

Whole Language in the Middle and Secondary School

Whole Language Is Not Just Reading!

The whole language movement began as a grass roots movement¹ in elementary schools during the 1980s and continues growing in the 1990s. Since the phenomenon spread so rapidly and successfully in elementary schools, interest in whole language spread to the middle and secondary level. Teachers from other disciplines also became interested. This article will seek to answer three questions: (1) What is and is not whole language? (2) How is whole language being used in middle and secondary schools? and (3) How would classrooms be different if whole language were implemented?

What Is Whole Language?

Whole language is a philosophy or set of beliefs about how children and youth learn. Freeman and Freeman have put these beliefs into a set of six principles:

1. Lessons should proceed from whole to part.
2. Lessons should be learner-centered because learning results from the active construction of knowledge by students.
3. Lessons should have meaning and purpose for the students now.
4. Lessons should engage groups of students in social interaction.

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5. Lessons should develop both oral and written language.

6. Lessons that show faith in the learner expand students' potential.²

What Whole Language Is Not

Whole language is not a specific teaching method or strategy or a set of materials.³ There are many myths about whole language. In an article in *The Reading Teacher*, Judith Newman and Susan Church list 19 myths of whole language.⁴ For the purposes of this article we will consider only three of these myths that relate directly to middle and secondary schools.

The first myth: *Whole language is for teaching English or language arts and doesn't apply to other disciplines.* In fact, the "whole language philosophy

underlies the entire curriculum."⁵ Teachers of science, social studies, and mathematics can also implement the basic beliefs of whole language philosophy in their classrooms.

The second myth: *The whole language philosophy applies only to beginning readers in the primary grades.*⁶ Although most whole language classrooms are in elementary schools, the basic principles of whole language apply equally well to high school, college, or graduate courses.⁷

Another myth: *Whole language teachers never teach skills.*⁸ Nothing could

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be further from the truth. Whole language teachers teach skills when they are needed. However, unlike more traditional teachers, they don't use worksheets or workbooks to teach skills.

How Is Whole Language Being Used in Middle and Secondary Schools?

Here are examples of whole language in the middle and/or secondary school.

Freeman and Freeman describe ways that whole language can be used in "Doing' Social Studies: Whole Language Lessons to Promote Social Action." It gives the following model for a whole-language social-studies lesson:

1. Begin with the learners' actual experiences. Draw on the students' background knowledge.

2. Develop background concept(s) through actions, visual aids, and discussion.

3. Begin critical observation using pictures, books, personal stories and experiences, and community events.

4. Through comparison and contrast, help students to view concepts and understand how those concepts relate to their lives.

5. Research the concepts through reading, writing, interviews, discussions, films, and field trips.

6. Plan appropriate action(s) related

What is and is not whole language?

to students' lives that result in social change.⁹

Mathematics

In "Whole Concept Mathematics: A Whole Language Application," Cheryl L. Brown shows how whole language can be used to make math interesting and meaningful. In the whole concept math classroom, the "focus . . . is on the natural use of mathematics."¹⁰ Presently most schools teach separate math skills. In the whole-language mathematics classroom, problems are presented and students assist in choosing what problem to study. "Students are involved and interested. They actually use mathematics and understand the practicality of what they are studying."¹¹

Literature

McWhirter, a middle school language arts teacher, describes how she uses reading workshop in her classroom. The reading workshop has "three components: (a) time to read; (b) ownership through self-selection; and (c) opportunity to respond

to the reading"¹² through dialogue journals. Instead of English being a content course, it is a course in "ideas—thinking and learning through writing, reading and talking—and when students . . . pursue their own ideas in the company of friends and their teacher, the junior high English classroom has the potential to become an interesting place."¹³

How Would Whole Language Change Middle and Secondary Classrooms?

Perhaps the best way to show what would be different in a whole language classroom is to make some comparisons. At the secondary level:

- cooperation replaces competition;
- heterogeneous grouping replaces homogeneous grouping;
- peer conferences replace teacher talk;
- collaboration replaces solo work;
- writing replaces worksheets and workbooks;
- trade books supplement textbooks;
- self-selection replaces teacher-selection;
- present relevance replaces future relevance;
- the class is learner-centered rather than teacher-centered;
- emphasis on the whole replaces emphasis on the parts;
- trust in the learner replaces distrust;
- belief that all students can learn replaces the belief that only some students can learn;
- student-made decisions replace teacher-made decisions;
- students and teachers learn together rather than students learning alone;
- enthusiasm replaces boredom.¹⁴

When an Adventist teacher examines the philosophy and beliefs of whole language in the light of the educational counsel given us by Ellen White, he or she will be struck with their similarity. Here are some Ellen White statements that match the goals of the whole language method:

1. *The belief that all students can learn.* "The good that a teacher will do his students will be proportionate to his belief

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in them.”¹⁵

2. *Trust*. “Children and youth are benefited by being trusted.”¹⁶

3. *Cooperation*. “Cooperation should be the spirit of the schoolroom, the law of its life.”¹⁷

4. *Collaboration*. “Let the older assist the younger, the strong the weak.”¹⁸

5. *Teachers as learners*. “Teachers are to learn as they teach.”¹⁹

How is whole language being used in middle and secondary schools?

6. *Enthusiasm*. “Teachers are needed who . . . possess enthusiasm.”²⁰

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How to Organize a Whole Language Classroom

A whole language secondary classroom might look like this: There would be a large rack filled with paperback books that relate to the subjects being taught in the classroom. Students would spend at least 30 minutes per week in sustained silent reading of books they have selected. There would not be any required accountability for this reading. Writing of various sorts, such as journal writing, learning logs, response journals, etc., would take the place of worksheets and/or workbooks. Trade books related to this subject would be used to supplement the textbooks and make the subject more relevant. The classroom would feature action bulletin boards created by the students. There would be an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust. The classroom organization would promote collaboration and cooperative learning.

Kenneth Goodman says, “the future of whole language is the future of education.”²¹ When teachers see what students can do when using whole language, they will become evangelists for this technique. If K-12 Adventist teachers implement the whole language philosophy in their classrooms, the future of Adventist education looks bright. ✍

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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10. Cheryl L. Brown, "Whole Concept Mathematics: A Whole Language Application," *Educational Horizons* 69:3 (Spring 1991), pp. 159-168.
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13. Nancie Atwell, *In the Middle: Writing, Reading, and Learning With Adolescents* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1987), p. 40.
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16. _____, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1903), p. 289.
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18. *Ibid.*
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