



Written by [Sam Blumenfeld](#) on March 22, 2012

What Parents Should Know About “Whole Language” and Other Pedagogical Nonsense

When parents are told that their child is having a “reading problem” in primary school, they usually accept the teacher’s explanation that little Johnny or Suzie have some sort of learning disability. The fact that these little rambunctious kids came to school having taught themselves to speak their own language is proof positive that they don’t have a learning disability. In fact they are quite learning able. Children who teach themselves to speak their own language virtually from birth are little dynamos of language learning. And when they enter school, no one expects them to suddenly have a learning problem. It doesn’t make sense, unless you understand what is being done to them in that school.



Sadly to say, it is the teacher who has a *teaching* disability. That poor teacher graduated from a teacher’s college where her professors taught her to teach reading by the whole language method, and she was also told that some children will never to learn to read because there is something wrong with these children, not her teaching method. Also, she has not been told that there was a time, not too long ago, when every child learned to read in a public school. (I’m old enough to prove it.) Her knowledge of educational history is nonexistent. What she knows is only what her professors have told her. And they’ve no doubt warned her about people like this writer, who are charlatans getting rich by spreading disinformation about public education.

But how are parents to know that they are being deceived by this very lovely teacher who truly wants the best for their children? She doesn’t even suspect that her professors deliberately deceived her, because she assumes that they are intellectually and morally honest and would never miseducate a young teacher. They would never betray the trust she put in them. So she thinks. But that’s the tragedy of American education. And because the progressive educators knew from the very beginning that they would have to deceive the parents in order to impose their new dumbed-down curriculum on the schools, the entire system has become a house of lies.

Over the years, I’ve done a lot of tutoring of children with reading problems. When their parents bring them to me for help, I always ask them if they know how the child was taught to read at school. They can rarely answer that question. They haven’t the vaguest idea. They just assume that schools know how to teach children to read and so are quite surprised when I tell them they don’t. In other words, most parents are quite confused by the whole subject of reading instruction. They’ve heard about phonics, which many teachers will claim is useful in a limited way, but is not the preferred way to each reading. But the simple fact is that it is the only logical, common sense way to teach a child to read a phonetic-alphabetic writing system. In my own reading program, Alpha-Phonics, which I wrote for



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parents to use at home, I use no pictures so that the student must learn the letters of the alphabet and the sounds they stand for and thus become an accurate, fluent reader. Once they've acquired that phonetic reflex — the automatic ability to see the phonetic structure of the words — reading becomes an easy, enjoyable, and voracious way of acquiring knowledge.

When children are taught by the whole language, look-say, or sight method, they acquire a holistic reflex, that is, they automatically look at each word as a little picture, as if English were like Chinese, an ideographic system. The child cannot see the phonetic structure of the words. The child has been forced to apply his right-brain spatial faculty to perform the functions of the left brain, which is the center of language learning. It cannot be done without causing injury to the brain.

Some years ago when researching reading problems, I came across a very revealing book: a large-size paperback entitled *The Whole-Language Catalog*, authored by Kenneth and Yetta Goodman and Lois Bridges Bird. It was published in the early 1990s by American School Publishers, and it told you everything you ever wanted to know about the whole-language movement, and more. After reading every page and every article in this 445-page monster of a book, I can say that I was impressed by the sheer scope and depth of the whole-language movement.

With the book's great emphasis on beliefs and values, I got the distinct feeling that this was a religious movement, with its high priests, its sacred literature, its disciples and fanatics, and its proselytizers. It even had its own canon law. For example: Thou shalt not teach intensive, systematic phonics in a whole language classroom. Thou shalt not correct the spelling of a learner for fear that his or her spontaneity will be thwarted. Thou shalt not teach anything that requires rote memorization. Thou shalt not fragment language for phonic or spelling exercises.

Actually, I agreed with some of the things that whole-language educators did. They got rid of those inane but friendly Dick-and-Jane basal readers and replaced them with "real literature." They got rid of those workbooks where children circled things and filled in blank spaces. They permitted the pupils to write their own whole sentences. Unfortunately, like so much of the pedagogical nonsense in whole language, they encouraged the children to write before they could read and they encouraged "invented spelling" to express their thoughts.

In whole language, children are not taught to read. They are expected to learn to read the way they learned to speak. It is assumed that if you read to the children, surround them with books, immerse them in literature, then somehow they will learn to read through a process known in biology as osmosis. The above-mentioned Ken Goodman, of Arizona University, wrote in *The Whole-Language Catalog* (p.207):

Whole language classrooms liberate pupils to try new things, to invent spellings, to experiment with a new genre, to guess at meanings in their reading, or to read and write imperfectly. Our research on reading and writing has strongly supported the importance of error in language development. Miscues represent the tension between invention and convention in reading. . . . In whole-language classrooms risk-taking is not simply tolerated, it is celebrated. Learners have always been free to fail.

And fail they do. The late Prof. Jeanne S. Chall, who ran a reading lab at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education, told a reporter from the *Washington Post* in 1986, "I see the failures from it already. Children are coming into the lab who were in [whole language] classes."

But whole language educators do not acknowledge failure in terms of traditional pedagogy, because to



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them reading is, in Ken Goodman's words, "a psycholinguistic guessing game." And the reason why they have to guess is because they have not been drilled in intensive, systematic phonics which provides readers with an automatic ability to associate letters with sounds so that they can become accurate readers. Oh, yes, they were taught some phonics, but only incidentally. It's fragmented knowledge implanted in their brains but rarely used because it requires effort.

Risk-taking is a euphemism for guessing. Naturally, if children are not taught the means of easy decoding through intensive, systematic phonics, they will have to rely on "strategies" that are much less reliable, such as skipping unknown words, using context clues, or asking for help. The whole language people do it all backwards. They want children to understand what they are reading before they know how to read. Those of us who have advocated "phonics first" know from years of experience that you must know how to read before you can understand what you are reading. It's a two-step process. First you master the code, then you learn English: grammar, vocabulary, etc. It's the same process in learning to read Russian or Hebrew. First you have to master that alphabet so that you can articulate the printed words, then you have to study the language.

It's downright criminal to teach children that reading is a guessing game. Some years ago when I was tutoring a youngster with a severe reading problem, I discovered that his idea of a good reader was someone who was a good guesser. His problem was that he was a bad guesser. He had been so badly damaged by this idea that it took months of hard work to get him to see things differently, to realize that if he learned to read by intensive phonics he would no longer have to guess.

Not unexpectedly, *The Whole Language Catalog* paid homage to John Dewey, the father of progressive education, who is considered one of the pioneers of whole language. It was John Dewey who advocated de-emphasizing the teaching of reading in the primary schools in favor of a curriculum that emphasized social engagement among the students. His essay, "The Primary-Education Fetich," published in 1898, outlined the new primary curriculum based on activity rather than intellectual development. He wrote:

The plea for the predominance of learning to read in early school life because of the great importance attached to literature seems to me a perversion.

His recommendations led to the adoption of the look-say, whole-word, sight method of reading instruction that has resulted in millions of Americans becoming functionally illiterate. And there doesn't seem to be any incentive on the part of today's educators to return to the curriculum that worked when the three Rs were taught in the traditional way. They can't be fired for failure, and the river of cash flow into the education establishment is the widest and deepest it's ever been.



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