

Defining Whole Language

By Samuel Blumenfeld

The other day, I received an e-mail from a lady in California who asked, "What on earth is the whole-language system?" She had read my article on [the making of the black underclass](#) in which I had identified whole language as the primary cause of reading failure among so many black students.

Fortunately, the answer is easy to give, because whole-language professors have been quite open in defining what they mean by their pedagogic philosophy. So I shall quote some salient passages from their writings.

In a book entitled "Whole Language, What's the Difference?" written by three whole-language professors in 1991, we read on page 32:

Whole language represents a major shift in thinking about the reading process. Rather than viewing reading as "getting the words," whole language educators view reading as essentially a process of creating meanings ... Meaning is created through a *transaction* with whole, meaningful texts (i.e., texts of any length that were written with the intent to communicate meaning).

It is a transaction, not an extraction of the meaning *from* the print, in the sense that the *reader-created* meanings are a fusion of what the reader brings and what the text offers ... Although students who learn to read in whole language classrooms are, like all proficient readers, eventually able to "read" (or identify) a large inventory of words, learning words is certainly not the goal of whole language.

Another passage from page 19 of the same book may be even more illuminating:

From a whole-language perspective, reading (and language use in general) is a process of generating hypotheses in a meaning-making transaction in a sociohistorical context. As a transactional process ... reading is not a matter of "getting the meaning" from text, as if that meaning were *in* the text waiting to be decoded by the reader.

Rather, reading is a matter of readers using the cues print provides and the knowledge they bring with them (of language subsystems, of the world) to construct a unique interpretation.

Moreover, that interpretation is situated: readers' *creations* (not retrievals) of meaning with text vary, depending on their purposes of reading and the expectations of others in the reading event. This view of reading implies that there is no single "correct" meaning for a given text, only plausible meanings.

Now you might think that all of this pedagogical insanity is taking place in some kind of political vacuum. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Whole language practice is very politically oriented. We read on page 23:

Learning is a social process ... Although whole language educators accept the importance of learning through individual interactions with the environment (Piaget 1967), they lean more heavily on Vygotsky's ideas about the social nature of learning (Vygotsky 1978).

Whole language takes seriously Vygotsky's notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (Engstrom 1986) which entails stressing the importance of collaborations (between students and teachers and between peers) through which students can transcend their own individual limitations.

You might ask: Who is Vygotsky? Vygotsky (1896-1934) was a Soviet psychologist who worked with Pavlov's colleagues at the State Institute of Experimental Psychology in Moscow in the 1920s and '30s. James Wertsch, Vygotsky's biographer, writes:

[It] is important to note that Vygotsky was a staunch advocate of dialectical and historical materialism. He was one of the creators of Marxist psychology ... People such as Vygotsky and his followers devoted every hour of their lives to making certain that the new socialist state, the first grand experiment based on Marxist-Leninist principles, would survive.

Vygotsky's colleague, Alexander Luria, wrote: "Vygotsky was ... the leading Marxist theoretician among us ... in [his] hands, Marx's methods of analysis did serve a vital role in shaping our course."

Apparently, these same methods of analysis are also serving to shape the course of the whole-language agenda. The three professors, cited earlier, state on page 67:

The whole language theoretical premise underlying which topics are pursued and how they are treated is: "*All knowledge is socially constructed.*"

Therefore all knowing is political. In an effort to promote critical literacy and thus to help children learn to read the world, not only the word (Shor & [Marxist revolutionary] Freire 1987), teachers who work with theme cycles try – no matter whether the topic is overtly "political" or not – to show how the topic is related to other more general questions.

They try to demystify social institutions by helping children investigate connections between surface facts and underlying social structures, between lived experience and structural features of class, gender and race. They know that not making connections is as political as making connections.

No further explanation needed. But what about phonics, you might ask? Here's a view of phonics given in another book on whole language, "Evaluation: Whole Language, Whole Child." We read on page 19:

The way you interpret what the child does will reflect what you understand reading to be. For instance, if she reads the word *feather* for *father*, a phonics-oriented teacher might be pleased because she's come close to sounding the word out.

However, if you believe reading is a meaning-seeking process, you may be concerned that she's overly dependent on phonics at the expense of meaning. You'd be happier with a miscue such as *daddy*, even though it doesn't look or sound anything like the word in the text. At least the meaning would be intact.

My response to that kind of imbecilic pedagogy is that any child who looks at the word "father" and says "daddy" can't read. It's as simple as that. But tell that to a whole-language teacher. Meanwhile, we the taxpayers are paying for it all.