

Whole Language: Emancipatory Pedagogy or Socialist Nonsense

By Patrick Groff

Professor of Education Emeritus at San Diego State University.

The “whole language” method of reading instruction is a highly popular, yet experimentally discredited teaching innovation. The educational principle that governs it falsely states that students best learn to read in the same informal, natural manner they previously learned to speak as preschoolers. The WL doctrine also erroneously insists that children be empowered to add, omit, and substitute meanings and words in written material—as they individually see fit.

Critics of WL note its appeals to educators to abandon direct, intensive, systematic, early, and comprehensive (DISEC) instruction in a hierarchy of prearranged discrete reading skills. The WL movement protests that DISEC teaching of reading is inhumane; a violation of each child’s unique, immutable “learning style”; stifling of teachers’ creativity by disempowering them; not “progressive” enough; too technical and mechanical; and hostile to the culture of low-income families.

But WL is misunderstood if it is seen as just a method of reading instruction.

In 1991 education professor Kenneth Goodman, co-founder of the whole language (WL) literacy development movement, edited the *Whole Language Catalog*. [1] It includes chapters written by leading WL economic/political theorists, who sought to convince educators and other audiences of the validity of the political, social, economic, and cultural agenda of WL. The writers made clear that the WL “philosophy,” as it is dubbed, views teaching students to read as a prime means to bring about definitive political, social, economic, and cultural changes—of a radically left-wing nature.

The Ultimate Aim of WL Teaching

The DISEC teaching of reading is objected to by the *Catalog* on ideological (political, social, economic, cultural) grounds. The book emphasizes that WL is more than a sweeping reconstruction of how to teach reading skills; it prepares students to challenge traditionally or historically venerated political and socioeconomic mores or precedents.

The politically active WL teacher uses reading instruction as a convenient vehicle to aid and abet the establishment of socialist goals, policies, values, and ideals. Through bona fide WL reading instruction, students learn how to rise up and challenge “the interests and values of the Anglo, white, middle and upper classes,” Harry Giroux proclaims in the *Catalog*. [2] They are prepared to oppose, writes Michael W. Apple, “the political right of the United States” by being ready to use their collective powers to change the world so that democratic [read ‘socialist’] power replaces corporate power.” [3] Elimination of the present “economic, cultural, and social policies of business and industry” clearly is the ultimate aim of WL reading teaching. [4] In WL terms, for students to be literate in the full and finest sense means they are eager to disrupt the political, socioeconomic, and cultural status quo by committing themselves to a socio-historical reconstruction of society. [5] Reading instruction by WL teachers arms students to engage in socioeconomic class warfare, whenever and wherever it is ordained, the *Catalog* explains. The WL teaching envisioned to that end is given a fetchingly revolutionary title: *Liberation/Emancipatory Pedagogy*.

Update on WL's Supreme Purpose

The socio-political agenda of WL, as expressed in the *Catalog*, was updated in six articles in the summer 1997 edition of the educational journal *Reading and Writing Quarterly*. Here, seven education professors, all well-known enthusiastic defenders of WL, and a fourth-grade teacher of like persuasion, expanded on what they call “The Politics of Literacy.”

The first argument posed for the need to transform students’ literacy development into political action is that the United States is not “a just and democratic society.”[6] Proof of this provocative allegation is the supposed fact that “high unemployment is becoming a permanent condition” in America. It is claimed that unemployed parents are provided only “\$208 a month” to “feed a family.” At the same time, the family is “paralyzed by all the variables of pesticides and other chemicals” found in its food. The writers find that the depressed “state of the American economy” has “dampened working class and poor students’ interests” in learning to read.

Also, so much “discrimination” now abounds in the nation that “many Americans” give up hope of finding a job. It thus is deemed outlandish to propose that “individuals must stand on their own”; that is, be expected to show personal initiative and responsibility for their future lives. Even philanthropies “are losing any sense of social responsibility”[7] for ameliorating the above evils, the writers complain.

Therefore, DISEC literacy development programs are criticized as not having “the power to overcome the effects of poverty and discrimination,” as they are described. As the writer puts it, the goal of reading instruction “should be to educate students for democracy as a means of challenging a status quo in which a relatively small number of people—privileged by their race, class, gender, language, and sexual orientation—control a disproportionate share of society’s social and economic resources.”[8] Only “critical literacy” programs suffice in this respect. These are ones that teach students “to work toward a more just and democratic [again, read ‘socialist’] society.” Through the WL version of reading instruction, students are trained to attack the economic “status quo.” Whole language reading instruction acts as the means “to help create the conditions for a more just and democratic society,”[9] the author emphasizes. That WL instruction has not yet achieved this goal purportedly is the fault of inadequately dedicated teachers, and not the WL theory.

The second major argument in the articles for using WL for political purposes concerns the conventional definition of reading ability. The historical conceptualization of reading ability was students’ capacity to comprehend precisely the meanings that authors intended to impart.

It is argued, to the contrary, that teaching reading “should be viewed as socializing children into a particular set of social and cultural practices in particular social settings.”[10] Educators who object to the validity of this approach are summarily dismissed as “cultural dupes merely acting out extant literacy practices.”

The fourth-grade teacher-author in the *Reading and Writing Quarterly* describes how certain “social and cultural practices” are developed through WL teaching. [11] Her students first were led to be “shocked and angered” by past scenes of apartheid in South Africa. Then, through the selection of literature, a “connection between racism in South Africa” in the past and “racism and injustice in the United States” in the present was established.

The third prominent argument for employing WL teaching to convey political-economic ideology centers on an attack on standardized reading tests. [12] That assault on those tests is not surprising since they measure how well students comprehend precisely the meanings authors planned to convey and not how well they are “socialized into particular social practices” of a left-wing origin.

The *Quarterly* writers voice vigorous grievances against the tests: they are “scientific,” statistically sophisticated, and based on “meritocratic principles,” that is, “glorify” competitiveness. Proof that these tests “corrupt the concept of fairness” is that students who score low on them typically are from politically oppressed low-income minority families. These students do not possess “the knowledge required” to score high on the tests and do not have “knowledge of test-taking skills.” Therefore, testing these students signifies a “systematic bias” against them of a “racist” nature. Since it is held that the tests pander to students who are “white, male, middleclass, and American,” scores on them thus “may be more findings of cultural difference [among students] than anything else.” [13]

From the advent of the WL movement in the 1970s, its members have charged that standardized reading tests deliberately project socioeconomically disadvantaged students onto “a trajectory of school-based failure.” The *Quarterly* writers repeated the common WL outcry that such testing must be abandoned and replaced with “individualized assessment” by bona fide WL teachers. This changeover, if activated, doubtless would work to the advantage of WL’s reputation. So far, all the published accounts of WL instruction involving teacher assessment of students’ reading conclude that it is superior to DISEC teaching. On the other hand, an overwhelming preponderance of relevant experimental research findings conclude the opposite.

The writers’ fourth main argument for the necessity of WL teaching that politically indoctrinates students is that DISEC instruction is expressly designed to “protect the privilege of the upper and upper-middle classes by encoding their values and intentions into school reading practices.” This encoding is said to take place through schools’ adoption of traditional reading instruction textbook series, called basal readers. These series of books are castigated as a dastardly “remote control” device operated by “the upper-middle and upper classes” to “neutralize other peoples’ [the downtrodden masses] literacies in their efforts to control their lives.” [14] Lower-class and minority students, the writers claim, cannot satisfy the rigorous requirements imposed by the readers, for example, “completing daily assignments and periodical tests,” because they do not reflect these students’ peculiar cultural “intentions and values” and “ways of making sense of [written] text.” [15]

According to the writers, the economic upper-classes induce frustration among students by “design.” Through the imposed adoption of basal readers, the socioeconomic despots engage in “manufacturing reading failures among their [lower-class] children and hindering their prospects for the future” for jobs with decent wages. As a result, under-class students “doubt the value of who they are and what they do and could know.” [16]

Reflections on the WL Agenda

The WL movement’s contention that certain members of the public school establishment must be authorized to shape the economic, political, and cultural institutions of the nation has distinctive precedents. For example, at the height of its influence in the 1930s, the Progressive Education Association expressed the same ambitions.

However, in light of the abject failure of socialism in the intervening years, revival of claims to its effectiveness, as currently made by the WL movement, takes on a particular distressing tone of *déjà vu*. The uneasiness one experiences in this regard is intensified by the statistically inaccurate, intensely partisan, and pitifully self-indulgent manner in which the WL theorists construct their argument for reading instruction as emancipatory pedagogy.

The scientifically invalid nature of WL reading instruction has been known since its inception. None of its unique principles or novel practices is corroborated by relevant experimental research findings. Whole language thus defends itself with qualitative (nonnumerical, anecdotal, subjective/impressionistic) research findings. A circular form of verification is adopted. Published reports refer exclusively to one another for confirmation.

Complimentary accounts of WL thus are notorious for their practice of the propaganda tactic called “stacking the deck.” Any form of evidence that appears to support WL is approvingly displayed. None of the larger bulk of experimental data that finds WL inferior is cited. Examination of the defenses of WL thus leaves one with an eerie sense of disbelief, similar to that experienced on reading documents of Stalin’s regime.

The greatest danger of Wigs vision of politically oriented reading instruction doubtless lies in its irony. The WL plan, to liberate proletarian students from under the heel of the diabolical business and industrial class, rests largely on a fiction. It depicts a nonexistent society created as a convenient scapegoat for economic problems of the lower class, which in actuality are self-imposed to a great extent. It impetuously plays the “race card” whenever that expedient serves its purposes. It blames the messenger for the message in its aspersions on standardized reading tests.

Thus while it professes to be the savior of abused racial minorities, the WL political-economic agenda paradoxically turns out to be their deceiver. It delivers no demonstrably effective pathways for them to become literate, join in the prosperity of the nation, and actively contribute to its improvement. Why educators loyal to WL appear blind to its weakness in these respects is one of the notable enigmas in the history of government schools.

Notes

1. Kenneth S. Goodman, Lois Bridges Bird, and Yetta M. Goodman, eds., *The Whole Language Catalog* (Santa Rosa, Calif.: American School Publishers, 1991).
2. Harry Giroux, “Literacy, Cultural Diversity, and Public Life,” in *Ibid.*, p. 417.
3. Michael W. Apple, “Teachers Politics, and Whole Language,” in *Ibid.*, p. 416.
4. Stanley Aronowitz and Harry Giroux, “Education under Seige” (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey, 1985), p. 66.
5. Bess Altwerger and Barbara Flores, “The Politics of Whole Language,” in Goodman et al.
6. Curt Dudley-Marley, “Introduction: The Politics of Literacy,” *Reading and Writing Quarterly* 13 (1997), p. 201.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. David Bloome and Laurie Katz, “Literacy as Social Practice and Classroom Chronotypes,” in *Ibid.*, pp. 221-22.
11. Maria Sweeney, “No Easy Road to Freedom: Critical Literacy in a Fourth-Grade Classroom,” in *Ibid.*, p. 280.
12. Sharon Murphy, “Literacy Assessment and the Politics of Identities,” in *Ibid.*, p. 263-66.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 269.
14. Patrick Shannon and Patricia Crawford, “Manufacturing Descent: Basal Readers and the Creation of 15. Reading Failures,” in *Ibid.*, p. 228.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 242.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 234.

The Freeman, July 01, 2000.

Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

January 2, 2015

Although 15 years old, this report on the sinister side of whole-language continues to sound an alarm that should be headed by everyone interested in the future of our country as a beacon house for individual freedom and responsibility. As a veteran educator from the whole-language era, I can confirm first hand that Dr. Groff’s allegations are well founded. www.donpotter.net