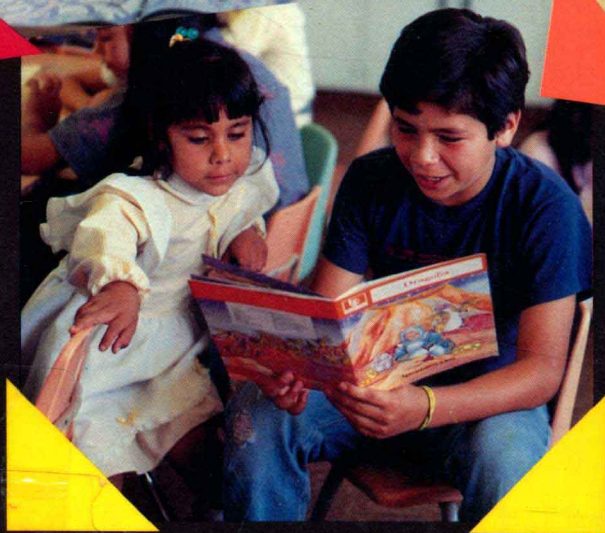
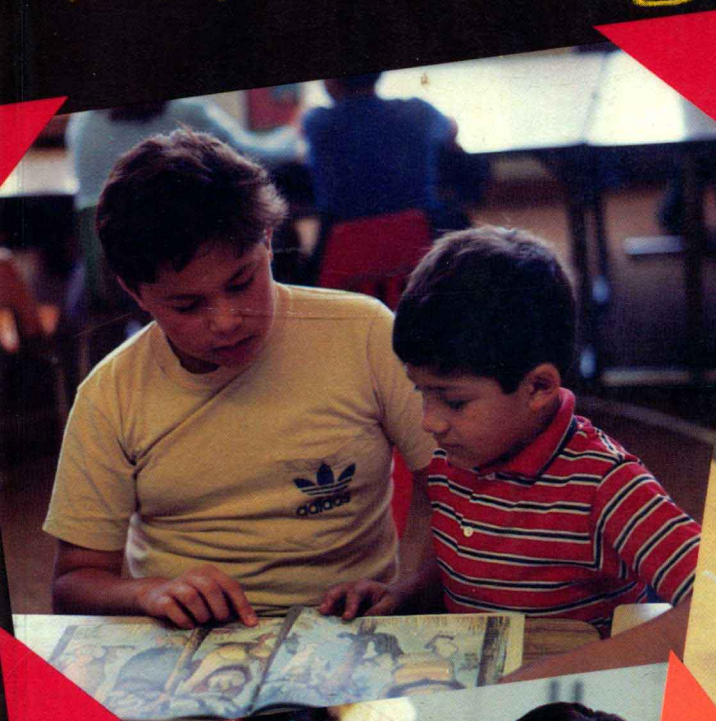


Whole Language What's the Difference?



*Carole Edelsky
Bess Altwerger
Barbara Flores*

Whole Language

What's the Difference ?

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Introduction

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You know they're different somehow—those teachers at the group meeting of Teachers Applying Whole Language (TAWL); the principals who have joined that writers' workshop; the teacher educator who works with the teacher and children in that classroom analyzing pottery shards; the teachers whose determination to direct their own in-service led them to found a nonprofit corporation devoted to spreading "best practice." It's not only what they do in the classroom or the principal's office. It seems to be something about *them*. Yet, they don't stand out in a crowd—until they speak up, that is. Then the difference is immediately apparent. These people make a reality of the rhetoric about the *profession* of education. They are confident enough in their professional knowledge about learning and language that they are not bamboozled into going along with slick "instructional materials" or school district edicts that contradict their own knowledge, or long-standing norms that distance the universities from the schools. They are not only wise in their professional judgments; they understand the theory and research that lie behind their judgments. Moreover, as they've worked according to that theory, they have also had their eyes opened about what stands in the way of the best theoretically defensible practice, about how the system really works. And so, with that firsthand knowledge of the politics of education, they have become *politicized* professionals, working to take control of their own professional lives. When they speak up in

public, it is clear that they know what their general framework is, that they know what backs it up, and that they know what practice fits with it. They are whole language educators publicly demonstrating whole language, showing that, in substance, *whole language is a unity of framework, theoretical base, and congruent practice.*

But currently, whole language is also a “hot label,” a bandwagon on the roll. The evidence is everywhere. Entire school districts are declaring themselves “whole language.” Educational agencies are now writing “whole language” behavioral objectives. Ever sensitive to such shifts in the market, publishers are trying to climb aboard, offering such oxymorons as “whole language” basals and “whole language” pocket charts for flash cards. And wherever we go we hear statements like the following:

“We do ‘whole language’ every Tuesday afternoon.”

“There’s nothing new about ‘whole language’; we’ve known about the ‘whole child’ for decades.”

“We’ve had ‘whole language’ in this school before but we just called it the ‘language experience approach.’”

“But we’ve always taught skills in context.”

“I’ve always been a ‘whole language’ teacher; I’ve used literature since I started teaching.”

So not only is whole language popular; it is also surrounded by confusions. In fact, the confusions make us wonder just what it is that is popular: the idea of whole language? the label? innovation per se?

Educational innovations have not fared well in the United States. With its materialist, consumer culture, the United States tends to “consume” innovations—to gobble the latest new idea, not tasting or digesting the substance, using it up, spitting it out, and on to the next. One remarkable exception here is that long-lasting innovation, the basal reader (Shannon 1989). A more typical case, however, is open education. It was widely distorted so that open space was substituted for openness of ideas, learning centers for learning-centeredness. The final irony is that it was judged a failure even though (because of the distortions) it was never implemented on any broad scale. (Thankfully, a few excep-

tions still exist: Prospect School in Vermont, Central Park East in New York City, and scattered classrooms elsewhere).

As with open education, in its early years the spread of the whole language label alone had some value. It created a more hospitable climate—a legitimate space—for those who wanted to work with the substance. But there is a dark side to this. Wholesale adoption of the label alone without the substance can *prevent* change, declaring something done before it ever really gets started. Whole language is too good an idea for learners, teachers, and society to suffer such a fate.

Whole language is not only a good idea; it is also a threatening idea for those with a vested interest in the status quo. It threatens because it is *profoundly* different from predominant views about education. As such, it counters the established system so deeply and thoroughly (in premises built into roles, materials, and assessment) that it has the potential not only for affecting learners and teachers in the classroom but for having widespread economic and political ramifications within the huge institution of education. Such a powerful idea is bound to elicit pained reactions from those it threatens with loss of legitimacy, income, or power. And indeed, in the undertones of the bandwagon's rumble can be heard the crack of a backlash. If whole language is to gain strength (or even simply to remain) as a viable alternative, it has to overcome the backlash and also the well-intentioned confusions. We hope this book will be part of that overcoming, and that it will help whole language gain strength.

The best defense against being distorted as a trendy new method, being misrepresented by opponents, and being co-opted by publishers wanting to cash in on a market is knowledgeable teachers. Knowledgeable teachers are also the center of a strong movement. By knowledgeable teachers we mean teachers who know about the language and learning theory behind their holistic preferences, who develop an articulate, coherent framework, who measure their practice against that underlying theoretical framework, and who, as a result, claim full status as professionals—in short, teachers who become *truly* whole language teachers. The example set by whole language teachers is a major contributor to that possibility. So is Goodman's 1986 monograph. But, working against it, as we have indicated, is everything that muddies

the water, from practice being called “whole language” that isn’t, to published statements (emanating from supporters and opponents alike) purporting to describe it but in fact misrepresenting it. We are writing this book, therefore, not to introduce whole language but to “un-muddy” the concept for people who already know something about it (as well as about other educational stances) but who aren’t quite sure how it is different—or even whether it is different—from anything else.

As we will illustrate, a wide range of practices and ideas, rather than a narrow orthodox set, make up whole language. Still, there are some limits. Whole language cannot be defined by everything that goes on under its name. Our premise is that there are core parameters to the idea of whole language. These core parameters are what prevent whole language from meaning whatever anybody wants it to mean.

It seems appropriate to say that misdefinitions promulgated by opponents of whole language are wrong. But what about statements and practices by people—like those we quoted earlier—who believe they are supporters of whole language? What about the idea that whole language is a change in the schedule or another way to teach skills? What about the thousand-item lists of “whole language skills” written by state department curriculum workers? Are we being exclusionary to say these are *not* examples of whole language?

Like much in the theory of whole language, the answer depends on the purpose. If our intent were to describe everything happening in the name of whole language, we would, obviously, need to include everything. But our purpose is not to survey and describe whole language as a “movement.” It is, instead, to increase the strength of a professional theory that has the best chance of any for improving education. It is to help clarify the idea, to clear up the confusions and answer some of the questions. It is to help already knowledgeable teachers become more knowledgeable—to help them understand the principled theoretical basis of whole language so they can move beyond simply feeling good about the new goings-on in their classrooms to understanding *why* the goings-on *should* be going on.

In clarifying whole language, we will be using the most well-known sources and prototypical classrooms. These share a set of assumptions—those core parameters we mentioned

earlier. Naturally, we have selected the part of the core we consider most important. Other whole language sources might have a different “most important” list, but they would still concur with the substance of what we are presenting here.

Toward accomplishing our goal, we will define whole language and explain its bases, compare it with other educational ideas with which it is sometimes confused, relate it historically to its predecessors, discuss at least one of its distortions in relation to similar distortions in another alternative in education, compare it to a current innovation with which it is compatible, and finally, illustrate it with scenes from whole language classrooms.

Whole Language: What It Is



A Brief Overview

First and foremost, whole language is a *professional theory*, an explicit theory *in practice*. That is, it is neither theory divorced from practice nor practice that is blind to its own theory. Consequently, it is not possible to label as whole language a theoretical statement tied to no actual educational practice. Nor is it possible to characterize a classroom as whole language simply by checking off a list of supposedly whole language activities. It is the teacher's stated beliefs, the character of classroom interaction, and the teacher's and students' underlying intentions, the *deliberately* theory-driven practice—not simply the behaviors—that make a classroom whole language.

Whole language weaves together a theoretical view of language, language learning, and learning into a particular stance on education. Other innovations in education have taken similar stances. For example, along with prior progressive approaches to education, whole language prefers learner-focused curricula and holds to a conception of the “whole child,” of the active learner, of the classroom as a community, and of teachers who learn and learners who teach. For these stances, whole language owes a substantial debt to John Dewey, Caroline Pratt, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, Susan Isaacs, George S. Counts, and other philosopher-artist-educators, as well as to more recent “ancestors” like Sylvia

Ashton-Warner and Roach Van Allen. Much is shared. Yet there are significant differences. What defines a progressive alternative is not just its stance and the nature of its key underlying theoretical beliefs. It is also what the alternative is an alternative *to*. Whole language is unique, then, not just because of what it advocates for education (its stance) but because of the underlying beliefs and the current historical context that, together, give the stance its meaning. We will return to the issue of historical context when we discuss whole language in relation to its predecessors. In this section, we concentrate on the underlying beliefs—whole language beliefs about language and language acquisition based primarily on relatively recent research and theory building in linguistics, sociolinguistics, and cognitive psychology.

A key whole language belief is that reading and writing are learned through really reading and writing (not through doing reading and writing exercises) and, therefore, that reading and writing should be what goes on in school (Edelsky & Draper 1989). Drills on isolated skills or language fragments are exercises, so they don't qualify as reading or writing; neither do entire stories exploited for the main purpose of teaching some skill rather than for a purpose appropriate to story. Whole language teachers do not rely on material written "for instructional purposes." Instead, they use genuine texts—children's literature, recipes, song lyrics, dictionaries, and so on. But just as activities do not define whole language, neither do texts. Using song lyrics for the purpose of enjoying or learning the song is congruent with whole language premises. Using the same lyrics to teach rhyming words or spelling patterns is not.

The crucial difference between really reading or writing and going through an exercise has to do with purpose and meaning. Whole language educators know that all language events, both oral and written, have *some* purpose and *some* meaning. The question, however, is *which* purposes (and whose) are driving the event and *which* meanings are emphasized. If the child's purpose is simply to comply with the teacher's assignment—i.e., if the work really belongs to the teacher and has no intrinsic meaning for the student—then what is going on is just an exercise. And doing exercises is an extremely difficult way to learn language.

Another whole language premise is that process, product,

and content are all interrelated. While whole language educators are interested in processes underlying reading and writing and knowing, they recognize that it is primarily through products and the events in which products are produced that processes are visible. Moreover, they understand that it is content that the processes “work on.” That is, language use and learning are always *about something*; and to the speakers, readers, and knowers, the somethings are what is important. Therefore, whole language classrooms provide content-rich curricula where language and thinking can be about interesting and significant content—both traditionally accepted “establishment” knowledge and also knowledge newly created by students—but most importantly, about content subjected to critical analysis. In fact, it is the critical analysis of knowledge (e.g., in figuring out how the knowledge came to be, what functions it serves, and what other knowledge it had to displace) that helps give whole language classrooms the potential to be transformative.

Still another whole language tenet is respect for and trust of teachers and learners. In this professional theory, learners and teachers are seen as capable of directing their own educational lives. They are active, problem-formulating, problem-solving, social beings who interact in a particular cultural and historical milieu. Their teaching and learning is linked to outside communities, and it is communities they form together and curricula they invent together that support their teaching and learning.

What Whole Language Is Based On

A view of language



In a whole language perspective, it is not just oral language that counts as language. Oral language, written language, sign language—each of these is a system of linguistic conventions for creating meanings. That means none is “the basis” for the other; none is a secondary representation of the other. It means that *whatever* is language is learned like language and acts like language. While each mode (oral, written, sign)

has its own set of constraints and opportunities, they all share certain characteristics: (1) they are profoundly social; (2) they contain interdependent and inseparable subsystems; and (3) they are predictable.

Language is a social semiotic system. Whether oral, written, or signed,¹ language is a complex system for creating meanings through socially shared conventions (Halliday 1978). We can talk with others, read texts written by others, write to others, or sign with others because we share a similar system for representing meaning. That is not to say that any instance of language signals one and only one meaning or that language cannot be used in intensely personal ways. On the contrary. A particular oral or written text can evoke a wide range of interpretations. What is socially determined is not specific meanings but the range of *potential* meanings for that community. And that range comes from the varieties of voices, conversations, shouts, and whispers each person has interacted with in the past (Bakhtin 1986). The meanings for texts (for language, actually) are not *in* the text or even *in* the language. Language can only mean what its community of users know—the meanings users have attached to the experiences they have had. When the language community has new experiences (e.g., when satellites send back images of Neptune over television), the range of potential meanings for the language (users) is expanded.

Thus even when a person is alone, perhaps writing only for herself, language is still social in two senses: (1) the conventions are shared with other people; and (2) its use is always associated with other texts, other contexts, other people, other voices. In other words, when people interpret a text they use more than that text. Sometimes with awareness, sometimes not, they relate that text to other texts and to the contexts in which they met those other texts. That explains why different people (with memories of different texts and contexts) can hear the same conversation and disagree on what was meant or read the same book and agree in general

¹ We will occasionally refer to sign (language) to remind readers that it too is language. However, because of our own ignorance, when examples are called for in our explanations, we will not be able to offer examples of sign.

but still have unique interpretations. On the other hand, it is because people who speak, read, and sign the same language know the same rules that they can communicate ideas with one another and trust that they will be understood.

Language is a supersystem composed of interdependent, inseparable subsystems. The subsystems of language are (1) the phonological (in oral language), the graphic and graphophonic (in written language), gesture (in sign language); (2) the syntactic; (3) the semantic; and (4) the pragmatic. Each of these is a system of rules or conventions.

The phonological system (of oral language) specifies what sounds are possible under particular conditions in a given language. For example, in English a word cannot begin with the sound made at the end of *song* /ŋ/. And the *p* in *pill* will include a puff of air (i.e., it will be aspirated) while a *p* following an *s* (as in *spill*) will not have that puff of air.

The counterparts of the phonological system for written language are the graphic and graphophonic systems. The graphic system specifies what shapes will count as what letters (e.g., counting dissimilar shapes [*a*, *A*] as the same but similar ones [*c*, *d*] as different). The graphophonic system provides rules for pronouncing the spelling system (the orthography). The orthography itself is tied to both the sound and the meaning systems. For example, *medicate* and *medicinal* are both spelled with a *c* (pronounced as /k/ in the first case and as /s/ in the second) because of a similarity in meaning, not sound.

The syntactic system is the set of rules that regulates the structure or shape of sentences, thus determining which sentences will be considered “grammatical” for a particular language community.

The semantic system determines the ways words and sentences can convey meaning, whether a particular linguistic unit even has the potential to mean anything in the first place. When semantic rules are violated, we have the intuitive feeling that something doesn’t make sense.

The pragmatic system concerns the connections between aspects of context and all aspects of language (pronunciation, word order, spelling options, choice of topic, length of a turn, etc.), including the ways all those aspects are interpreted. Context refers to the general situation, the beliefs and biases