ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION IN WHOLE LANGUAGE PROGRAMS

ABRIDGED EDITION

EDITED BY BILL HARP

Assessment and Evaluation in Whole Language Programs

Edited by
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Dedication

To Rod Fielder and Fred Harp, who always believed.

Credit Lines

Chapter 1

Quote from "Questions We Ask of Ourselves and Our Students" from *The Reading Teacher*, Vol. 42, No. 8 (April 1989) used with permission.

Chapter 3

Figure 3.1, from "Reading Assessment: Time for a Change," from *The Reading Teacher*, Vol. 40, No. 8 (April 1987) used with permission.

Chapter 7

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Preface

The whole language movement is in a very real sense at a crossroads. While many educators at every level have embraced the basic tenets of whole language and support classroom instruction that is child-centered, meaning-focused, and holistic, the critics and traditional assessment and evaluation practices remain firmly entrenched. And how we deal with assessment and evaluation in the coming years will either confirm whole language or kill it.

Assessment and Evaluation in Whole Language Programs attempts to answer many of the critical questions being asked about the role of whole language in our schools. In pulling this volume together we called on some of the most talented educators working in the whole language arena, and gave them a challenge. We asked them to create a scholarly, yet practical work that not only examines the growing research base that supports whole language, but also offers practical and realistic suggestions for tackling the many thorny issues involved in the assessment and evaluation of students.

The book begins with an examination of the basic principles of whole language. Chapter One serves as an introduction to the movement for those new to whole language instruction. This chapter defines and illustrates whole language, explains characteristics of whole language instruction in light of a child-centered, developmental approach to literacy, and concludes by examining the philosophical/research base of whole language.

Chapters Two and Three examine past assessment and evaluation practices and offer guiding principles for future practice. John Bertrand offers valuable insights on assessment and evaluation by examining the traditional philosophy and methods of testing and evaluation through to present day needs. He calls for change that will bring assessment and evaluation in line with whole language learning processes. Bill Harp then offers twelve principles of assessment and evaluation that do not violate the basic principles of whole language instruction. The key here is that assessment and evaluation are viewed as very much a part of the teaching and learning process.

One of the greatest changes the whole language movement has brought to our view of literacy processes is in how we look at children's use of the reading process. From seeing reading as a product that can be measured by grade scores on norm-referenced measures, we now look at how children use the reading process. In Chapter Four Dorothy Watson and Janice Henson offer practical suggestions for using miscue analysis in ways that lead to specific strategies for helping children. Their practical applications are extended in Chapter Five by Ward Cockrum and Maggie Castillo, who show how teachers can develop their own assessment and evaluation strategies.

Chapters Six through Ten, the heart of the book, focus on whole language assessment and evaluation in primary, intermediate, special education, and bilingual, multicultural settings and also look at the issue of record keeping. Jeanne Reardon invites you into her classroom where she and her students collaborate in the evaluation process. Here, assessment is the teacher's discovery and understanding of a child's learning from the child's perspective.

In Chapter Seven, Yvonne Siu-Runyan illustrates ways in which whole language instruction works in intermediate classrooms by focusing on dialoguing with students about their progress. She carefully shows how talking with students about their progress can be used in combination with anecdotal records and student portfolios.

Special education teachers who embrace whole language as the truly sensible way in which all children can be brought to literacy are constantly faced with the conflict between their beliefs in whole language instructional principles and mandated assessment and evaluation practices. In Chapter Eight, Hilary Sumner directly addresses this conflict and offers realistic suggestions for dealing with local, state, and federal guidelines.

In Chapter Nine, Dorothy King examines the complexities of multicultural classrooms and suggests that observation and analysis are critical to assessment and evaluation in these settings. She discusses the interactions of language, culture, and academic development and offers concrete examples of evaluation in real multicultural classrooms.

Whole language teachers recognize early on that old ways of keeping records do not fit into the classrooms they now wish to foster. In Chapter Ten Jean Church explores the purposes of record keeping, the kinds of records that should be kept, and what needs to be recorded.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank some of those persons who have contributed significantly to the success of this book. First, my sincere appreciation to each of the contributors who accepted the challenge and worked diligently to produce a truly fine manuscript.

Next, my heart-felt thanks to Sue Canavan of Christopher-Gordon Publishers, who had the vision to get this project started and who has carefully guided its development. And finally, my thanks to the reviewers, Mona Matthews and Kate Kirby, whose thoughtful examination of the original material gave both guidance and encouragement.

B.H.
November 1990
June 1992

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Chapter 1

The Whole Language Movement

Bill Harp

The teacher is reading an enlarged text of *Greedy Cat* (1988) to a group of first graders. It is a wonderful New Zealand story about a greedy cat who looks in the shopping bag and eats whatever Mum has brought from the store. The predictable text follows a pattern of "Mum went shopping and bought some XXXX. Along came Greedy Cat. He looked in the shopping bag. Gobble, gobble, gobble, and that was the end of that." After the first episode the children are eagerly reading along with the teacher, usually needing support for only the names of the things Mum buys at the store.

The teacher reads ". . . and that was the end of that!" And asks, "What would you like to do with this story now?" The responses from the children are eagerly offered and extremely varied. One child suggests that they could write about Greedy Cat. Another adds that they could write about Greedy Cat. Some want to make shopping lists for their mother. One child quietly offers the possibility of reading the book to a partner or by one's self. When several children say that's what they want to do, the teacher poses the question of how they can arrange for everyone who might want to reread the book to get a turn. One child suggests a sign-up sheet and busily finds paper and paper clip to put the sign-up sheet on the cover of the big book. Another child suggests that they could make a game about Greedy Cat and he is instantly joined by two other classmates who want to do that, too.

The teacher then allows each child to choose how to respond to *Greedy Cat* and facilitates his or her other work. A few children return

to activities they were engaged in before the reading of *Greedy Cat*, but most of them initiate one of the choices of activities suggested by the group.

Grant, Eric, and Julie have their heads together on the creation of a game. They make several trips to the game cupboard to get ideas for their game board. Olivia goes to the teacher with a writing problem. She wants to write "Greedy cat is too hungry." But she isn't sure which spelling of "to," "two," or "too" is right. The teacher seizes that moment to spend a little time with Olivia on a lesson on "too," and then enters an anecdotal note about Olivia's growth in her record book.

As children complete their chosen activities they share with each other and some move on to the library corner, activity centers, or to complete work started earlier. The teacher calls a group of six to the large table to engage in a guided reading activity with small copies of *Greedy Cat*.

In this classroom, as in other whole language classrooms, the children are viewed as experimenters—each hypothesizing and testing his or her theories. The teacher is the director of the laboratory. The teacher sets the stage for the children to explore, experiment, and grow. The teacher then observes carefully for ways to lead from behind by providing additional experiences that will take the children toward greater literacy.

What is Whole Language Instruction?

The scenario above gives us some insight into what is meant by whole language. Consider the important features of what happened in this classroom.

- Children were exposed to literature that confirmed what they know about how language works. The predictable text of *Greedy Cat* allowed even the emergent readers in the group to join in the reading, feel success, and find a way to respond to the selection.
- Whole language teachers think differently about readers' development and the nature of texts. In traditional classrooms the readability of *Greedy Cat* would have been determined and only children reading instructionally at that level would have been exposed to the text. Because whole language teachers think of readers developmentally, the same text can be used with all children, but the expectations for response from the children will vary. The emergent readers in the classroom benefitted from the shared reading of the text with the voice support of the teacher. Other children will be able to engage in guided reading activities with the text with limited support from the teacher and peers. Still others will be able to read the text independently.

- Whole language teachers engage in assessment as an ongoing part of instruction. The teacher noticed each child's participation in the shared reading of *Greedy Cat* and decided which children would benefit from a follow-up guided reading activity. The teacher made an instantaneous decision to engage Olivia in a lesson on writing "to," "two," and "too." That objective was not planned in advance, but became important as Olivia exhibited a need for the instruction.
- Whole language teachers empower children to make choices about what they learn and how they demonstrate that learning. Notice that the question at the end of the shared reading was, "What could we do with this story now?" This opened the situation to the wide variety of responses the children chose. Whole language teachers believe that literacy develops naturally through meaningful, functional use of language. The literacy activities the children chose were meaningful and functional to them.
- Whole language teachers value risk-taking and see it as both a tool of evaluation and a form of growth for children. Again, Olivia is an example. She took a risk in spelling "too," and the teacher used that risk-taking as a tool of evaluation and as a way to help Olivia grow.
- Whole language teachers create learning activities that are language rich, success-oriented, and carried out in a noncompetitive environment. In whole language classrooms the *process* is often of greater importance than the *product*.
- Whole language teachers create environments in which children use print in a variety of forms for a variety of important purposes.

Other Characteristics of Whole Language Instruction

Whole language is not an approach to the teaching of reading and writing. It is not a method that can be spelled out in a teacher's guide with a defined set of instructional strategies. Instead, whole language is a mind set about instruction. It is a mind set that draws on what we know about the importance of child-centered instruction (Berglund, 1988).

Whole language instruction is not text or test driven. Instead, it is driven by what teachers know about the developmental nature of literacy and the development of children. Whole language teachers are knowledgeable about language and child development. They are knowledgeable about literature as well as other content

fields. Whole language teachers arrange rich classroom environments that invite students to use language in meaningful, purposeful ways—and to take risks in doing so. Whole language teachers facilitate this growth in literacy by observing and interacting with children (TAWL, 1984).

Whole language instruction is a total literacy immersion program. Children read, read, read, and read. They write, write, write and write. They are exposed to whole selections of literature that confirm what they know about how language works. The focus is first and foremost on the creation of meaning. Only after children understand that reading and writing are meaning creating processes are they exposed to the subskills. And then, as they can benefit from that instruction.

Whole language instruction empowers both teachers and learners. It empowers teachers to be true professionals who plan and execute the best in instruction for children. Teachers are empowered to be accountable for their work through documentation in child development and research in instruction and literacy. Children are empowered to take responsibility and ownership for their learning. With choice comes responsibility. In the process children learn self-evaluation, self-confidence and self-appreciation.

Whole language teachers have very strong beliefs about language and how it is learned. Language is used to comprehend the meaning of others, to create meaning, and to share meaning. Language is used for real purposes and to solve real problems. Language is used to get things done, for interpersonal relations, to solve problems, to pretend and imagine, to explain to others, and to recreate past experiences (TAWL, 1984).

Whole language teachers use integrated, thematic units that build bridges between literacy events and a variety of subject areas. Thematic units are defined more broadly than traditional units. They have a focus or topic that cuts across subject matter areas. Themes are often developed during most of the school day. Only those subjects not covered in the theme are scheduled separately. Many literacy goals can best be achieved through thematic units. Interesting activities in which reading, writing, listening, and speaking are required in order to accomplish the content goals serve as dynamic methods for meeting literacy goals.

Whole language teachers operate from a well-defined philosophical base. The probable reason so many of them are so articulate about their beliefs is that they have had to carefully examine their beliefs and defend them. Whole language teachers are so knowledgeable because they keep reading, studying, and going to conferences so they can cope with the tough questions they get from parents, colleagues, and administrators (Goodman, 1989).

The Philosophical Bases of Whole Language

The philosophical bases of whole language are the beliefs teachers hold about how children learn, the role of the teacher, and the nature of curriculum.

How Children Learn

Much of what whole language teachers believe about the development of literacy is born of our understanding about how children learn oral language in natural, developmental ways. Strong parallels exist between learning oral language and learning literacy.

The Development of Language

The fundamental philosophical base for whole language is what we know about how children learn language. As parents, we have often been amazed at the wonder of language development while at the same time eternally grateful that it wasn't our job to *teach* language to our children. We sometimes forget that the process is not a magical one; children do have to learn to use language and it does take time and effort. Observations of young children learning language have produced several principles of language acquisition.

Language learning is self-generated. Learning to use language is controlled by the learner and does not require external motivation. Children in situations where language is used will learn to use it without reward for each word learned. Communication with significant others is enough to keep the child learning. The best motivation for learning oral language is the same as for learning to read and to write—to communicate with others.

Language learning is informal. Parents do not have language lessons for their children. They play with them, sing with them, make cookies with them, show them the world and supply words to label the environment. Language is learned through use in meaningful contexts, not through talking about it or analyzing it. Children learn language in the process of living in a social situation and participating in activities with others. They learn literacy in much the same way. This is not to suggest that children learning to read and write will never have instruction, but that instruction should be in a context that is meaningful to the learner. The instruction should be focused on accomplishing communication rather than isolating the forms of language.

Language learning is active. Children learn language as they actively engage in language with others. If a child says "cat" to an approaching cat the caregiver is likely to respond, "Yes, that is a cat." If the child said "Dog" the caregiver would likely say, "No, that is a cat." The child

must actively take the label "cat" and decide what it is about this particular animal that makes it not a dog. Children are continually engaging in such active learning processes in learning to communicate. They need the same kind of active learning opportunities in developing literacy.

Language learning is a holistic process. Children learn about the forms and functions of language at the same time. They learn the phonetics (sounds), the pragmatics (rules for using language), the semantics (meanings), and the syntax (word order) all at once. No one would suggest that language be broken into artificial, discrete units to make it easier to learn. If we know that language is not learned by practicing its components outside the process of using it, then it follows that the learning of reading and writing must also be a holistic process that involves children in actual experiences that require reading and writing.

Language learning is variable. Each child has a unique set of experiences and a personal environment that differs somewhat from that of others. Even though children acquiring language pass through very predictable stages and most children in the world acquire language on a similar schedule, there are individual differences. The schedule varies somewhat for each person, but almost all will achieve competence in communicating and will have mastered most of the skills required for communication by the age of five or six.

The Development of Literacy

Whole language teachers draw on what we know about the development of oral language to undergird our beliefs about the teaching and learning of literacy. We believe that the key principles of language acquisition apply to the development of literacy.

Literacy learning is self-generated. From the time children first scribble a line and "read" it to themselves or someone else, we see the self-generating nature of literacy development. Children want to communicate in written form, and those efforts will grow in environments where adults respond favorably to their reading and writing efforts.

Literacy learning is informal. Much of the real learning about reading and writing occurs outside the context of formal lessons in school. As children write more accurately through successive approximations to adult writing, they receive feedback on their writing. This feedback is then used to confirm their growing beliefs about how writing works. The same is true of reading. Children who understand from the beginning that reading is creating meaning, work through successive approximations to become more and more accurate in their reading. In a sense, each reading activity becomes a lesson for the next reading activity.