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The Teacher in Transition: Learning to Let the Child Lead

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ABSTRACT

Whole language is an interdisciplinary method of teaching which is becoming a political movement in the schools. It empowers both student and teacher, allowing the student to become self-directed and freeing the teacher from a primarily authoritarian role. Literacy activity in the whole language classroom resembles reading and writing in the real world, so that school work is seen as purposeful by students. Ideally, students plan and work cooperatively in cross-grade groupings.

In this ethnographic study of two first grade classrooms, a participant-observer identified those factors which support and hinder a teacher's transition from the traditional model of teaching to whole language orientation. Data were collected through one week of full day participation in a whole language college laboratory classroom in Georgia, and a semester-long internship with a public school teacher in Illinois who is moving from traditional commercially-driven teaching to whole language child-centered instruction. Theoretical and empirical literature, classroom observations, and teacher interviews were analyzed.

Factors identified as assisting the transition from basal to whole language instruction were a) a support network of administration, teachers, and parents to share information and encourage risk-taking; b) less restriction on how time is spent throughout the day, since subjects are not drastically separated; c) teacher's skill and experience with positive classroom management; d) the creation of new definitions for teacher and student success, i.e., less performance-oriented, in terms of standardized measures of achievement, and more mastery-oriented, in terms of improvement, individual goal-setting, and self-examination for improvement; and e)

teacher's realization that the child's writing is the best text for beginning reading instruction.

Factors found to limit the transition to whole language included: a) the allocation of funds for workbooks and skill sheets rather than for the purchase of trade books and quality literature; b) school-district assessment documents geared toward the evaluation of isolated skills with standardized quantitative scores; c) reluctance to change teaching style, take pedagogical risks, and deviate from principles taught in teacher education classes; d) absence of unified commitment to whole language instruction among teachers, administrators, and parents; e) failure to comprehend the political nature of whole language philosophy, e.g., giving up basal readers but not the teacher-centered classroom; f) fear of sharing authority and responsibility, losing control of students, and changing the nature of the student-teacher relationship.

INTRODUCTION

According to Jonathan Kozol (1986) in his book Illiterate America, there are currently 60 million illiterate adults in the United States. The Congressional Record (1985) also gives the following alarming statistics: A 20-percent functional illiteracy rate among adults and 13 percent among 17-year-olds; a 32 percent marginal illiteracy rate for adults; a minority youth illiteracy rate that may run as high as 40 percent, and in increase of 2.3 million adult illiterates each year. Many authorities believe that low level literacy skills in the U.S. can be attributed to the manner in which language arts, including reading and writing, are taught in schools. School districts mandate the use of commercial materials, including workbooks and basal readers matched to the stated district goals and objectives, in an effort to make teaching more scientific and to control for "teacher incompetence." This situation in American education has resulted in the teaching of language skills outside of the context of meaningful communication. By making publishers' materials, bought en masse, the vehicle for language acquisition, learning is introduced to the student, rather than emergent from the student.

However, recently many educators and some school district administrators have begun to doubt the effectiveness of this reductionistic approach to teaching literacy, and are attempting to move toward whole language instruction in reading and writing. This movement is not easy for teachers and administrators who have been rewarded in the past for students' performance on measures of isolated, mechanical skills. In order to make the transition to whole language, they must change the way in which they view education and teaching, and learn to approach the student from an entirely different perspective.

Whole language, distinct from other movements away from basals, is an interdisciplinary method of teaching which is becoming a political movement in the schools, due to the changing nature of the power relationships school-wide and in the classroom. The very individualistic nature of whole language and the leadership taken by the student in this method empower both student and teacher, allowing the student to become self-directed and freeing the teacher from a primarily authoritarian role. Its interdisciplinary nature gives purpose to learning, and shows the relevance of each area as it relates to other areas. Within this context, "subject matter is important not only for its own sake, but also as a way of developing transferable abilities in writing, reading, and thinking." (O'Neil, 1990, p. 6) Literacy activity in the whole language classroom resembles reading and writing in the real world, centering around meaningful language, so that schoolwork is seen as purposeful by students.

The differences between a whole language classroom and a non-whole language classroom are best defined in terms of a) the relationships between the teachers in the school as a whole, and between teacher and students within the classroom in particular;
b) the balance of power and authority between teachers and students; c) the perceived purposes of reading and writing; and d) the atmosphere of the room, in reference to the acceptability of risk-taking and the emphasis placed on either process or product.

For a teacher who has always followed a basal or other commercial program, the transition to whole language is personal and difficult. The teachers, administrators, and student teachers involved in this study were committed to the value of their transition to whole language and were beginning to locate those people and factors that propelled them further

toward reaching their goals. However, most of them at the start of their transition had never observed or participated in a fully whole language classroom, and were largely on their own to discover avenues for advancement and understanding. Teacher initiative is absolutely necessary for the successful transition to a whole language classroom--the philosophy cannot be imposed, or it loses the entire political aspect of openness to risk-taking and non-authoritarian guidance.

Because of the growing awareness among educators and parents of the need for teachers willing to enact this difficult transition, this study concentrated on identifying those factors which contribute to and detract from a successful move away from impersonal, commercially determined programs to a student-driven literacy curriculum.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In order to better understand both the philosophies and dynamics of whole language, and the progress already made, a broad examination of current literature on the topic was included as an integral portion of the study. Throughout the literature, definitions of whole language were few and inadequate, mentioning only selected aspects of it. Most studies compared whole language to skills-oriented teaching methods, and affirmed the value of whole language instruction in the acquisition of reading and writing skills, including those of Hagerty, Hiebert, and Owens (1989) ; Rowe (1987); and Shannon and Shannon (1991). A few dealt with the transitions students make as they go from traditional classrooms to whole language classrooms, most notably Edelsky, Draper, and Smith (1983). The transitions of teachers are dealt with primarily only as a side note, as a reference point for the researchers' observations of student transitions.

A key book reviewed in the study was *Lessons from a Child* by Calkins (1983). It detailed one ethnographic researcher's study of several children as they experienced two teachers' attempted transitions to whole language. In the process, the difficulties and revelations of the teachers are examined in some depth. The overall emphasis of the book, however, was the case studies of the students, with actual examples of the children's work and comments on learning a different writing process.

Edelsky, et. al, (1983) also dealt with the topic of teacher techniques in a whole language classroom in their *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* article, "Hookin' Em in at the Start of School in a 'Whole Language' Classroom" . This study highlighted the political nature of the classroom dynamics, and the rapid transition the students made in adapting to the unusual expectations and demands of a whole language fifth grade teacher. The teacher employed whole language teaching techniques, which were described in some detail.

Sylvia Ashton Warner also contributed significantly to any examination of whole language philosophies with her book, *Teacher,* detailing her experiences in transforming a traditional British school in New Zealand into a student-centered, "organic" experience for the children. Although her work took place before the term "whole language" was coined, she was making the same difficult transition on instinct alone, by trial and error, and by being open to discovering how much the children had to contribute toward their own education. Her work was with Maori children, who were being taught in their second language by strict disciplinarians according to the British system. She attempted to change the school drop-out rate and later career failure by getting students involved in their own schooling, letting them write stories about their own lives and cultures, and

creating her own books to ease the transition from their culture to that of the British school system.

For an excellent survey of general recent literature on whole language, consult *Technical Report No. 527 Toward an Understanding of Whole Language* (1991) from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. The author has compiled a detailed annotated bibliography of articles and books, in an attempt to build some solidarity among factions within the movement.

DESIGN

This study was conducted through various channels of research, including participant/observer data collection in two classrooms, interviews with teachers and administrators, examination of theoretical and empirical literature on whole language, and analysis of observational data (daily journal entries) and interviews. All forms of research fell under the broader description of ethnographic research.

Ethnographic research was implemented as the primary vehicle for discovery in this study, due to the nature of the information pursued. W. L. Neuman (1991) gives the following comments on ethnography:

> *Ethnography*, (a kind of field research) comes from cultural anthropology. *Ethno* means 'people' or folk, *graphy* refers to describing something. Thus, *ethnography* means describing a culture and understanding another way of life from the native point of view. . . Moving from what is heard or observed to what is actually meant is the center of ethnography. (p. 340)

According to the methods of ethnographic research, the researcher kept detailed daily journals, recording the materials and methods used, and the student and teacher responses to them. As a participant/observer, the

researcher entered the culture of the classroom and attempted to understand it as a member, rather than as an outsider, while remaining conscious of what factors were new to the researcher, and what factors were accepted as part of the classroom culture the researcher herself was accustomed to.

The classroom in which the researcher first acted as a participant/observer was at Sheridan Elementary School in Bloomington, Illinois. The researcher worked closely with a first grade teacher, Mrs. Pederson, four half-days (during Language Arts and Math) per week for twelve weeks. Mrs. Pederson used to teach reading using the basals. Three years ago she decided to try whole language upon the encouragement of the school principal, Mr. Melican. As initiator of the whole language movement at Sheridan, Melican faced considerable resistance from some of the teachers when he cut the workbook budget by 50 percent to encourage them to find alternate methods of teaching. Sheridan is a public school, and had been doing quite poorly on district standardized tests. The tendency was to blame poor performance on the low socioeconomic status (SES) and family problems of the students, 65-70 percent of which qualify for free or reduced price lunches, rather than on teaching techniques that did not fit the needs of the children. Mr. Melican decided that drastic measures needed to be taken to reach these children, and turned to whole language as an option. Mrs. Pederson has been very open to the idea from the beginning, and is experimenting with ideas she finds in books and hears about from other teachers.

The second classroom, which the researcher visited for a week of intensive all-day study, was at the Berry College Laboratory School in Rome, Georgia. While there, the researcher acted as participant/observer with Ms. Poulsen, the first grade teacher, and the students and parents who assist in

her classroom. The Berry Laboratory School is thoroughly whole language, and all classes follow the same general schedule for the day, with Language Arts and Math in the morning to facilitate cross-grade movement. Language Arts and Math are interdisciplinary in that all subjects are taught within these periods but the primary medium for study is language or mathematics. There is considerable sharing of students among teachers, rather than strict class distinctions, and all the classes eat lunch together in Lunch Families that include a teacher or teaching assistant and six to seven students from different classes. Parents do have to pay tuition for their students to attend the laboratory school; however, there is a good mix of working class and professional families. They are informed about the special vision of the program before sending their child there, so there is general parental support of the program. The teachers, administrators, and parents are very supportive of each other, and seem very cohesive in their belief in the effectiveness of whole language instruction. Each classroom is supervised by a teacher, and at any time there may be up to five other adults (undergraduate and graduate level students, student teachers, parents, and community members) assisting with the class. The large classrooms allow for student movement and exploration within the format of material taught in modular units, rather than strictly defined subjects.

In addition to extensive observation and journal-keeping as a participant/observer, the researcher interviewed the teachers and administrators in the schools studied. In order to record the teacher's transition, the researcher interviewed Mrs. Pederson, the transitional teacher, both at the beginning of the year and at the end of the year to delineate her changing perspectives. Since the principal, Mr. Melican, was key in the introduction of whole language to Sheridan, the researcher also discussed the

motivations and expectations with him in depth. While at the Berry Laboratory School, the researcher interviewed the primary teacher from the classroom in which she participated, the student teacher who spends full days there, several student assistants, and the administrator.

Since no definitive description of whole language was immediately available in the literature, and the researcher had little background in the movement at the beginning of the study, a primary objective was to define the factors that describe whole language, in order to better distinguish between transitional classrooms and fully whole language classrooms. This definition, as compiled by the researcher, can be found in the introductory section of this paper.

FINDINGS

Since the teachers' own perceptions and participation are so crucial to the transitional process, the information compiled during the interviews will be presented here independently from the researcher's observations and conclusions, many of which began as analysis of comments volunteered by the teachers.

Sheridan Elementary School--Interviews

Mrs. Pederson was first formally interviewed in October, roughly a month after the beginning of the school year. At this time, she cited the support of the administration as the factor that encouraged her in the transition to whole language. The limiting factors she named were considerably more numerous.

As she sought to establish her classroom and prepare for the rest of the school year, she found the lack of funds to "do" whole language as it should

be done frustrating, especially in reference to having enough books in the classroom to send each child home with a book every night, instead of being limited by their once-weekly trips to the Learning Center. Under Mr. Melican's system, the teachers each had a set budget, which they could choose to use on some workbooks, or on other classroom materials. The budget was truncated to the extent that the teacher would not have sufficient funds to continue relying on workbooks for all subjects, but had the option of incorporating a few in subjects of their choice. Mrs. Pederson felt this amount to be insufficient, especially in the early stages of establishing a whole language classroom with a library of its own.

She also found it difficult to let go of the guidelines provided by basals. She strongly felt that especially in the case of inexperienced teachers, the discipline of the basals allows teachers to learn basic classroom management and strategies. From the perspective of an experienced teacher, she believed that it would be hardest for a new teacher to attempt whole language instruction. It would be more difficult for them to know how to assess progress and success with no background to measure it by, and no standards of achievement. Also, new teachers have not been exposed to as many materials that they can use in new ways, and have fewer past ideas to pull individual exercises from in creating a new curriculum.

By March of the same year, her views on enabling and limiting factors had changed somewhat. One factor that indicated her development was that she saw more positive factors influencing her transition. She still listed the administrator as the primary enabling factor, saying, "If you fall on your face, [Mr. Melican] doesn't say 'I told you not to try it.' He is very educated and up-to-date on what is going on in education."

The support system among the teachers is also crucial. She cited in particular the teacher across the hall who taught the same grade level, and was at about the same stage of transition. They shared ideas, discussed what worked and what did not, and encouraged each other to continue their efforts.

As before, she stated that she relies heavily on her past experience as a teacher. Due to her experiences with both junior high and elementary children, she had some idea of what the students should be capable of, since teacher assessment may be the only form of measuring student progress. Witnessing her own successes through whole language instruction, and comparing what her current students produced compared to what her students of five years ago were writing, even by the old standards, inspired her to continue her efforts and to be conscious of her own development.

She enjoyed the more open curriculum, and reported that she had the liberty to spend time discussing concepts and characters, and to enjoy the books, since she was not strictly limited to a basal time scheme. She also grasped the distinction between practicing writing and practicing handwriting. The children were allowed to write creatively without paying strict attention to whether the letters are exactly formed and on the lines, and handwriting was practiced separately. Another revealing comment was that she had the freedom to bring personality into the classroom, and pursued both her interests and those of the students.

However, the approaching end of the year also brought parent-teacher conferences, and district-wide achievement tests geared to isolated skills, such as "Which word has a long /a/?" The district is currently in the process of revising these tests to reflect the changing methods of instruction, including the incorporation of reading comprehension skills. At this point in the year

she was faced with the quandary of how to communicate the validity of assessment without scores and tests, no longer having these traditional ways to demonstrate the improvement the children had made. Recording her evaluation on the district report card forms was a problem, because the skills scored were not the things being taught; e.g. the report card asks if the student can spell the words on the spelling list, when Mrs. Pederson did not use one. Rather, she introduced words as they were needed and as they tied to the subjects at hand. She and other teachers are still being held accountable by the district under these old assessment tools, when new indicators of success and individual development permeate the classroom.

Another frustration for Mrs. Pederson is the absence of school unity in belief in Whole Language. It was a painful prospect to think that next year her students may return to more traditional classrooms, and not experience whole language instruction during the remainder of their schooling. She senses school-wide tension over whether the students will be prepared and able to function in that capacity, and whether one isolated year of whole language will be enough to interest the students in their own literacy activity.

Despite Pederson's wish for solidarity among teachers, she reported that it is difficult for her to share authority with fellow teachers, or even student teachers. She explained, "I'm selfish, I want to have the time to spend with them and work with them--it's very hard not to be involved." As much as she relied upon the support of the teacher across the hall, Mrs. Pederson said that she would not want to co-teach with her, because each had her own areas of concentration. She prefers to share ideas, not students, and wishes she could look at team teaching more as a cooperative effort, rather than a taking and losing of control.

Berry College Laboratory School--Interview

Ms. Poulsen also cited the support of the administrator and the other teachers as the foremost enabling factor. She said that when she came into the laboratory school, she learned about the whole language teaching philosophy primarily by watching other teachers and asking questions, rather than through any formal training. A major step was accepting the attitude that most children learn to read in spite of you, rather than because of you, if you provide the opportunities. She began to let student interests lead her, rather than leading them to follow the controlled subject matter of commercial materials.

Also, the fact that all of the classes/grade levels at Berry follow the same general schedule made implementing the philosophies easier. All of the classes have Language Arts and Math at roughly the same times, and all the teachers use whole language, so students can move from class to class depending on their skill level on different subjects. All teaching is interdisciplinary; however, there is a distinct focus on reading and writing during the time period set aside for language arts, and a focus on mathematical themes within the interdisciplinary unit during the time period set aside for Math.

Ms. Poulsen felt that the hardest part of her transition to whole language was overcoming her initial lack of understanding of how whole language is different from skills-oriented teaching. She did not have a real grasp of what she actually had to do differently at first, despite a general understanding of the different priorities. She stated that it was difficult to escape her own "teacher training" on discipline and orderly classrooms. The hardest thing was learning how far to let the kids go.

Researcher Observations

The months of observation also revealed some factors to the researcher that helped explain the differences between the two classrooms observed. Throughout the course of the year, Mrs. Pederson increasingly relied on the child's own writing as the best text for beginning reading instruction. As the year progressed, she got farther away from teacher-made books in which students filled in blanks, and developed more in the direction of allowing them to independently create their own stories and books. This realization of the importance of the students' imaginations and roles as authors, and the freedom they needed from beginning to end, marked a major transition in her teaching style.

For Mrs. Pederson, the exposure to an Illinois Wesleyan University Teaching Reading I class, of which the researcher was a part, also assisted in the transition. A lot of ideas were shared, and suggestions made from both sides. Mrs. Pederson allowed the students in Teaching Reading to work one-on-one with her students once a week, and negotiated with individual students on what type of work should be done during the hour-long session. As the semester progressed, she became more open to less directed activities, and allowed the college students to adjust their work to the child's individual level. These discussions, comparing the merits of various exercises, helped further her understanding of the goals of whole language.

The distinction between student-led activities and teacher-led activities was illustrated during a session between the researcher, as a member of the Teaching Reading class, and one of Mrs. Pederson's students. Thus far in the semester, Mrs. Pederson had directed what activities would be addressed during the tutoring sessions. Some students expressed to her their desire to attempt the "organic writing" described in Ashton-Warner's book, Teacher,

so Mrs. Pederson gave them the option of either using her directed creative writing assignment, or giving the child free reign to choose a topic to write and draw about. The child with whom the researcher worked was distraught and tearful over the recent death of her grandmother and cousin, causing the researcher to be apprehensive about suddenly introducing a non-directed assignment. However, the researcher gave the child the option of writing on the assigned topic, or choosing her own, and the child chose to write about the fire in which her family members died. The child worked with more concentration than in any previous tutoring sessions, and cherished the resulting book more than the teacher-determined ones completed earlier. Although the one isolated incident was not enough to change the child's perceptions of writing entirely, she did approach further assignments with slightly more enthusiasm.

Other examples that help define the rebalancing of power within the classroom include the resolution of disagreements and disputes between students. At Sheridan, the students came to the teacher for direction in resolving their conflicts. Mrs. Pederson was fair, and attempted to lead them to discover the fair course of action. At Berry, a very different atmosphere for conflict resolution existed. When a problem arose, the students wrote their name in a notebook near the meeting area. During a class meeting at the end of the day, Ms. Poulsen read off the names, and gave each child a chance to explain their complaint. Each problem was then opened up for class discussion, in order to generate multiple possible solutions. In this way, the children were responsible for their own actions, and were encouraged to find their own solutions, rather than being dependent on the teacher to judge who was in the right.

The creation of new definitions for teacher and student success, both within the classroom, and within the school as a whole, also assisted in the transition. The classroom under these definitions became less performance-oriented, with less emphasis on standardized measures of achievement. In turn, it became more mastery-oriented, concentrating on individualized goal-setting, self-examination, and acknowledgement of improvement in the place of peer comparisons.

The formal, external factors that influenced teacher transition either positively or negatively were only half the story, however. The internal transition was at least as important, if not more so. In the case of Ms. Poulsen, it was evident that she found the political nature of whole language imperative. The difference in her teaching style was primarily an issue of control and power, and whether the teacher or students were the leaders within the classroom. Mrs. Pederson had not yet reached this stage of transition, and was still focusing on the selection and presentation of materials. The transition to a classroom style more open to risk-taking and increased student-student interaction had not yet occurred. Part of this may be due to the fact that as a private school, Berry's organization depended partially upon the active participation of student teachers and workers, lending a different balance of authority within the classroom, while Sheridan as a public elementary school does not provide multiple teachers within the same classroom.

Despite acceptance of the principles of whole language, and willingness to give up past teaching techniques, the classroom observations show that whole language cannot be fully and functionally instituted into the schools unless the teachers really internalize the concept of letting the child lead. Despite any number of creative writing exercises, and despite how far away

from commercial materials the teacher gets, the true goals of whole language have not been met if the child is a passive recipient of the teacher's instruction. The whole language teacher comes to see that by empowering the student, and giving the student the initiative for learning, she is empowering herself as a teacher. Once the teacher has let go of the idea of control and authority over the children, they can learn to work with the children, and to bring in other teachers as resources, without feeling they've lost touch with their class.

This last factor was a notable difference between the whole language teacher and the transitional teacher. While Ms. Poulsen was accustomed to having a full-time student teacher, several student assistants, and occasional parents in her classroom at any given time, Mrs. Pederson expressed reluctance to participate in any similar sharing of authority. She still perceives it as a loss of control that would distance her from her students, rather than as a resource to free her from routine duties to spend more inidividualized time with them. The fact that she characterizes this in terms of loss of control also indicated that she still sees herself as the dominate figure in the classroom, rather than as a facilitator to the children. Although her classroom is considerably more open than traditional classrooms, and her assignments increasingly non-restrictive, she is still the primary initiator for learning, rather than the students themselves.

Mrs. Pederson's understanding of whole language has changed from the beginning of the year. At that time, she cited the lack of funds as a major limiting factor, indicating that materials and presentation style were defining factors in her perception of whole language. Neither Sheridan or Berry are well funded; however, Ms. Poulsen does not feel limited by the lack of funds, or obligated to acquire a large, permanent in-class library. The emphasis at

Berry is on reading self-written texts, and individual copies of trade books borrowed from the public library, rather than on the commercial Big Books with multiple copies of "junior" books used at Sheridan. As the year progressed, Mrs. Pederson used more children's literature and borrowed books, and did not list lack of funds as a limiting factor during the March interview. She also voiced her awareness of the issue of shared authority with other adults, although she was not yet prepared to change her views

CONCLUSION

Teacher's understanding of the political nature of whole language is a key event in making the transition away from a traditional classroom. Even if the teacher abandons the commercial materials, the balance of power and authority must also change in order for the classroom to be truly whole language.

The movement away from standardized tests and evaluation according to isolated skills also marks a major turning point in the teacher's transition. Use of portfolios and goal contracts to gauge individual progress encourages teachers and students to look at overall performance and growth, and see interdisciplinary ties.

The two classrooms are examples of very different understandings of whole language--the organic, as introduced in Sylvia Ashton Warner's book, Teacher, and the semi-commercially driven. Publishers' marketing (providing Big Books and Junior Books as "vehicles" for change) is based on current interest in whole language and the general lack of direction provided by the education establishment. However, change in instructional materials cannot and does not necessarily signal a change in views on the acquisition and purposes of reading and writing.

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