

# Facts

# On the nature of whole language education

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. . . . Whole language is not a program, package, set of materials, method, practice, or technique; rather, it is a perspective on language and learning that *leads to the acceptance* of certain strategies, methods, materials, and techniques.--Dorothy Watson, 1989

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## Background

Whole language is a perspective on education, a philosophy of education, a belief system about education. It is an educational theory grounded in research and practice, and practice grounded in theory and research (to paraphrase Harste, 1989). This perspective or educational theory derives from several kinds of research: research demonstrating the psycholinguistic and social nature of the reading process, research demonstrating how children acquire language and how learning to read and write is similar to learning the basic structures of the language as children learn to talk; and research on how humans learn concepts and ideas. In fact, one way of characterizing whole language is to say that it is a "constructivist" view of learning, with particular emphasis on the development of literacy. Derived from research in cognitive psychology, constructivism asserts that human beings develop concepts through their own intellectual interactions with and actions upon their world. Learners and learning are not passive, but active. Forming concepts about language-oral or written-is easier when learners are presented with whole, natural language, not unnatural language patterns like "Nan can fan Dan," not the vastly simplified language of some primers in basal reading programs, and not the bits and pieces of language found in many workbook exercises and skills programs. Hence the term "whole language."

## History, in brief

In the United States, the advent of whole language is often traced to the mid-to-late 1970s, when Kenneth Goodman and others' insights into reading as a psycholinguistic process gained increasing recognition, Yetta Goodman's interest in the development of literacy merged with related lines of research, and Dorothy Watson started a teacher support group called Teachers Applying Whole Language (TAWL). Of course, whole language has roots that are historically deeper and intellectually and geographically broader (K. Goodman, 1992; Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1991; Y. Goodman, 1989; K. Goodman, 1989; Watson, 1989; K. Goodman & Y. Goodman, 1979). But what we think of today as a whole language theory of learning and teaching did not become widely known in the United States until the late 1980s, or even the early 1990s. In Canada, other leaders emerged during approximately this same time period, among them Judith Newman and David Doake. In New Zealand and Australia, where whole language is known as "natural" learning, the best-known researchers and theoreticians are Don Holdaway and Brian Cambourne, respectively.

## Some key characteristics of whole language education

- **Acceptance of learners.** This means, in part, that all learners are accepted regardless of their cultural or socio-economic background or other characteristics or labels. But in whole language classrooms, "acceptance of learners" also means that whole language teachers develop the classroom environment and the curriculum for and with the students, to meet their needs and engage them in learning about what interests them, as well as to cover essentials from the curriculum guidelines.
- **Flexibility within structure.** Instead of having children do one brief activity or worksheet after another, whole language teachers organize the day in larger blocks of time, so that children can engage in meaningful pursuits. **Thus they engage in fewer different tasks, but larger and more satisfying**

**projects.** They may have a readers' and writers' workshop, for instance, when the children read books and perhaps use them as models for their own writing. They may study a theme or topic at least part of the day for several days or weeks, using oral and written language and research skills to pursue learning in the realm of social studies and/or science and math, and using language and the arts to demonstrate and share what they have learned. Together and individually, the students have **many choices** as to what they will do and learn, which enables them to take significant **responsibility** for their learning. However, the teacher guides, supports, and structures the children's learning as needed. Flexibility within the larger time blocks offers the **time** that learners need (especially the less proficient) in order to accomplish something meaningful and significant.

- **Supportive classroom community.** Many whole language teachers help children develop skills for interacting with each other, solving interpersonal conflicts and problems, supporting one another in learning, and taking substantial responsibility for their own behavior and learning.
- **Expectations for success as they engage in "real" reading, writing, and learning.** Kids aren't kept doing "readiness" activities, in preparation for later reading and writing; rather, they are given the support they need to read and write whole texts from the very beginning. Whole language teachers have discovered that virtually *all* children can learn to read and write whole texts. This is true also of children who have heretofore been sent to resource rooms because they had difficulty with skills work. Indeed, reading whole texts is often easier for these children than doing the skills work.
- **Skills taught in context.** Instead of being taught in isolation, skills are taught through minilessons and conferences, in the context of students' reading, writing, and learning. For example: phonics is taught mainly through discussion and activities deriving from texts the children have read and reread with the teacher, and through writing the sounds they hear in words. Spelling is mainly taught when children are editing their writing, and grammar is mainly taught as the teacher helps children revise and edit what they've written. Skills like using the index of a book are taught when students need to locate information on a topic they want to research, while using the yellow pages of a phone book is taught when children need to locate resources within the community. In short, skills are taught while students are engaged in real-life tasks.
- **Teacher support for learning: scaffolding and collaboration.** Teachers provide "scaffolding" for learning in many ways. For instance, primary grade teachers read Big Books and charts to and with children again and again, enabling the children to read whole texts before they can read independently. Whole language teachers help children write the sounds they hear in words, thus enabling the children to communicate through writing. They collaborate with children in carrying out research projects and, in the process, they model and explain how to do things that the children could not yet do alone. By collaborating on projects, children provide similar support for each other.
- **Contextualized assessment that emphasizes individuals' growth as well as their accomplishments.** Assessment is based primarily upon what children are doing from day to day as they read, write, do math and science, research topics of interest, and express their learning in various ways. Comprehensive, "portfolio" assessment will include data not only on the products of children's efforts, but on their learning processes. Whole language teachers commonly involve children in assessing their own work and progress, and in setting future goals for learning. Parents and peers may also be involved in assessment. Individual growth and strengths are emphasized, along with progress in meeting agreed-upon goals and predetermined criteria.

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