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SLATE STARTER SHEET Fact Sheet Series

Whole Language Fact Sheet Series: On Myths about Whole Language Education

Is whole language really warm and fuzzy?—Susan Church, 1994

Background

There are many myths and misconceptions about whole language education. Several of these are addressed below.

Myths reconsidered

- **One of the common myths is that whole language teachers don't teach "the basics."** By this, critics usually mean that whole language teachers don't teach the composite skills that allegedly must precede real reading and real writing. This is not true, as explained below. Equally important, however, is the fact that whole language teachers have a different view of what is truly basic. They believe that authentic reading of trade books and authentic writing of texts for a variety of purposes (notes, letters, stories, reports, etc.) are more "basic" than skills work.

- **Given this difference in what whole language teachers consider "basic," it is perhaps not surprising that another common myth is that whole language teachers don't teach "skills"—or at least that they don't teach skills directly.** It is certainly true that whole language teachers don't engage in the typical teach/practice, apply, memorize/test syndrome that characterizes traditional teaching. Instead of teaching skills in isolated lessons, according to a scope and sequence chart on the organization of some workbook, whole language teachers typically help children develop skills in the context of their needs and interests. When they teach mini-lessons on skills within the context of authentic literacy and learning experiences, they do not test to see if children have learned these skills or strategies; they help the children apply them, watch for signs that the children can apply them independently, and keep helping the children as necessary.

- **Another misconception is that a teacher is "doing" whole language if he or she is using trade books rather than basal readers.** However, the critical difference is not whether the children read from basal readers or trade books, though whole language teachers much prefer trade books from which children can choose their own reading. Rather, the critical difference is what the teacher has the students do with the literature. Instead of asking students questions to see if they have understood the reading selection, whole language teachers engage

them in discussing their reading—in dialogue journals, for instance, and in literature discussion groups. Meanings are constructed and reconstructed through social discourse and collaboration, which promotes a richer understanding of the text and an ability to consider it more thoughtfully and critically. This, of course, promotes critical thinking.

- **Another misconception is that whole language is only for the primary or elementary grades.** While whole language teaching is certainly more common in the primary and elementary grades, the nature of whole language is such that it can apply to learning and teaching students of any grade or age. Whole language has grown into an educational philosophy based on research about the nature of learning and teaching. From cognitive psychology, it shares the constructivist view of learning that has become prominent in disciplines such as science and math as well as language arts; namely, the view that learners must be intellectually active to construct concepts and ideas. Thus, whole language is sometimes known as a transactional or active model of education, in contrast to the notion that learning is merely transmitted from teacher to learner.

- **Another misconception is that "doing" whole language means adding more and more to the curriculum.** First, one does not "do" whole language so much as live it. Second, whole language does not necessarily require adding more to the curriculum. Instead of having many separate activities, whole language teachers organize the day into larger blocks of time: for readers' and writers' workshop, perhaps, or for theme exploration. When students explore a theme drawn from social studies, or science and math (or all of these), the language arts become a natural part of what they do in learning and sharing what they have learned. Reading, writing, discussion, research, and problem-solving skills are taught as students need them to learn and to prepare products of their learning for others to appreciate or experience too.

- **Another common misconception is that whole language teachers don't assess students' learning.** It is true that whole language teachers don't have much confidence in the results of standardized tests, because they are aware that such tests typi-

cally lack content and construct validity: they don't reflect the content of classrooms where effective learning is taking place, and they don't adequately reflect the real-world skills that schools are trying to develop. Furthermore, whole language teachers know that the primary purpose of standardized tests is to rank order individuals, and they reject this aim. On the other hand, almost everything that occurs in whole language classrooms may become part of assessment and evaluation. For example, assessment may include recorded observations, student self-evaluations, and various kinds of artifacts, such as periodic performance samples, think-alouds, data from conferences and interviews, inventories and questionnaires, dialogue journals and learning logs, and student-kept records of various kinds. By drawing upon such varied sources for assessment, teachers can focus on students' growth and learning strengths, instead of trying to expose weaknesses.

• **Another myth is that whole language teaching is appropriate only for unlabeled students or for gifted students — not for students labeled as learning disabled, Attention Deficit Disordered, or “at risk” of school failure.** In fact, whole language teachers have found that special needs students have their best chance of becoming independent readers, writers, and learners in whole language classrooms. More skills work holds them back; what they need is opportunities to engage in real reading and writing authentic texts, along with their peers. Whole language teachers have found that special needs students flourish when given such opportunities and when given the support they need to become genuine readers and writers. Major keys to success are individual choice, ownership, teacher support, and TIME to change old patterns of dependency and failure.

• **Another misconception is that whole language students do worse on standardized tests, and that whole language learning and teaching are not supported by comparative research.** However, the small but growing body of comparative research shows students in whole language classrooms typically scoring as well or better on standardized tests than students in more traditional classrooms. More generally, this emerging body of research (so far, dealing primarily with preschoolers and children in kindergarten, grade 1, and grade

2) has found that children in whole language classrooms typically show greater gains on reading tests; have developed a greater ability to use phonics knowledge effectively; have developed vocabulary, spelling, grammar, and punctuation skills as well as or better than children in more traditional classrooms; are more inclined and able to read for meaning rather than just to identify words; have developed more strategies for dealing with problems in reading; have developed greater facility in writing; have developed a stronger sense of themselves as readers and writers; and have developed greater independence as readers and writers.

• **Another major misconception is that anyone can be a whole language teacher simply by going to an inservice or two, replacing basal reading programs with trade books, maybe buying some of the newer instructional materials labeled “whole language,” and obtaining from conferences or from fellow teachers some clever ideas for turning skills work into a fun activity.** While some of these tactics may help, they usually are not enough to bring about the shift from the typical transmission concept of education to the transactional, constructivist concept that underlies whole language learning and teaching. Teachers need opportunities to read and discuss professional literature with colleagues, to share teaching ideas and get feedback, to visit others' classrooms, to see demonstrations in their own classrooms by effective whole language teachers, and so forth. Perhaps most of all, they need respect and support for their risk-taking, particularly from administrators.

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