Professor and Head, Department of Language Education, UBC
Ph.D. University of Minnesota
Experience: Classroom teacher, school administrator

Gunderson, Lee
Associate Professor, Department of Language Education, UBC
Ph.D. University of California, Berkeley
Experience: Nursery school teacher, resource teacher, learning disability teacher, administrator

Lukasevich, Ann
Assistant Professor, Department of Language Education, UBC
Ed.D. University of British Columbia
Experience: Classroom teacher, teacher of gifted, remedial teacher

Ralston, Marion
Associate Professor Emeritus, Department of Language Education, UBC
Ph.D. Walden University (California)
Experience: Classroom teacher

Shapiro, Jon
Associate Professor, Department of Language Education, UBC
Ph.D. Syracuse University
Experience: Classroom teacher, preschool teacher, learning assistance teacher

Snyder, Gerry
Assistant Professor, Department of Language Education, UBC
Ed.D. Oregon State University
Experience: Classroom teacher, teacher corps

Staab, Claire
Associate Professor, Department of Language Education, UBC
Ph.D. Arizona State University
Experience: Classroom teacher, reading specialist, language arts consultant

Verriour, Patrick
Associate Professor, Department of Language Education, UBC
Ph.D. University of Alberta
Experience: Classroom teacher, school administrator

Contents

Preface vii

1 Introduction to Whole-Language Teaching and Learning 1

Victor Froese

2 Talk in Whole-Language Classrooms 17

Claire Staab

iii

6 Drama in the Whole-Language Classroom 193

Patrick Verriour

7 Organizing Whole-Language Classrooms 221

Ann Lukasevich

8 Parents, Teachers, Children, and Whole Language 255

Gerry Snyder

9 Assessment: Form and Function   283

Victor Froese

10 Research Perspectives on Whole-Language   313

Jon Shapiro

1 Introduction to Whole-Language Teaching and Learning

Victor Froese
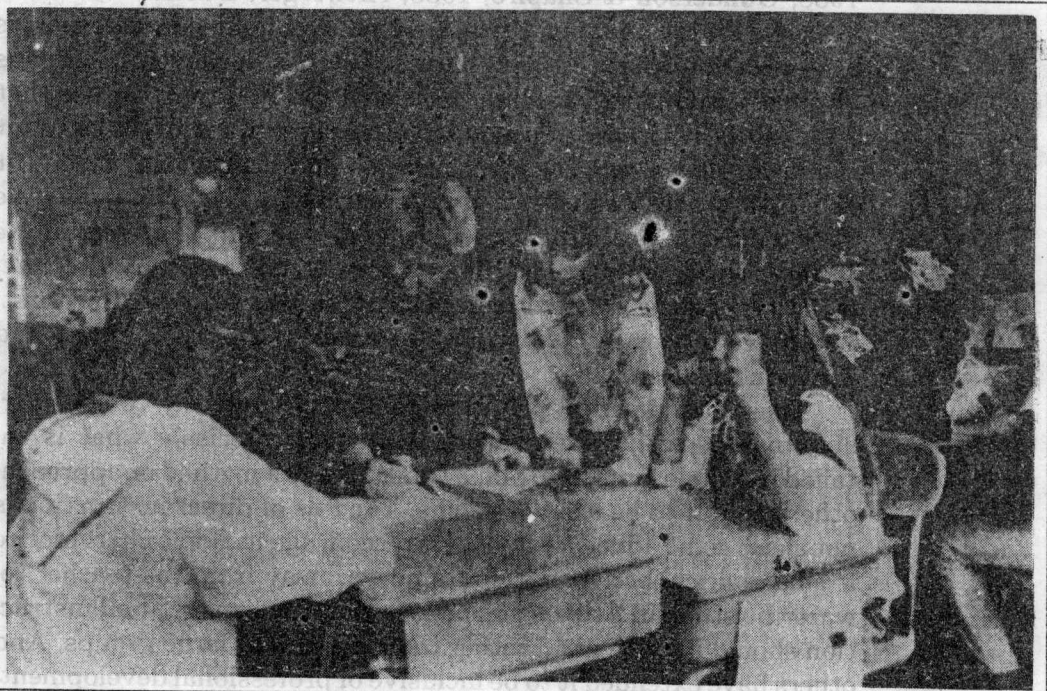
What Is Whole-Language?

In this book we define **whole-language** as a child-centered, literature-based approach to language teaching that immerses students in real communication situations whenever possible. Throughout this text we will use the term "whole-language" in its *hyphenated* form to refer to our specific operational definition (see also Gunderson, 1989). By "literature-based" we mean that textual materials of all kinds—from fiction to informational materials—are used to promote language learning. By "real communication" we mean that genuine audiences—*interested* listeners—are involved whenever possible in the linguistic effort. With this book we intend to assist the prospective teacher in understanding the whole-language concept; to provide enough practical information and examples so that teachers are able to begin teaching in this manner; and to show that teaching and learning can be engaging, stimulating activities for all participants.

Today's journals and books are sprinkled liberally with the term "whole language" (Watson, Burke, & Harste, 1989; McConaghy, 1988; Gunderson & Shapiro, 1988; Altwerger, Edelsky & Flores, Weaver, 1988; Goodman, 1986), but that does not mean that there is agreement on what the term means. There is, however, consensus on some fundamental aspects of the concept. First, it is agreed that language is a *naturally developing human activity*, and as a result it is a *social phenomenon* used for *communication purposes*. Second, it is generally accepted that language learning and teaching must be *personalized* in order to respect the *uniqueness and interest of the learner*. Third, language learning is considered to be a *part of making sense of the world*; language need not be learned separately first. Language is learned *holistically in context* rather than in bits and pieces in isolation.

These fundamental points of consensus give way to considerable disagreement when theorists consider precisely what is entailed by whole language. Some think of it as a method or approach; others hold it to be a set of beliefs. The role of direct instruction is not clear; some advocate it, others discourage it. Some characterize it as a political activity: it shifts power away from the teacher toward the student. Still others believe that it means that all instruction should be individual rather than in small or large groups. And others have extended it to be inclusive of professional development.

Crowell (1989, p.62) in fact concludes that "whole language is an excellent example of many new paradigmatic concepts. The concept of integration, complexity, and holism are central to this approach. Process and content are intertwined, as are students and learning."

Other areas of contention have arisen from what seems to be an attempt by some to make current and traditional classroom procedures appear as though they are not very different from whole-language procedures. As a result, publishers market "whole-language" flashcards, workbooks, reading series, and other learning aids. Most of these materials are based on a learning paradigm that is antithetical to the whole-language paradigm. As well, some would argue that whole-language is another label for "whole-word" learning, which is usually compared or contrasted with phonics instruction. These "arguments" are basically deliberate misinterpretations of what whole language is intended to be. That is, "whole-language" refers to a child-centered, literature-based approach to language teaching that immerses students in real communication situations. For a more neutral interpretation of the research on the phonics/whole-word controversy, consult Adams's (1989) *Beginning to read: Thinking and learning about print*.

Dealing with Textbook-Based Teaching

While this book is about whole-language, we recognize that the prospective teacher is likely to encounter materials that do not fit well with whole-language teaching, such as classroom reading series, spelling series, or language series in many schools. Our intention here is simply to put these kinds of materials, and textbook-based teaching, into perspective. We will examine the differences between the assumptions behind textbook-based teaching and those behind whole-language instruction.

First, we must look at the assumptions behind the materials. While it is commonly believed that educators have determined exactly what each student at each grade level should learn in order to become a competent language learner, one need only examine and compare different scope and sequence charts for any individual subject area to discover that there is only minimal agreement. If one compares across grade levels, one finds even less agreement (or, in

some cases, substantial overlap). Yet many teachers, principals, and superintendents adhere to the belief that if the materials are "covered," the specified skills will be learned. In fact, in most cases there is little, if any, evidence that the "skills" themselves exist (Froese, 1983; Johnston, 1984), and even less for the effectiveness of the sequences in which they should be taught. And more recently the validity of the studies on which skills are based is being questioned (Lysynchuk et al., 1989).

A second assumption is that *all* students must learn the proposed skills, usually in the same order, and at the same time. Classroom observation reveals, of course, that groups of students do not learn in this manner. Giving any group of students a pre-test on something they are supposed to learn will convince the observer that some already know the information or process, that some do not, and that some may have a partial understanding. Furthermore, not all students have a *need* for the skill, and those students are likely to forget it quickly even if they do learn it. For example, a recent report by Gunning (1988) explored the phonics processes taught to students and found that they did not use the skills as taught. Instead, the report found that the students used a range of much more intuitive processes to develop language skills.

Most graded series of textbooks fragment teaching, and often take the supposed skills to be learned out of context. The emphasis usually is on teaching such skills as "predicting outcomes," on dividing words into syllables, or on writing complete sentences. Examples are given in the textbook, practice exercises are presented, and then the student is expected to know the skill. None of these fragments has grown out of the student's experience; they are not means to an end; they do not represent problems that the student needs to solve. Interest in such activities has to be artificially induced; that is, the teacher has to try to get the students to appear interested. Shuy (1981: 103) has decried such practices of putting form before function in the teaching of language.

Textbook-oriented teaching does have some benefits in some people's minds. It does not require as much preparation since the materials are already printed; it does not require much thought on the part of the teacher because the guidebook provides the directions (Goodman, Shannon, Freeman, & Murphy, 1988); and it placates the administrators because the supposed "ground" has been covered. (In my opinion, the latter metaphor is appropriate to foot-

ball but not to learning.) It is also considered by many to be the traditional method of teaching (hence conservative and proper). Parents often expect such teaching since they experienced it as well.
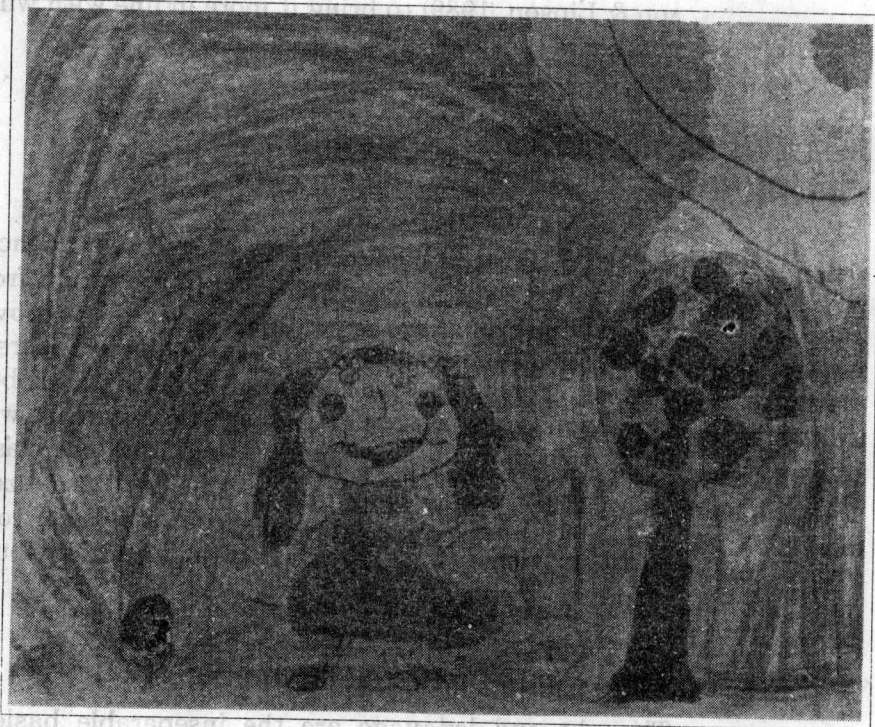
Our position is that textbook materials may be useful at appropriate times with appropriate applications, but it is not the preferred method of instruction. When school pressures require the prospective teacher to use such materials, our suggestion would be to begin with the "follow-up" or "enrichment" activities (although it is usually recommended that they be used last, and then they frequently are omitted because of lack of time), because they can create a context for the lesson. Then use a pre-test, or observation, to group students so that only those who need it get the textbook instruction. Others might read independently or become involved in enrichment activities. Naturally this requires additional planning and preparation, but it does have the potential of resulting in more satisfying teaching. It is rather ironic that we now are seeing textbooks on how to improve basal reader instruction (Winograd, Wix-