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CONTENTS

Articles

- That's News to Me: Readers' Responses to Brief Newspaper Articles. *Ernest T. Goetz, Mark Sadoski, Zhaleh Fatemi, and Rebecca Bush.* 125
- Toward a Social Constructivist Reconceptualization of Intrinsic Motivation for Literacy Learning. *Penny Oldfather and Karin Dahl.* 139
- A Content Analysis of Reading Methods Texts: What Are We Told About the Nonnative Speaker of English? *Elizabeth B. Bernhardt.* 159
- Teacher-Student Interaction During Oral Reading and Rereading. *Cathy M. Roller.* 191

Critical Issues

- A Critical Commentary on Research, Politics, and Whole Language. *Michael C. McKenna, Steven A. Stahl, and David Reinking.* 211

Book Reviews

- The Ethnography of Reading*, edited by Jonathan Boyarin. Reviewed by *Donna E. Alvermann.* 235
- Reading Research into the Year 2000*, edited by Anne P. Sweet and Judith I. Anderson. Reviewed by *Louise Cherry Wilkinson.* 239

Information for Authors

243

A CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON RESEARCH, POLITICS, AND WHOLE LANGUAGE

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A recent exchange of four letters in *The Reading Teacher* exemplifies the revolution going on in reading education. It began with a letter from Joanne Yatvin, a superintendent of schools, apparently sympathetic to whole language, asking for evidence that "instruction based on whole language work(s) better for kids (or at least as well) when compared to more traditional instruction" (Yatvin, 1993). She acknowledges the importance of qualitative research, but continues that:

... the exclusive use of qualitative research to support whole language has hurt its credibility in the schools and has made whole language seem more like a religion than responsible educational practice.

The answer to my prayers would be a spate of educational research studies that confirm what I believe about whole language. But until those appear, Goodman and others should not pretend that their absence doesn't matter. (Yatvin, 1993, p. 636)

Kenneth Goodman (1993a) replied that he had "discussed [his] reading miscue research and other sociopsycholinguistic research that forms the base of *belief* in whole language about literacy practices" (p. 636, emphasis added). To Goodman, Yatvin's was "the wrong question."

I can't use her question unless we set up studies that look at all the intentions of whole language classrooms—reading, writing, oral language, thinking, problem solving, asking as well as answering questions, and developing schemas and knowledge in integrating theme units. What studies provide such data about "traditional instruction?" (Goodman, 1993a, p. 636)

In a later issue, Edward Fry (1993) replies:

I disagree. It is a perfectly fine question, one that every well-trained teacher and every administrator should ask. Wholesale mandatory switching from one reading approach to another without an answer to the basic question "Is it any better?" is nothing short of educational malpractice. (Fry, 1993, p. 182)

Fry further suggested "that testimonials are not an acceptable form of knowledge for a mature profession. Finding some teacher or some district that just loves 'method X' is not sufficient reason for changing methods" (Fry, 1993, p. 182). Goodman countered that the evidence Fry demanded already existed in the form of "the rich documentation available in whole language classrooms" (1993b, p. 182). This documentation is not just "testimonials." He also said that "teachers and school administrators have a lot more reasons for moving toward whole language" than test scores.

Within this exchange are the major themes of the debate that has occurred in reading over the past few years. Although we have been identified with one side of the debate through our papers (e.g., McKenna, Robinson, & J. W. Miller, 1990; Stahl & P. A. Miller, 1989), our intent is not to continue this debate but to articulate our own understanding of it. We will criticize what we think are internal inconsistencies in the arguments of whole-language advocates, not to score "debating points," but to examine the deeper arguments. As we will discuss, we share many of the aspirations of whole-language advocates both in terms of how we believe instruction should be carried out and the ultimate goals of that instruction. We also believe that, if the whole-language movement fails, and the pendulum swings back radically in an opposite direction, educators and children will be the worse for it.

The Wrong Question?

The central issue in the exchange of letters in *The Reading Teacher* is whether instruction based on whole language works better for kids (or at least as well) when compared to more traditional instruction. Fry (1993) says that this is a valid question. Goodman (1993a) says that it is not. This argument about the validity of the question highlights one reason why the debate over whole language is so frustrating and, sometimes, so acrimonious. Goodman and Fry align themselves with different views of research—how it should be done, how it should be interpreted, and how it relates to practice—so different that they are essentially talking about different things when they use the word "research."

Our analysis of the discourse in whole language and our knowledge of traditional educational research suggest that Goodman and Fry, and the research communities their letters represent, are concerned with entirely different questions. The difference revolves around a secondary question as well: "What do you mean 'better'?" Fry implicitly defines the goals of instruction in terms of conventional achievement, such as being able to comprehend increasingly complex texts,

and he believes that this ability can be measured through the scores of "well-constructed test(s)." (Not a particular type of test, only a well-constructed one.)

Goodman (1992a, 1992b, 1993b) and other leading advocates of whole language (e.g., Shannon, 1993, 1994) have a different goal for instruction. Whole-language instruction is seen as a means for advancing a political agenda descending from earlier progressive movements in education (see Y. Goodman, 1989). They see education as a vehicle for individual liberation and the classroom as a model for an egalitarian society, in which each individual is free to develop at his or her own rate. In Edelsky's words, "Whole language is based on a desire to improve the conditions of education for students and teachers by giving them more power over their own lives—students over their learning lives and teachers over their teaching lives. Thus, whole language is political in the sense that it refers to power arrangements" (1992, p. 325). Consistent with this view, power is first extended to teachers, so that it can be shared by students, for example, by the use of trade books rather than prescriptive sets of materials. A target of the whole-language movement has been the basal reader publishing industry, which is seen as deskilling and disempowering teachers, on the one hand, and ensuring a stratified, Eurocentric society on the other through its espousal of traditional dialect, cultural norms, and assessment procedures (Goodman, Shannon, Freeman, & Murphy, 1988; Shannon, 1992a, 1992b). Through its decentralized, child-centered philosophy, "whole language generally supports minorities in all categories—ethnicities, social classes, culture" (Edelsky, 1990, p. 10n) and "has human emancipation as its goal" (Shannon, 1994, p. 99).

Cheek (1993) compared the strength of educators' whole-language beliefs with the direction and extent of their general political persuasions and found that the more strongly educators were committed to whole language, the more liberal their general political views were on social and economic issues ($r = .86$). Such a result may only confirm the obvious, given the writings of leading whole-language advocates. (It is still not clear how many whole-language advocates associate whole-language instruction strongly with a political agenda and how many see whole language solely as an instructional approach or an instructional philosophy. The reading field has a wide range of viewpoints. We do not mean to falsely categorize anyone.)

To us, it is these political beliefs that define whole language as not just an approach to education, but as the embodiment of an ideal. To advocates such as Goodman, Edelsky, Shannon, and others, whole language is an approach leading to an egalitarian society. The interactions in the classrooms are intended to be a model for the children of how to function in a truly democratic society. To compromise whole language would be to compromise that broader goal.

From this perspective, it is clearer to us why the two sides are not communicating. Fry (1993) sees whole language as one of many ways to teach reading, "reading" being instantiated as the ability to read with comprehension, which in turn is

instantiated in achievement tests. In that view, the effectiveness of whole language as an approach to instruction should be evaluated on how well it improves performance on tests, in comparison to more traditional instruction. Such a view leads Fry to cite the earlier first-grade studies that found no difference in achievement between language experience approaches, a precursor of whole language (but see McGee & Lomax, 1990), and basal reading approaches, and suggests that teachers ought to "select the method that makes them happy."

Goodman, from his other writings (e.g., 1992a, 1992b), appears to see whole language, not as a method of teaching reading, but an aspect of an approach to creating a more just world. From this analysis, whole-language advocates do not see the goal of education as improving test scores. Their critique of test scores ("I hope [Fry] knows I think the term 'well-constructed test scores' is an oxymoron," Goodman, 1993b) is based not only on technical issues such as construct validity, but also on a questioning of the imposition of a standard or norm on an individual child. External imposition of a standard disempowers the child, who should be encouraged to seek personal meanings from text, rather than the externally mandated correct answers. Instead, whole-language advocates see reading as making a personal response, which may involve critical evaluation of the text or an aesthetic response, but will undoubtedly differ from one person to another (Goodman, 1992b; Smith, 1988). Furthermore, since whole-language advocates see instructional method not as an end in itself, but as a reflection of broader beliefs about the nature of human beings, including the power relationships within the school and the empowerment of individuals in society, they find methodological questions, such as those which Fry (1993) and Yatvin (1993) ask, to be beside the point.

This is not just a disagreement, but a disconnection, in that Fry and Goodman seem to mean different things when they use the words "reading" and "whole language." This disconnection makes us uncomfortable. On one hand, we share an achievement-orientation with Fry (1993), in that it seems reasonable to hold any approach to teaching reading accountable for how well it teaches children basic reading competencies. At the same time, we agree with many of the criticisms of standardized testing, namely that tests do not adequately measure a construct we would consider as "reading" and that they tend to pervert creative and thoughtful instruction. Yet neither are we ready to abandon testing entirely. We believe that creative minds devoted to enlightened views of reading can develop valid and reliable tests, consistent with what many consider to be whole-language principles, such as the use of authentic texts and tasks.

On the other hand, we share many of the larger goals of the whole-language movement. We agree with Shannon (1993) about his goals for a just society, one which invites the participation of *all* its members, and we consider ourselves liberal on social and economic issues. We share a belief for true multiculturalism in schools, as well as the empowerment of both teachers and students in the process of education. A point of disagreement is whether the methodology of whole language

is unquestionably the best means to achieve those goals. We agree with Smith (1989) that literacy is not sufficient in and of itself for participation in society, and that it may have been oversold as a means to economic betterment. But we also believe that, without literacy, defined as the ability to apply basic reading and writing competencies, a person is much less likely to reap the full benefits of societal participation (Kirsch, Jenkin, Jungeblut, & Kolstad, 1993). We believe that one should not be forced to choose between these goals as if they were mutually exclusive. We believe that a reading method should be judged on how well children learn to read words and comprehend texts as well as on how well they exercise their personal power to read critically and widely. A method that does a poor job of the former will jeopardize many children's opportunities to participate fully in society.

Research and Politics

These different viewpoints about the goals of education are reflected in disagreements about the nature of inquiry in educational research. Fry (1993) typifies the traditional view of educational research as informing practice, by suggesting refinements and new methods to achieve set goals. Whole-language advocates see research as supporting the development of whole-language programs, by reporting the development of whole-language teachers so that other teachers who have accepted this philosophy can benefit. Smith (1988) sees all research as political:

One aspect of eclecticism is the view that science is an incremental activity—that every bit of research is valid and worthwhile, adding a nugget of truth to an always-growing accumulation of knowledge and understanding. . . . All reported findings are supposed to fit together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, no matter how contradictory they might be. . . . The alternative point of view is that scientific research is based on conceptual *paradigms*, or ways of seeing the world, which frequently conflict. They are subjectively adopted and emotionally retained. . . . The research being done, the evidence gathered and the conclusions reached all depend on the researcher's beliefs and expectations. (pp. 220–221, original emphasis)

Smith sees conflicts between conclusions as a political conflict between two paradigms, both of which are inherently biased toward their respective views of the world. According to whole-language proponents, scientific research is not truly objective, but reflects the researchers' political choices in the type of measures used, and the way the findings are interpreted.

It is widely acknowledged that researchers (and university-based purveyors of research) almost necessarily hold political beliefs that are reflected in such matters as the choice of what questions to ask and what paradigms to employ in answering them (e.g., see Eisner, 1988; Popkewitz, 1984). This circumstance is acknowledged to be true of basic educational research, especially whenever social uses of its results are envisioned by investigators (Jackson, 1990). However, what distin-

guishes whole-language research is the central place occupied by political ideology in its educational agenda. Arguing that research can never be value-neutral, whole-language proponents go the next step and bend research to the accomplishment of valued political goals (Edelsky, 1990). The prominence of such goals appears to have influenced, in important ways, how the whole-language community conducts research and how it reacts to research conducted by those outside that community.

Propaganda and Research

One source of evidence for the effectiveness of whole-language practice has been the success stories of individual teachers. For example, Five (1991), Mills, O'Keefe, and Stephens (1992), and eight others are cited by Shannon (1994) as supporting whole language. Weaver (1990) and Stephens (1991) cite others as well. These are the "testimonials" discussed by Fry (1993). The strategy of equating the accumulation of such stories with research can be questioned from a research perspective, on the grounds that the reported effects may not generalize to other teachers and their classroom contexts. By emphasizing only success stories, whole-language advocates convey the impression that only success is possible through whole-language practice. The stories consequently become propaganda, and they have an effect similar to that of advertising (designed to persuade) rather than research (designed to question) (Stahl, 1994b).

Not surprisingly, whole-language writers are generally positive and optimistic as they discuss classroom experiences, and their language is replete with words of positive rhetorical value—*real, natural, authentic*—a tactic that has the political effect of portraying challengers as advocates of the implied opposites of these terms (the artificial, the unnatural, the synthetic) (Moorman, Blanton, & McLaughlin, 1992a, 1992b). Similar polarizing terms are used to couch the political ideals of the movement: "Whole language stands for justice, democracy, and empowerment and against injustice and a stratified society" (Edelsky, 1992, p. 325, original emphasis).

Whole Language as a Foil to Conservative Conspiracies

Tuinman, in his (1985) reaction to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, praised the United States as a nation interested in monitoring the literacy of its citizens in order to achieve the laudable goal of universal literacy. He added, parenthetically, that the only other reason a government might wish to monitor literacy was to ensure that its people did *not* attain too high a level. This comment evoked the laughter he intended, but the whole-language literature comes close to suggesting that the whole-language movement is a bastion of freedom against a conservative conspiracy to stifle widespread literacy.

Two types of opponents are envisioned, very different in character. One group, advocating back-to-the-basics approaches to literacy development, now harbors so

much power, Goodman has argued, "that even reports by authoritative research groups find it politic to endorse early direct instruction in phonics as essential to reading development" (1989a, p. 215). Goodman (1992a) stated that Adams's book (1990) and Stahl, Osborn, and Lehr's (1990) summary of that book were "being widely promoted by publishers, right-wing groups, and professional associations" (p. 355). As one of the authors, Stahl does not know of any right-wing groups promoting that book (although such involvement certainly is possible), but does know that Adams's book is published by a university press (MIT) and the summary is published by the Center for the Study of Reading and copublished in England by Heinemann, the publisher of many whole-language books. It is also codistributed by the International Reading Association and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, both mainstream professional groups.

Although we feel that he is in error in this particular case, we share Goodman's (1992a) larger concern that researchers be aware of the potential misuse of their findings. Research findings, for example, such as those of Jensen (1969) that there were differences in intelligence between children from two different ethnic groups might be used to justify unequal treatment of children from these two groups. Such an outcome would be morally wrong, and researchers should take care that their results are interpreted properly, to the extent that such interpretation is under their control. Where we differ, again, is that we see whole language as an approach to reading, and consequently we see our questions about it as a way of improving reading instruction. Whole-language advocates, such as Edelsky (1990), see such criticism as a way of abetting the political goals opposed by whole language, namely those of profiteering publishers, racists, and so forth.

The second group of opponents to whole language is more sinister, comprising those who wish to maintain a stratified American society because they themselves presently occupy one of the higher strata. The reason, we are told, that the federal government supported Marilyn Adams's (1990) book is because individuals within the government knew that "that was the best way to keep the underclasses in their place" (Goodman, 1991). Goodman has further suggested that "it is a group of individuals who want to limit education to a small elite corp of technicians needed to run our industry" (1992b, p. 198). The conspiratorial mind-set is perhaps the natural consequence of a movement which not only sees itself as revolutionary, but also as out of power. We worry about this mind-set, however, because there is little evidence of a well-orchestrated conspiracy and because the emotional fall-out from these theories tends to stifle dialogue between educational researchers who have honest differences of opinion. The irony of these conspiracy theories is that the same charge was leveled against meaning-oriented approaches by conservatives, beginning with Flesch (1955). It was not valid then, either.

Other voices have called for an enhanced sense of political responsibility on the part of literacy researchers for how their findings might be used (McCaslin, 1989; Mitchell & Green, 1986), but Shavelson (1988) has argued that the extent to

which educational research ultimately affects policy is generally dwarfed by other considerations. The school choice movement is an example offered by Shavelson as an idea largely unsubstantiated by research but favored nonetheless by some policy-makers for political motives.

Whole Language and Disenfranchised Populations

We share with whole-language advocates a strong concern for improving literacy among disenfranchised populations. Children from poor homes rely on public schools for their education more than children from wealthier families who can pay for tutors and private schools. For children from poor homes, the risks of our choices are much higher. However, our concern includes serious doubt as to whether whole language is adequately addressing the important needs of this population. Our doubt is based on results suggesting that whole-language approaches seem to work best with middle-class populations. For example, Stahl and Miller (1989) did not find any studies in which whole-language or language experience approaches produced significantly higher achievement with students classified as "disadvantaged" or "lower SES" or a similar label reflecting a disenfranchised group. Of the studies reviewed by Stahl, McKenna, and Pagnucco (in press), only three clearly identified their student population as low SES. Of these one study found no significant differences among students in attitude toward reading, one found a difference in favor of the whole-language group in writing, one found a difference in favor of the whole-language group on a cloze measure, but not on a phonics measure. These results are roughly similar to what was found in the overall analysis.

Delpit (1988), an African-American educator, argues that disenfranchised children need to learn about the rules of the culture of power in order to participate in that culture. In terms of literacy, this means being able to write in standard English and read books that would be read by those from the mainstream culture. According to Delpit, honoring uncritically the nonstandard responses from nonmainstream children may have the ironic effect of shutting them out from the culture of power, since they will not learn how to participate in that culture. The instruction favored by Delpit involves a mixture of direct instruction with authentic, meaningful tasks, honoring students' home language but also teaching students how to participate in the dominant culture.

Students from mainstream homes, who enter school speaking standard English, have no such problem. Further, students from homes with greater resources may have other advantages in whole-language classrooms. Feitelson's (1973) experience in Israel might illuminate this point. When the state of Israel was founded in the 1940s, the only approach to reading was a progressive one termed the "center of interest" approach, in which the student's interest was paramount to other considerations. Words were not presented in isolation, but as part of class charts, songs and stories. Children were to infer the relationship between words and speech sounds, through a "natural" process of acquiring reading. This approach, which

clearly resembles whole language, was quite successful with the European Jews who first settled Israel, but this changed with the mass migration of poorer Jews from Arab countries in the 1950s. Among these new immigrants, failure rates of 50% or higher were not uncommon. Feitelson (1952, cited in Feitelson, 1973) interviewed the parents of the Arab Jewish children who failed and the middle-class children who succeeded. She found that the middle-class parents took it upon themselves to teach their children, if their children were not learning well in school. The poorer children who did not have that help failed to learn at school or at home.

Parents who place a strong emphasis on literacy and who have the resources to provide supplemental help to their children will mitigate the effects of any reading program. This phenomenon occurred with lower SES parents as well, as observed by Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, and Hemphill (1990) and Chall, Jacobs, and Baldwin (1990). If a school is ineffective in teaching reading, such parents will compensate, by working with their children at home, providing tutors, and so on. For children from homes with a lesser emphasis on literacy, an effective teaching approach at school becomes vital. Thus, determining the effectiveness of instruction is at least as important for the development of an egalitarian society as choosing an approach that is egalitarian in its conception (see Chall, 1992). We are troubled by what we see as too great a focus on how consistent whole language is with egalitarian ideals without an equal focus on how successful it is in providing children with levels of literacy that will enable them to participate fully in the mainstream culture.

Unfavorable Research?

In the traditional view of research, one tries to refute findings that are unfavorable to one's theory by doing research. Thus, if traditional scientists disagree with a study's finding, their response is another study. In rejecting the gradual accretion of findings to produce generally accepted conclusions, as discussed by Smith (1988), whole-language proponents tend to see research as essentially political and to believe that unfavorable findings require a political, not necessarily a research response (Shannon, 1994). Political responses include attacks on the motives of the researchers, ignoring unfavorable research, and delegitimizing researchers. The results of these strategies may be to draw the whole-language community closer together, but they also tend to alienate those not in that community.

One political approach to unfavorable research is to challenge, often on an *ad hominem* basis, the researchers who have produced or synthesized results unfavorable to whole language. Sometimes these researchers' motives are impugned, as when they are accused of "insincerity" (Shannon, 1991a, p. 6) or characterized as developing specious theories they "then translate for teachers into the technology of commercial reading materials" (Shannon, 1992b, p. 203). Sometimes they are accused of political naivete, causing them unwittingly to abet "the far right in their attack on public schools" (Goodman, 1992b, p. 198). Sometimes they are accused

of wishing to advance their own political agendas (Edelsky, 1990)—an inevitable suspicion, perhaps, given the view that whole-language proponents have of research. Sometimes they are depicted as not having “bothered to study” what whole language is (Edelsky, 1992, p. 327) or as being unable to “distinguish whole language” from other approaches (Edelsky, 1990, p. 8), a shortcoming that “invalidates” their research (Weaver, 1990, p. 121). Sometimes they are described as “amoral,” having shirked their professional responsibility to weigh the possible uses others may make of their findings (Goodman, 1992b, p. 198). Sometimes they are the target of outright name-calling. Grundin (1994), for example, called people who disagreed with his position “phonicators” and “word fetishists.”

These challenges have at least two effects. First, they tend to strengthen the affiliation of whole-language researchers with their ideal, by making those who would question whole language into villains or dupes. If whole-language advocates stand for what is good for children, those who oppose or question them must stand for what is evil. We believe that whole-language advocates are sincere in their love for children. But so are those who question whole language and its effects. The rejection of doubters and skeptics tends to shut down any constructive dialogue. This lack of respect is a troubling aspect of the whole-language literature. Although there certainly are amoral researchers who crunch their numbers with little or no concern for the practical consequences of their research, there are many others who have children's interest at heart when they question the effects of whole language. We like to think of ourselves in this way.

We are also disturbed by the tendency of whole-language advocates to ignore unfavorable findings. This tactic is linked to the “advertising” strategy, described earlier, through which their own reports accentuate success. An example is an annotated bibliography of whole-language research (Stephens, 1991) that systematically excluded unfavorable studies. Stephens, for example, did not include Stahl and Miller's (1989) review, nor did she include any of the studies in that review which did not find results which favored whole language, although she certainly was aware of them. Shannon (1994) defended this practice by arguing that teachers using the bibliography were apt to have already made a commitment to whole language and were therefore part of its community. It is interesting to note that Shannon (1991b) concurred with Glass (1987), who condemned the general practice of selective citation. But in regard to the Stephens review, Shannon remarked, “Whole language advocates . . . choose some descriptions, theories, explanations, and narratives about reading, and they dismiss others because the former produce their desired community better than the latter” (1994, p. 107). On this issue, contradictory evidence threatens the solidarity of the movement and must therefore be avoided. Whatever the reasons, a disregard for opposing viewpoints and scholarship is tantamount to the suppression of ideas, especially for those who do not have the time or inclination to seek out the literature. Another example is Weaver's (1989, p. 6) reference to a “multidisciplinary consensus” against the assumptions underlying basal reader use. Even though she included cognitive psychology among

these disciplines, she ignored two decades of research in that field, including findings that pose challenges to assumptions that ground whole-language theory (e.g., Just & Carpenter, 1987). Her assertion that a consensus had been reached would not have been tenable had she acknowledged this extensive literature.

A third approach is to defer to teachers as higher authorities on effective practice. The emphasis on teachers as researchers in their classrooms (see Allen, Buchanan, Edelsky, & Norton, 1992) is consistent with a belief that teachers, especially whole-language teachers, have a special kind of knowledge that university-based researchers cannot appreciate. Goodman (1993b) makes reference to the teachers who have embraced whole language as evidence that it must be successful, evidence more relevant than that provided by university-based researchers, such as Fry (1993) and, ironically, Goodman himself.

This approach has proved problematic, however, because many practicing teachers have reached judgments at variance with whole-language positions. On an individual level, the tactic of bowing to teacher judgment can backfire dramatically. When Heymsfeld, a practicing reading specialist, published a constructive, though critical, piece on whole language in *Educational Leadership* (1989), she was trenchantly attacked in the same issue (Goodman, 1989b). Though whole language had the last word, the victory may have been a Pyrrhic one. It is difficult to hold up teachers as practical savants on the one hand and then hammer them mercilessly when they depart from the positions that whole-language advocates, themselves mainly employed by universities, espouse. Surveys conducted by Pressley and Rankin (1993) and Walmsley and Adams (1993) resulted in evidence at odds with whole-language claims. These surveys found that even teachers who professed being “whole language teachers” used a great many approaches in their classroom, some of which were in conflict with whole-language teaching, such as explicit skills instruction. Thus, these teachers might be more properly termed “eclectic,” in that they use a variety of instructional techniques.

Eclecticism

Whole-language proponents typically reject an eclecticism that would combine elements of whole-language teaching with other instructional procedures. For example, Newman and Church (1990) state:

Whole language isn't an add-on. It's not a frill. We can't do a little bit of whole language and leave everything else untouched. It's a radically different way of perceiving the relationships between knowledge and the knower, between competence and responsibility, between learner and teacher, between teacher and administrator, between home and school. (p. 26)

Goodman (1989b), in response to a suggestion that direct instruction in skills be included with whole-language principles, replied:

One cannot reconcile direct instruction with natural learning. Meaningful, predictable, authentic texts are incompatible with carefully controlled vocabulary

and decontextualized phonics instruction. Teachers *have* lived with contradictions, but they don't have to. Whole-language teachers are evolving internally consistent views that enable them to make the instructional decisions necessary to support literacy development. (p. 69)

In the view of these and other vocal whole-language advocates, one cannot have a little whole language and a little of something else. Partial moves toward whole language are acceptable only as a way-station to becoming a bona fide whole-language teacher.

The strategy of attacking eclecticism seems designed to prevent whole language from being assimilated into a more traditional approach, and thus lose its identity. This has happened with other progressive approaches, such as the language experience approach, which began as an instructional philosophy but became an activity among many others in a first-grade reading program. By maintaining whole language as a philosophy, which must be accepted in its entirety or not at all, whole-language advocates are resisting the tendency of educators to reduce a new movement to a set of activities. What they want to avoid is a teacher "doing whole language" on Friday afternoons, while maintaining a basal orientation the rest of the week. This view is understandable from the goal of maintaining solidarity within the movement and consistency of philosophy. If whole language is not a reading method, but a method for reorganizing power relationships in schools, as suggested by Edelsky (1992) and Shannon (1993), then half-way moves undermine the entire thrust of the movement. It is troublesome, however, from a pedagogical viewpoint. As we will discuss, effective pedagogy usually requires eclecticism.

RESEARCH AND THE QUESTION OF EFFECTIVENESS

Given the aims of whole language, Yatvin's (1993) question of whether whole-language approaches are more effective than traditional approaches, affirmed by Fry (1993), would seem irrelevant to the purposes of whole language. The research tradition that Fry comes from would place achievement as an obvious outcome of any reading method. Whole-language advocates, using a different paradigm, do not consider it important whether children in whole-language classes are learning more or faster than children in traditional classes. It is important to whole-language advocates *that* children are learning, but how fast they learn is less relevant than whether they learn to read well. In this case, "reading well" might involve the social construction of meanings of text, as well as personal aesthetic and critical responses to text. But what of Yatvin's (1993) question? Fry (1993) responds by citing the first-grade studies from 1967 (Bond & Dykstra, 1967). There is more recent evidence, but it essentially supports Fry's conclusions that there is little evidence that whole-language approaches are more (or less) effective than traditional approaches. It is also surprising how little recent research has been done

comparing whole-language and traditional approaches, especially given the rapid increase in the number of whole language-oriented teachers (Stahl et al., in press). This evidence uses comparative studies, in which a whole-language or language experience approach is compared directly to a traditional, basal reader approach. We will discuss those studies in the next section, and then discuss the criticisms of this tradition by whole-language advocates.

Comparative Studies

In their review of studies conducted in kindergarten and first-grade classrooms through 1988, Stahl and Miller (1989) found it necessary to use fairly early studies involving the language experience approach in order to conduct a meaningful meta-analysis. Overall, they found no differences (an overall effect size near zero) between whole language and the earlier language experience approaches and basal reading programs. They did find that whole-language approaches tended to be more effective in kindergarten than in first grade, and that whole-language approaches tended to produce somewhat higher effects on measures of word recognition than on comprehension (see Stahl, 1994a). Similarly, they found the same patterns on nontraditional measures, such as oral reading miscue analysis and retellings, as on standardized tests.

Two noteworthy trends emerged from the Stahl and Miller review. One was that in the later studies—those better aligned with a whole-language philosophy—whole-language approaches tended to produce lower effects on measures of comprehension. The second was that the better designed studies, particularly those with observational components to verify treatment, tended to produce lower effects for whole language.

These trends occasioned a second review (Stahl et al., in press), involving studies undertaken since 1988. The Stahl and Miller (1989) study included studies of both whole-language and the earlier language experience approaches, and was limited to kindergarten and first grade. This time, investigations were limited to those clearly identified as whole language. It also included studies above grade one as well. An extensive search identified only 14 studies yielding numerical data about children's relative achievement—too few for a meta-analysis to be conducted. A vote-counting found that 11 of 16 comparisons examining comprehension reported no significant difference between whole-language and traditional approaches, 4 favored whole language, and 1 favored conventional instruction. An average effect size of .13 was computed (ignoring an outlier; .29 including it). With respect to word recognition, results varied with the type of measure used. On standardized vocabulary tests, whole-language students did slightly better, whereas on informal reading inventory word lists and decoding tests, traditional students exhibited a slight edge. There were wide spreads in the effect sizes measured, suggesting strong teacher and site effects, rather than method effects. That is, there may have been very successful whole-language teachers and extremely unsuccessful whole-lan-

guage teachers, and that, overall, these tended to balance each other out. These results are similar to the first-grade studies, which also found strong teacher effects (see Bond & Dykstra, 1967; Chall & Feldmann, 1966).

Comparisons?

Whole-language proponents often object to making comparisons as antithetical to the philosophy of whole language, which stresses individual development (e.g. Edelsky, 1990). One cannot compare traditional instruction to whole language because the two approaches have different aims, and differ on so many different dimensions that it would be impossible to measure them all. This was the position in Goodman's (1993a) response to Yatvin (1993). The use of standardized tests, for example, favors traditional instruction because such instruction is geared toward performance on standardized tests, both in the use of test-like materials for instruction, and in the way standardized tests reflect the atomized skills taught in traditional classrooms, more than they reflect the holistic view of reading typical of whole-language classrooms. (However, Stahl and Miller [1989] found that the results from nontraditional measures, such as oral reading miscue analysis or retellings, mirrored the findings from standardized tests.)

There is an irony in the whole-language advocates' eschewing of comparisons, since much of whole-language writing is devoted to delineating the differences between their approach and that of traditional instruction. K. Goodman (1989a), for example, in reviewing the research on whole language, devotes more space to critiques of traditional instruction than to research on whole language itself. Weaver (1990) devotes one chapter in her whole-language text to criticizing the "transmission" mode, another chapter to criticizing research supporting traditional phonics instruction, and a third to criticizing standardized testing.

There are two reasons why whole-language advocates need to contrast the new movement and older movements. First, is the need to define itself. In purely Aristotelian terms, it is impossible to define what a concept is without establishing what it is not. Just as it is difficult to define what a "square" is without distinguishing it from other quadrilateral figures, it is impossible to define whole language without distinguishing it from traditional instruction as well as from other progressive education movements. Altwerger, Edelsky, and Flores (1987) discussed how whole language both resembles and is different from language experience, open classroom, whole-word methods, and so on. A problem is that whole language is often clearer on what it is not than what it is. Part of the difficulty in defining whole language is the desire not to make whole language just another educational prescription and the belief that individual practitioners will interpret whole language differently in their classrooms depending on the needs of their children and their personal histories (Watson, 1989).

A second reason that whole-language advocates have tried to distinguish themselves from traditional instruction is the political orientation of the movement. The political agenda driving whole language stresses a restructuring of the relations

between student and teacher, and between teacher and administration. The movement also sees the process of its own growth as a political one. Since many whole-language advocates have elected not to try to influence basal reading programs for philosophical reasons (although they certainly have, as evidenced by Hoffman et al., 1993), they have elected to disseminate their ideas through conference presentations and publications. Although some have likened these modes of presentation to religious fundamentalism (McCallum, 1988), we feel they are more akin to political campaigning, combining a positive platform with sharp, negative attacks on opponents (e.g., Edelsky, 1990; Goodman, 1992a, 1992b; Grundin, 1994). Further, we worry that this approach may undermine a free flow of ideas based on serious scholarship.

Making a Case Through Case Studies

Thus, whole-language proponents do make comparisons and contrasts, and do so for reasons that are consistent with their goal of defining their movement. However, they reject comparative research as alien to their paradigm. Instead, they rely on individual case studies that typically avoid comparisons.

Case studies can serve several purposes. When they are used as concrete examples how whole language can be implemented in a classroom, they can be useful for teachers who are struggling to do just that. A successful example of this type of work is Nancie Atwell's (1987) *In the Middle*, which has had an extensive influence on educational practice through her discussion of reading and writing workshops, which were the first exposure for many teachers to whole-language practices and principles. These works have also been used to "advertise" how whole language works, to show doubting teachers that whole language can be successfully implemented and that children gain benefits from it (Stahl, 1994b).

However, these case studies have also been cited as evidence that whole-language approaches are more effective than traditional approaches (e.g., Shannon, 1994). For this purpose, though, these works fall short. Almasi, Palmer, Gambrell, and Pressley (in press) have compared a handful of qualitative studies on whole language to a set of criteria drawn from the literature on the foundations of qualitative research. These criteria were so strict that it is not surprising that these studies fall short. However, the case studies, such as those in Atwell (1987), Five (1991), Stires (1991), Mills, O'Keefe, and Stephens (1992) and others also fall short of more elemental criteria. When Atwell describes the writing done by one of her middle school children, or Five describes the growth made by one of her struggling readers, or Mills, O'Keefe, and Stephens describe how their case study first graders made gains in decoding, we find ourselves asking "Who are these students?" "How were they chosen?" "Why did the author choose to report what was reported and not other behaviors?" When Atwell shows us her middle school students thriving in her whole-language environment, we do not know whether these same students would have thrived in traditional classes as well, because no comparison was made. Were they simply talented students who would do well in any

setting? When Five and Mills et al. discuss the gains made by their case study students, we do not know whether these students were typical, since the cases appear to have been chosen after the fact, to illustrate the progress made by students. In fact, none of these authors claimed to be doing research. The problem is that they are taken as research. These particular case studies were taken from the "Selected List of Research in Whole Language" in Shannon (1994), but see also Edelsky, 1990; Stephens, 1991).

Two studies which meet our informal criteria are Dahl and Freppon (in press) and Allen, Michaelove, and Shockley (1993). In Dahl and Freppon's study, subjects were chosen from traditional and whole-language classes at the beginning of kindergarten and followed through first grade; they were chosen to represent three different levels of entering ability, and data were collected through twice-weekly observations and analyzed through established techniques for qualitative research. A similar amount of discipline went into the Allen, Michaelove, and Shockley study, although they studied only "children that we worry about" and how they progressed through a whole-language curriculum.

The research reported in Dahl and Freppon (in press) and Allen et al. (1993) is complex and subject to multiple interpretations. At risk of oversimplification, Dahl and Freppon found that children in both types of class made equivalent progress on measures of reading, but children in whole-language classes had an advantage in their writing ability and in their decoding knowledge. Children in whole-language classes also had a somewhat more mature orientation toward reading than children in traditional classes, who tended to view reading as it was reflected in their skills-based curriculum. Some of the children in Allen, Michaelove, and Shockley's study made adequate progress in reading. Others did not, for various reasons, including factors relating to the school context and the larger context of the community that could not be overcome by two whole-language teachers.

Our problem is not with case studies per se, but with how they have been used. One can use single class case studies or ethnographies to show that learning is going on in whole-language classrooms, and that is how they have been used for the most part. But one cannot state that children learned more than they would have in another type of class, if the ethnographer did not make that comparison. One can use noncomparative ethnographies to show how whole-language classes work, but not that they accomplish any goal better than another type of instruction. When Goodman (1993b) says he wants "to use the rich documentation available in whole language classrooms to show the learning that's going on," he means just that, that children do learn in whole-language classrooms. Children learn in all types of classrooms. But when such statements are taken to demonstrate the superiority of whole-language approaches, that is an overextension of the data.

What is Left out of Whole-Language Discourse

There are at least two aspects of successful whole-language classrooms that we have observed get little mention in the whole-language literature—the integration

of strategy instruction in authentic reading and writing tasks and the expectation that children will read challenging materials. Although the whole-language literature contains ample cautions about the importance of including strategy instruction, including in some cases phonics instruction, and the importance of providing children with challenging materials, our observations in the field suggest that these aspects have not been successfully communicated to teachers.

Proponents of whole language make it clear that whole-language lessons do teach phonics (e.g., Goodman, 1992a; Newman & Church, 1990), but distinguish between embedding phonics instruction in whole-language lessons and teaching isolated skills as has been typical of traditional basal readers. Mills et al. (1992) and Freppon and Dahl (1991) have provided excellent descriptions of how phonics might be taught in a whole-language classroom. Furthermore, although the research on beginning reading provides strong evidence that an early and systematic emphasis on decoding leads to better achievement than later and less systematic instruction, it says little about *how* that instruction should be carried out (Stahl, 1992). It is certainly possible that embedded instruction in the context of reading authentic literature and inventing spellings might be as effective as other forms of phonics instruction. However, teachers appear to have an impression that a whole-language teacher does not teach phonics at all (Newman & Church, 1990).

Whole-language teachers also encourage (or "invite" in Newman's [1985] terms) students to engage in more and more challenging literacy tasks. Yet many of the classes we have observed seem not to press children to challenge themselves. Stahl, Suttles, and Pagnucco (1992) found that students in the whole-language classes they observed were reading relatively easy material, at least relative to the traditional classes observed in the same study. It seems to be differences in the challenge of the material that they read, rather than the difference in philosophy, that lead to differences in achievement.

The teachers in the classes observed by Stahl et al. (1992) were not doing whole language the way its advocates intend (e.g., Smith, 1992), but that is precisely the point. Through an oppositional approach, that deemphasizes similarities between whole language and quality conventional instruction, whole-language advocates have left teachers with the impression that one does not teach words or letters in isolation, nor does one push students but instead lets them determine what they should read guided only by their own interests.

Eclectic Programs

In contrast to purely whole-language approaches, whose effects have been weak, at least as measured by syntheses such as Stahl et al. (in press), several eclectic programs, or those which combine elements of whole language with elements of effective traditional instruction, seem to be quite effective. Examples include Reading Recovery (DeFord, Lyons, & Pinnell, 1991), Transactional Strategy Lessons (Brown & Pressley, 1993), the Independent Reading and Writing Periods (Morrow, 1992), the first-grade programs developed by Pat Cunningham and a group of

first-grade teachers (Cunningham, Hall, & Defee, 1991) or by Eldredge (1991; Eldredge & Butterfield, 1986) and the Benchmark School program (Gaskins & Gaskins, in press). All of these programs successfully integrate such whole-language principles as self-selection of books and the use of authentic reading and writing tasks with direct instruction in skills and strategies, as well as with an expectation that children will read challenging materials. In addition, this eclectic instruction seems to be what effective teachers are doing, even when they identify themselves as whole-language teachers (Pressley & Rankin, 1993).

All of these programs have learned from whole language, but differ significantly from it. All provide some amount of teacher-directed phonics instruction or comprehension strategy instruction. This instruction may be from a stand-alone program (e.g., Eldredge, 1991) or integrated into the children's reading and writing tasks (e.g., Brown & Pressley, 1993; Gaskins & Gaskins, in press), but is clearly systematic. All programs have an explicit focus on achievement. In Reading Recovery, this focus comes through continual diagnosis and readjustment of the program. In Independent Reading and Writing Periods, this comes from the use of a basal reading program, with its scope and sequence plan.

All of these programs also have children's interest in reading as an explicit goal, similar to whole language. They all use authentic materials, and eschew workbooks and other artificial tasks. However, these programs provide a degree of teacher direction or external monitoring. External monitoring conflicts with the political goals of whole language, which would require that the children be empowered to determine their own needs. The superior position of the teacher in these programs makes them ostensibly nonegalitarian, but it may just be that teacher direction which makes them successful.

WHY CAN'T WE TALK?

We began with an exchange of four letters. Perhaps more fundamentally, these letters represent a disconnection between two research traditions. In one tradition, advances in education involve incremental change arbitrated by educational research. In this scientific approach, researchers are seen as neutral evaluators who examine the effects of programs and pronounce which one "works" best on the basis of empirical data. Whole-language advocates have challenged this approach on several grounds. First, the question of what works best requires an answer to what is meant by "best." For the whole-language position discussed in this paper, what is best is that learners become empowered to direct their own learning as members of a community (see Allen, Michaelove, & Shockley, 1993), not whether they could perform on a standardized achievement test. Second, whole-language advocates argue that research cannot be objective, that researchers bias their results by their choice of instruments, research paradigms, and so on.

In addition, whole-language advocates see whole language not as a reading method, but as an approach to school change. To achieve the goal of realigning power within schools, and thus making schools models for a larger vision of a truly democratic society, whole-language advocates rely on political means. Since their view is that research is biased, and thus political, some use research politically, through the use of rhetoric, ignoring or discounting unfavorable results. This tendency to rely on rhetoric, as well as a rejection of eclecticism as a compromise of ideals, makes sense if one views whole language as a political movement whose goal is developing an egalitarian society through school change.

Thus, if one subscribes to the more dispassionate viewpoint that has been the ideal of the educational researcher, then whole-language instruction may not prove to be any more effective than traditional instruction. If one takes the whole-language position, that whole language is not a reading method, but a philosophy of how schools are to be changed, then evaluation is beside the point.

As long as one stays within one or the other of these paradigms, there is no problem. If your goal is reading achievement, then you will look at research which helps you choose the "best" instruction or refine current instruction, and you might want to adopt a more eclectic approach to reading instruction, as Stahl et al. (in press) suggest. If you accept the goals of the whole-language movement, and that whole-language approaches are the best ways of achieving those goals, then the question is how best to instantiate whole language. You might use case studies to see how other whole-language teachers are making whole language work in their classes and see if their approaches fit in your class. The problem is when a superintendent who is concerned about achievement questions whole language, as Yatvin (1993) did, or when educational researchers, such as Fry (1993), look at case studies. It is these collisions of paradigms that create dissent and turmoil.

The problem is that the public, as represented by Superintendent Yatvin's letter, still holds the view that it is advances in achievement that are important, not necessarily the building of community in the classroom. If those who are prominent in the whole-language movement had chosen to make their case that it is the transformation of education that is their goal, then the success or failure of that movement could be properly understood and judged by all the relevant stakeholders—teachers, parents, administrators, researchers, and so on. Instead, they allude to "many reasons" and the "rich documentation available" to support whole language, implying that there is a research base supporting their movement. Clearly the public understands "research" to mean the type of research requested by Superintendent Yatvin and by Fry, research that compares the new method to older, established methods.

Without making it clear that these reasons and documentation are based on a different view of research, the possibilities for misunderstanding are real and consequential. If the public feels, rightly or wrongly, they are being deceived, they may turn against not only the extremists in the whole-language movement, but also

against all of the ideas that have come out of that movement. With that, we will not only lose the good things that have come out of the whole-language movement—a greater emphasis on the joy of reading, the use of more authentic tasks, the use of quality children's literature rather than poorly written basal texts as the focus of reading instruction, the integration of reading and writing—but we will move toward an uncertain future where education, without any guidance from a knowledge base, will careen between competing demagogueries.

The irony is that the two positions are not as far apart as the rhetoric suggests. Traditional educational researchers could embrace a whole-language classroom, provided that it also include factors normally associated with early reading success, such as quality code instruction, high expectations, and so forth. They would, however, embrace that classroom for different reasons—the whole-language educator for the authenticity of its tasks and the egalitarian nature of the learning, the traditional educator for the quality of its instruction. The political agenda of the whole-language advocates is also not far away from the agenda of traditional educational researchers, who also tend to be politically liberal, and who have similar concerns about multiculturalism, equality of educational opportunity, and so on. We can (and should) teach reading in a manner that promotes both achievement and equality. The dispute is whether a political agenda or students' achievement should be the main goal of our instruction.

Harste, in a 1989 commentary on the "Future of Whole Language," suggests that the success of the whole-language movement will be judged by: "(1) Did the movement allow us to hear new voices? (2) Did the movement allow us to begin new conversations? (3) Did the movement help us to establish structures whereby these conversations can continue?" These are still good questions.

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