

VIOLET HARRIS

Associate Professor  
Curriculum and Instruction  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

## Evaluating Children's Books for Whole-Language Learning

### WHOLE LANGUAGE'S DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS

Whole language is a philosophy, perspective, world view, or stance; it is not a program of hierarchical components or methods (Blake, 1990; Teale, 1992; K. S. Goodman, 1986, 1990, 1992; Hoffman, 1992). It is a grass roots movement spearheaded by teachers with empowerment of teachers and students as a central theme. Whole language is an amalgam of theories, beliefs, perspectives, and research about language, children, and learning drawn from a number of interrelated disciplines such as linguistics, psychology, philosophy, and sociology. Further, whole language is the perspective that learning occurs when information is presented as a whole rather than divided into smaller components and is thus meaningful; activities occur within a social context, and the learner is active. Kenneth Goodman, a major proponent of whole language whom many consider a founding father, identified its key features (K. S. Goodman, 1986, pp. 38-40):

#### Principles for Reading and Writing

- Readers construct meaning during reading. They use their prior learning and experience to make sense of the texts.
- Readers predict, select, confirm, and self-correct as they seek to make sense of print.
- Writers include enough information and detail so what they write will be comprehensible to their readers.

- Three language systems interact in written language: the graphophonic, the syntactic, and the semantic.
- Comprehension of meaning is always the goal of readers.
- Expression of meaning is always what writers are trying to achieve.
- Writers and readers are strongly limited by what they already know, writers in composing, readers in comprehending.

People also enquire about what makes whole language whole. Kenneth Goodman (1986, p. 40) identified those features as well:

- Whole-language learning builds around whole learners learning whole language in whole situations.
- Whole-language learning assumes respect for language, for the learner, and for the teacher.
- The focus is on meaning and not on language itself, in authentic speech and literacy events.
- Learners are encouraged to take risks and invited to use language, in all its varieties, for their own purposes.
- In a whole-language classroom, all the varied functions of oral and written language are appropriate and encouraged.

### THE WHOLE-LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Application of these principles results in a radically different kind of classroom. Teachers and students take power; they share jointly in decision making, and they negotiate some aspects of the curriculum. Publishers, test makers, and consultants are not the arbiters of curricula. Teachers shed their role as “de-skilled” technicians and assume the role of a professional, a facilitator who guides learning. They assume responsibility (accountability) for what occurs in the classrooms. Students are active seekers of knowledge. They understand that they possess the ability to acquire the strategies needed to learn. Parents, too, assume a more integral role. The learning that takes place in the school is connected to the homes and communities in which students reside. Family and community members are encouraged to participate and share their knowledge and expertise with students. Their participation is not limited to homework checks or open houses.

What might a whole-language classroom look like to the visitor? Some characteristics are universal, others individual (Blake, 1990; Teale, 1992; K. S. Goodman, 1986, 1990; Hydrick & Wildermuth, 1990). First, the visitor would notice that the noise level fluctuates; whole-language classrooms are not silent. Talk is an integral feature.

Second, the physical layout of the room differs from the tradition of permanently anchored desks and seats. Whole-language classrooms

feature learning centers for math, writing, art, music, science, social studies, and reading. Books, magazines, newspapers, and other print materials such as maps, pamphlets, recipes, etc., abound. Basal readers are absent. Listening stations with tape recorders and audio materials are prominent. Children's writing, art, and other projects receive center stage. Seating is structured in small clusters. The teacher's desk is not the center of the classroom.

Third, "lessons" are active and varied. For instance, rather than three reading groups, a teacher uses heterogeneous groupings that change across task and subject. The teacher might structure four or more groups to discuss a book, complete paired reading, dramatize a section of a book, read additional information about an author or illustrator, or create a visual representation of a passage.

Fourth, evaluation is continuous and completed in order to guide learners, identify and celebrate their strengths, and discover areas that require additional work. Portfolios containing examples of students' work are the norm, rather than standardized tests.

Fifth, content subject matter is integrated. There are no unconnected periods for reading, spelling, and writing. Language crosses all subject matters, and all subject matter is connected.

The teacher in a whole-language classroom is a reader and a writer. She reads and writes about a variety of genres and topics. She knows children's literature; if not, she is informed enough to know that various review journals and guides exist that will provide information. The teacher shares her experiences as a writer and reader with her students. In the process, she shares her enthusiasm and models strategies that are effective for each mode of discourse. In addition, she develops and uses a professional library of essential texts on whole language such as those written by the Goodmans, Nancy Atwell, Donald Graves, Don Holdaway, Lucy Calkins, and others. She also reads other professional literature for insights into language and learning.

Most importantly, the teacher adopts a new attitude relative to her power in the classroom. She is no longer the sole source of knowledge. She develops within her students the belief that they, too, are sources of knowledge. She negotiates with her students. This does not mean, however, that she relinquishes all decision making. Rather, it means that she offers her students options. Perhaps they would prefer to work individually rather than in small groups to create some dialogue. The teacher becomes a "kid-watcher" (Y. M. Goodman, 1985). Kid-watching helps her monitor students' progress and their interactions with others so that she can make informed curricula decisions. She conducts her classroom in such a manner that students are active learners who learn meaningful information that connects with their lives inside and outside of school.

## THE WHOLE-LANGUAGE DEBATE

Advocates of whole language argue that this type of classroom and teacher are possible at all levels of schooling. Critics contend that the whole-language classroom is without direction and structure, that children slip through the cracks if they are not average or above average in performance. Also, some consider the movement elitist and not applicable to urban school districts or school systems with limited English proficient (LEP) or bilingual students.

Some criticize what they perceive as a smug intolerance on the part of whole-language advocates (Hoffman, 1992). Those who do not adopt a whole-language stance are made to feel as if they are pariahs and harmful to children. Numerous articles in the *Reading Teacher* and *Language Arts* convey this sentiment directly and indirectly. Leaders in this grass roots movement can alienate as well. For instance, Kenneth Goodman (1992) lambasts Marilyn Adams (1990) and her book, *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print*, and the Center for the Study of Reading (CSR), particularly those responsible for creating a 150-page summary of Adams' book, for their alleged duplicity in buckling under to the "far right" policy makers in the Department of Education. According to Goodman, Department of Education officials threatened to decrease or eliminate funding for the CSR unless it produced a report stating that phonics instruction was crucial in early literacy experiences.

Others accuse whole-language advocates of controlling periodicals devoted to literacy issues (Groff, 1992). Groff wrote the editors of the *Reading Teacher* to determine whether the *Reading Teacher* had relinquished its neutral stance regarding literacy instruction in order to "extravagantly" favor whole language. According to Groff, the *Reading Teacher*, from 1986-1991, published 115 articles that extolled whole language. The editors responded that they published only 10-15% of manuscripts submitted that related to whole language or literature-based reading instruction.

Delpit (1986, 1988) created extensive debate when she argued that whole language was at odds with the instructional practices of many African-American teachers and the expectations of African-American students. She found that many of her colleagues were more directive and emphasized skills. Consequently, Delpit argued, their students gained access to valuable cultural knowledge. Delpit did not suggest that African-American students did not need whole language but rather that factors such as race/ethnicity, historical experiences, interactive styles, and access to cultural knowledge influenced the effectiveness of

any method or perspective. Other researchers working with Asian/Pacific Islander and Latino/a students concurred with some of Delpit's criticism (Au, 1980; Wong Fillmore & Valadez, 1986).

Ladson-Billings (1992), in contrast, observed and interviewed teachers deemed effective in their efforts with African-American students. She found that effective teachers incorporated the realities of the sociopolitical milieu. They practiced a "culturally relevant" style of teaching, one that empowered students "intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p. 382). These salient features paralleled those that should appear in whole-language classrooms; however, whole-language proponents were usually silent on issues of race, class, and gender or touched upon them in tangential fashion. Ladson-Billings and other advocates of critical pedagogy provide convincing evidence that literacy and access to knowledge are essential components of cultural hegemony and that becoming literate in whole language or other classes is an overtly political action.

Another criticism of whole language relates to the perceived lack of an explicit curriculum. Critics contend that anything goes in whole-language classrooms, that students learn in a hit-or-miss fashion, and that the philosophy is best suited for average and above average students (K. S. Goodman, 1992). Further, critics such as E. D. Hirsch (1987) argued that there exists a body of knowledge reflecting the cumulative heritage of the nation, its histories, and the values advocated by citizens and that students should acquire this knowledge. Others such as Chall (1983) argued for some phonics in the literacy curriculum because meta-analyses of research completed within the past 30 years revealed that some instruction in phonics is crucial for learning to read. Whole-language advocates counter these arguments by stating that predetermined curricula violate an essential tenet of students' determining some of the knowledge they are to learn. Also, they argue that sound-symbol relationships should be taught within the context of whole, meaningful print.

A final criticism of whole language revolves around the collection of data that documents its effectiveness. Critics state that studies lack methodological rigor, that the musings of teachers in journals do not constitute objective evidence. Proponents counter by stating that whole language lends itself more to qualitative research methods, with multiple data sources such as content analysis, audio- and visual-recordings, observation notes, journal entries, interviews, and samples of students' work (Hydrick & Wildermuth, 1990).

Whole-language advocates proclaim that the movement has swept the nation and has become entrenched (K. S. Goodman, 1986; Hydrick & Wildermuth, 1990). Cullinan (1992) concurs with this belief. Her

research revealed that only 9 states had statewide initiatives focusing on literature, 16 had initiatives centered on integrated language arts, and 22 did not have any statewide initiatives, but that at a grass roots level, individual districts, schools, and teachers had adopted the perspective. Despite these claims, many teachers approach literacy by including phonics instruction and sharing literature with students occasionally; most are not whole-language teachers (Langer, Applebee, Mullis, & Foertsch, 1990).

Whole language will not disappear. It has gained a tremendous foothold in the two major literacy organizations, the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English. Both organizations sponsor pre- and post-convention institutes, workshops, and symposia on the topic. At both conferences, a "day of whole language" is an expected feature, attracting several hundreds to over a thousand teachers. Whole language has also become institutionalized. Professors who advocate the perspective are found in major colleges and universities preparing a new generation of teachers. What then, are the evaluative criteria that should guide the selection of literature in whole-language classes?

### SELECTING LITERATURE FOR WHOLE LANGUAGE

Undoubtedly, basal readers are the one type of written material universally banned in whole-language classrooms. In fact, teachers are admonished to throw out the basal as the first step. Kenneth Goodman (1988) popularized the term "basalization of children's literature" to describe the manner in which publishers rewrite literary texts to conform to readability formulas, change gender and ethnicities of characters, truncate syntax, and control vocabulary. Silvey (1989) also decried the basalization of children's literature in the form of literature guides that were often double the length of the trade book.

These are valid criticisms; however, one can make the argument that teachers might ban the basal prematurely. The late 1980s and 1990s signalled the renewed, or at least a newly acknowledged, emphasis of cultural diversity or multiculturalism in children's literature. Publishers of trade books did not respond as quickly as publishers of basal programs. For example, Lindgren (1991) reported that only 51 books published in 1990 included African-Americans; far fewer books about Latinos/as, Asian/Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans were published. Meyer Reimer (1992) reported that basal readers were more expansive in their inclusions of multicultural literature. Evidence exists to support this contention. Scott Foreman's new program, *Celebrate Reading!*, is fully one-fourth multicultural in content. These facts suggest a need to retain

basals for their cultural diversity, given the shrinking budgets of school and public libraries and the limited numbers of books reflecting cultural diversity that appear on the monthly best-seller lists compiled by *Publishers Weekly*. In 1990, 10 books about people of color appeared on the lists. Many of these, such as the "Indian" books of Lynn R. Banks, were controversial. Only two fit Rudine Sims Bishop's criteria of culturally conscious literature. Moreover, fewer than 10 have appeared on the lists for 1991 and 1992. One can argue that these data do not reflect school and public library purchases, but they offer insights on the kinds of books purchased by the public in bookstores.

Following the principles delineated by Kenneth Goodman (1986), the literature should reflect students' interests and tastes, the teacher's duty to guide and refine students' interests and tastes, and should engage them in meaningful ways. They should experience "real" literature. Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) provides an apt summary of what the literature should do:

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (p. ix)

In short, teachers should make available books that children would select for themselves, such as the *Berenstain Bears*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Baby-Sitters Club*, *Sweet Valley High*, *Choose Your Own Adventure*, romance series, and other books that entertain. Teachers are also responsible for introducing children to broader worlds and examples of literary excellence that provide models for writing, encourage critical thinking, and cause children to want to read more. Among the books included in this category would be traditional and contemporary classics such as *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, *Treasure Island*, *Dear Mr. Henshaw*, *Bridge to Terabithia*, and *M. C. Higgins, the Great*. Teachers cannot select books on the basis of demographics. For example, you do not select *Abuela* (Dorros, 1991) just because you have Latino/a students; you select it because the folkloric motifs and the portrayal of the relationship between granddaughter and grandmother are well done or your students are interested in the story.

Specifically, books for preschool and primary children should contain repetitive phrases, rhythmic language, predictable text, and characters and events familiar to young children. The books should possess a structure that children can easily comprehend. Categories of

literature that are important for this age group include poetry, folklore, nonfiction, wordless picture books, picture storybooks, and board books.

Children in intermediate, middle, and upper elementary grades require literature that "encourages confidence and risk-taking," and that helps improve strategies for reading and writing. The teacher's role is to help students expand their tastes and interests, acquire literary analysis skills, and promote the use of writing in functional contexts. Self-selection of reading material, as well as opportunities to share literature, is important. Appropriate literature at this juncture would include series fiction, award winners such as Newbery books, functional literacy materials, and nonfiction. In all cases, the teacher's selection of literature is guided by the needs of students in her classroom and is balanced against her responsibility to provide them essential, meaningful knowledge that enables them to understand themselves, family members, peers, community members, and other individuals with whom they may or may not have direct contact.

#### WHOLE LANGUAGE AND THE PUBLIC

Those involved with children's literature have achieved some successes. Messages about the importance of children's books were delivered; some people heard them and responded accordingly. For example, the number of children's-only bookstores increased to 450 in a little over a decade (Lodge, 1991). Sales approached 1½ billion dollars, and best-sellers appeared periodically. A new education market emerged. Some of the improved distribution of children's literature is attributable to the spread of the whole-language movement. Much has been accomplished, but significantly more remains to be done. For purposes of promotion, children's literature and whole-language advocates can learn a lot from popular culture.

Popular culture provides insights in unexpected ways. It also demonstrates how educators could reach more people and provide them with essential knowledge about schooling. Consider, for example, the phenomenon of shopping by television as structured by the Home Shopping Network, the Fashion Channel, and QVC. Many in academe and other "highbrow" cultural institutions such as publishing scoff at the notion of watching these shows or purchasing merchandise through them. Television shopping is lowbrow, fodder for late-night comedians. However, one could argue that the shopping networks offer a window to the world of the "average" citizen. These average citizens focus on family, friends, home, and hearth. They seem patriotic, religious, and committed to the value of education as the great equalizer. Several million people tune in daily. The various hosts bond with the



viewers and seem genuine. An announcement of an impending wedding, birthday, or birth among the hosts results in hundreds of cards, gifts, and flowers from viewers. These faithful viewers call in to talk with the hosts as if they were next-door neighbors or best friends and reveal personal details of their lives. A surprising number of the elderly, the housebound, and the disabled watch the shows.

How does this description of televised shopping relate to children's literature and to the task of evaluating books for whole language? It demonstrates why whole language and children's literature advocates need to exhibit a little less elitism. First, one network, QVC, sells numerous children's books quite below the industry average cost of \$17.45 (Roback, 1992). Most of the books are the type that can be purchased in venues other than traditional bookstores. They are the kind of books parents do not mind spending \$4 or \$5 to purchase. Sometimes they are Golden Books, other times Dr. Seuss collections, and occasionally Disney books. Rarely are the books ones critics and educators recommend or those found on the shelves of children's-only bookstores. The books offered by QVC sell in huge quantities, often selling out. QVC reaches an important segment of the market and informs consumers of the benefits of children's literature in an exciting manner. The hosts convey the impression that they know the latest information about literacy.

Second, the QVC network sells the "Hooked on Phonics" program complete with filmed testimonials from previously illiterate or low-literate individuals. These testimonials detail frustrations with teachers and literacy instruction techniques. All of the individuals in the testimonials state that phonics unlocked the mysteries of reading for them. One host, prior to describing Hooked on Phonics, informed viewers that the problem with "American" education and the reason why Americans could not compete with other industrialized nations was because of the elimination of phonics from the schools. He encouraged viewers to confront teachers, administrators, and school board members and demand explanations for the elimination of phonics. Several viewers called in and agreed with him. Undoubtedly, some individuals took up his challenge. Many more purchased the program.

Third, news organizations, print and electronic, discovered the literacy issue again. CBS's "Sunday Evening News" program of October 4, 1992, featured a segment on whole language, its supporters, and the effects on children. Generally, the segment was favorable, but in the tradition of balanced reporting, the reporter interviewed Professor Jeanne Chall of Harvard, who reiterated her beliefs that phonics instruction in the early grades was essential. In September, the local Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, newspaper printed a letter to the editor that warned of the dire consequences that would result from educators

encouraging and teaching "intended spelling" (*invented* spelling is an aspect of the whole-language writing process).

Herein lies a crucial dilemma. Clearly, the public desires information about children's books and whole language, among other literacy topics. Many are making uninformed decisions or using incomplete information acquired from television hosts on shopping networks. The public is less concerned with the process and more concerned with the end product—a child who can read. Publishers of commercial phonics programs have stepped into the void, bypassed educators, and reached the public directly in effective ways through the shopping networks. Supporters of children's literature and whole language are less savvy.

Proponents of whole language need to heed the steps taken by supporters of phonics instruction, whose message has filtered out from universities and professional organizations directly to parents. Whole-language philosophy has not. Parents are confused by concepts such as invented spelling and process writing. Indeed, many teachers are just as confused as parents. They lack a clear understanding of whole language, its underlying principles, and the results that can be achieved from its use.

Having identified the major features of whole language, the criticisms of whole language, and the evaluative criteria helpful in selecting books for whole language, we need now to connect educators and the public with those books.

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