Whole Language Works: Sixty Years of Research

A thorough and comprehensive body of research has gradually and quietly grown to support the progressive approaches to reading.

Harvey Daniels, Steve Zemelman, and Marilyn Bizar

"Decodable text" is the new trend in reading, the latest and hottest fad. Its devotees say that they have scientific research to back up their claims and that the rival methodology, Whole Language, lacks such proof. Claims and counterclaims, accusations and acrimony have ensued, even as peacemakers point to common elements and call for a truce (Flippo, 1997; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

This battle is an odd one in many ways. To begin, the supposed rivals are not actually claiming the same territory. Decodable-text programs focus only on beginning readers and on just one literacy skill: phonics. Whole Language offers a comprehensive reading and writing program for all children, from prereaders to students throughout their school years.

And the war of words is also peculiar for the role that research has played in the struggle. Decodable text advocates have parlayed a few recent and unreplicated studies into support for their approach—even legislation, in a few states. Yet when we look at the broad, still-accumulating body of educational research, we see that holistic approaches to literacy clearly remain our best documented, most reliable, and most thoroughly proved ways to teach reading to the majority of children.

Whole Language works. The proof is massive and overwhelming. Sixty years of research—yes, real scientific research—conclusively show it to be a superior way to help young people become skillful, lifelong readers and writers. This thorough and comprehensive research consistently validates the progressive approaches to teaching reading grouped under the name "Whole Language."

What Is Whole Language?
Whole Language is a philosophy of teaching and learning, an approach to curriculum, and a family of distinctive but closely related activities. Readers unfamiliar with educational history may be surprised to hear that Whole Language, far from being a recent innovation, is a
venerable, comprehensive pedagogy. And although veteran Whole Language practitioners sometimes worry about variations inside the family, the basic progressive heritage has been consistent across many iterations. Teachers espousing Whole Language share many key strategies:

- using classic children's literature,
- reading aloud daily,
- structuring independent reading and writing,
- embedding literacy activities in broad interdisciplinary themes,
- stressing higher-order thinking,
- teaching multiple cuing systems for decoding unknown words,
- holding regular teacher-student conferences,
- organizing students into collaborative groups,
- teaching writing as a staged process,
- inviting early writing with developmental spelling,
- teaching grammar and correctness in the context of students' own writing,
- substituting coaching and modeling for red-penciling children's errors,
- encouraging student goal setting and self-assessment,
- involving students and parents in literacy homework activities, and
- using the teacher as a model of adult literacy.

All these strategies, separately and in combination, are backed by decades of experimental studies or by qualitative research of rigorous design.

**Literature-Based Reading**

Whole Language has been around a long time, under different names and with slightly different proportions of ingredients. Its immediate and overlapping predecessor was called *literature-based instruction*. As far back as the 1930s, some teachers and school districts, rejecting the synthetic language and rote exercises of commercial basal programs, invited children to read whole, real children's literature and to discuss and write about it. In 1971, Thompson looked back to 1937 and summarized 40 studies comparing subskill-oriented basal programs with literature-based approaches that stressed wide independent reading. Of the 40 studies, 24 favored literature programs, 1 favored basals, and 15 showed no significant difference in achievement.

Extending this longitudinal perspective, a 1989 research summary by Tunnell and Jacobs showed a broad, recurrent pattern of achievement gains among students in literature-based, whole-language-style programs over the previous 20 years. Tunnell and Jacobs found test score increases not just in regular education classrooms, but also among students learning English as a second language, students with special education needs, and children from low
socioeconomic backgrounds.

In 1994, Weaver began creating and maintaining a research summary on literature-based and Whole Language instruction, much of it published in *Creating Support for Effective Literacy Education* (Weaver, Gillmeister-Krause, & Vento-Zogby, 1996). The studies that Weaver surveyed document that children in Whole Language classrooms

- do as well as or better than other students on standardized reading tests, including tests that measure phonemic awareness and phonetic knowledge;
- develop vocabulary, spelling, grammar, and punctuation skills as well as or better than students in traditional classrooms;
- use phonics knowledge more effectively than students in classrooms where phonics skills are practiced in isolation;
- read for meaning rather than just identify words;
- develop more strategies for dealing with problems in reading;
- develop greater facility with writing;
- show more independence as readers and writers; and
- develop a stronger sense of themselves as readers and writers.

**Writing Process**

Whole Language teachers embrace the process model of composition: teaching writing as a staged, recursive process; encouraging young writers' developmental spelling; sparing red ink in favor of coaching and modeling; and teaching correctness in students' actual writings rather than in separate drills. In his landmark meta-analysis of research on teaching writing from 1950 to 1985, Hillocks (1986) took data from 73 statistical studies to compare the effects of various modes and focuses of instruction. He found that direct teacher presentations on writing skills were almost completely ineffective. About eight times more effective, but still only modestly worthwhile, were lessons in which the teacher coached individuals or simply invited wide-open writing practice. Most effective were what Hillocks dubbed "environmental" lessons, which placed students in collaborative groups to work on problem-solving writing tasks. These complex, social, inquiry-driven activities left much choice and responsibility to students within a teacher-created structure—a pattern widely used by Whole Language teachers.

Further, he found that when the focus of instruction was grammar and mechanics, students' writing actually *got worse* than that of students who did not receive such instruction. This discrepancy sometimes occurred because the control groups were doing free reading during the experimental time—an inadvertent demonstration that for improving writing, independent reading is actually far more powerful than listening to grammar lectures. Hillocks also demolished the myth of intensive correction, showing conclusively that marking every error in student papers was no more effective in raising writing achievement than marking no errors at all.
Weaver's 1996 research summary included a number of studies replicating or extending Hillock's earlier findings. Teaching grammar has not been shown to improve most students' writing or even the correctness of their writing (Hillocks Jr. & Smith, 1991). What works better is teaching selected aspects of grammar (including sentence variety and style, punctuation, and usage) in the context of students' writing—that is, when they are revising and editing (Calkins, 1980; DiStefano & Killion, 1984; see summary in Weaver, Gillmeister-Krause, & Vento-Zogby, 1996).

In Whole Language classrooms, where the subskills associated with writing are taught in the context of students' own writing, children learn these skills as well as or better than they do with traditional practice drills (Elley 1991; Stice & Bertrand, 1990; Smith & Elley, 1995). One telling finding (Dahl & Freppon, 1992; Kasten & Clarke, 1989) is that in Whole Language primary classes, a considerably larger proportion of the children are writing whole sentences and complete stories by the end of 1st grade than children in traditional classrooms are. All these strategies are characteristic of the writing workshop approach consistently implemented by Whole Language teachers.

Developmental, or "invented," spelling is also supported by the research. On standardized tests of spelling, by the end of 1st grade, children who are encouraged to spell words as best they can typically score as well as or better than children allowed to use only correct spellings in first drafts. Meanwhile, the children encouraged to spell by writing the sounds they hear in words seem to develop word recognition and phonics skills sooner and use a greater variety of words in their writing (Clarke, 1988). Gradually, with extensive writing experience and vocabulary activities, early invented spellings give way to more sophisticated invented spellings and to conventional spellings. Extensive exposure to print and reading helps children internalize not only the correct spellings of words, but also the spelling patterns (Moustafa, 1996; Wilde, 1992).

**Independent Reading**

One defining characteristic of Whole Language classrooms is their commitment to extensive independent reading, delivered through such structures as reading workshops, literature circles, and book clubs and supported by reading logs, journals, and teacher conferences. These practices grow directly out of one of the oldest, strongest, and simplest bodies of literacy research, which shows that independent reading correlates highly with reading growth (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Leinhardt, Zigmond, & Coolery, 1981; Taylor, Frye, & Maruyama, 1990; Allington, 1983; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983).

We learn to read largely by reading. To become powerful readers, children need exposure to lots of books and many words. Quantity matters. Sadly, in the average elementary school, children read silently for only 7 or 8 minutes a day—less than 10 percent of instructional time; high schoolers average only 15 minutes (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985).

The amount of out-of-school reading is also important and consistently relates to gains in reading achievement (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Greaney, 1980). Among all possible out-of-school activities, the number of minutes spent each day reading was the best predictor
of students' reading comprehension and vocabulary size. These findings connect with Whole Language teachers' practices of involving parents in at-home literacy activities to increase independent reading and using real reading, rather than study questions or worksheets, as homework.

The independent-reading research has a sad side as well. Students from lower socioeconomic groups, attending schools where they are viewed as at risk for reading failure, actually do less independent reading than do students in more privileged and high-achieving schools (Allington, 1983). In other words, children who need independent reading the most are least likely to get it. Instead, these disadvantaged children are typically given larger and larger doses of reading subskills drills (Bean, Cooley, Eichelberger, Lazar, & Zigmond, 1991).

Cooperative Learning

For decades, educational researchers have documented significant achievement gains in a wide range of content areas when classrooms include ample cooperative activity—one of the defining components of Whole Language teaching. Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1991) describe the overwhelmingly positive results in their meta-analysis of more than 375 studies of cooperative activities. In another 1991 synthesis of research, Slavin reported that 61 percent of 67 high-quality studies found that cooperative learning proved statistically significantly better than control group activities in boosting student achievement.

Many recent research studies on progressive approaches to teaching reading reconfirm the importance of small-group cooperative effort. Fisher, Blachowicz, and Smith (1991) describe effective strategies for using small groups to teach vocabulary. Morrow and Smith (1990) show that even when the teacher reads the stories, children in small groups asked more questions, offered more comments, and demonstrated better comprehension than did children either in a large class or in a one-on-one setting. After studying the effect of reading partnerships in more detail, Soundy (1991) reported a whole range of increased comprehension behaviors, including more attention to reading correctness, heightened awareness of words, and the frequent return to read books again. In a 1995 study of 635 children, students engaged in literacy projects in small groups performed better in vocabulary, comprehension, language expression, and metacognitive awareness than students receiving traditional instruction (Stevens & Slavin, 1995).

"Remedial" Reading

Another way of validating instructional practices is by looking at what works with struggling learners. By far, the most successful and well documented program for at-risk readers is Reading Recovery, a one-on-one tutoring program for early intervention with 1st graders who are failing at reading. The instructional repertoire used in Reading Recovery tutoring sessions strikingly parallels the family of activities called Whole Language in the regular classroom.

Reading Recovery has been phenomenally successful. With young students who are a year or more behind developmental expectations, the program solves reading problems. In a 1987 study, Boehnlein found that
after an average of 15 to 20 weeks, or 30 to 40 hours of instruction, 90 percent of the children whose pretest scores were in the lowest 20 percent of their class catch up to the average of their class and never need remediation again. (P. 33)

In Columbus, Ohio, schools, more than 80 percent of the children enrolled in Reading Recovery caught up within one semester; two years later, in 3rd grade, they continued to perform above grade level on state reading tests (Lyons, Pennell, Deford, & Clay 1993).

Researchers have documented the effectiveness of holistic approaches with older students who have reading difficulties. As far back as 1978, Carol Chomsky worked with 3rd graders who were making no progress in reading despite normal IQs and no learning disabilities. Removing them from the school program of heavy phonics drills, Chomsky introduced a literature-based approach, including lively read-alouds and memorization of favorite stories. Reading skills increased significantly. For adolescents, Fader (1968) documented significant gains in reading achievement in a literature-based program that stressed independent reading over teacher-directed skills lessons and that was implemented in a wide range of settings from Detroit inner-city high schools to rural "reform schools."

**Beginning Reading**

The most controversial body of research, often the only one the media refer to and the one most often viewed as ammunition for the skills and phonics advocates, focuses on beginning reading. Actually, contemporary research on early reading strongly endorses a holistic approach. A review of the last five years of studies reported in the authoritative *Summary of Investigations Related to Reading* (Weintraub, 1992–97) reveals the following tally:

- Fifteen studies validated the comparative effectiveness, at a statistically significant level, of one or another element used in Whole Language classrooms.

- Five studies showed significantly higher test scores in broader Whole Language classrooms than in traditional classrooms.

- Two smaller case studies showed the effectiveness of Whole Language strategies.

- One study showed no difference between Whole Language and traditional classrooms, and two showed no difference for a particular Whole Language element.

Because Whole Language combines a long list of teaching strategies, it is valuable to research and evaluate each strategy in addition to judging the overall package. Detailed studies confirm the effectiveness for beginning readers of small-group activities (Morrow & Smith, 1990), partner reading (Soundy, 1991; Neuman & Soundy, 1991), focus on global meaning (Anderson, Wilkinson, & Mason, 1991), predictable books (Downhower & Brown, 1992), "story maps" (Baumann & Bergeron, 1993), teaching spelling within holistic reading and writing activities (Bunt, 1993-94), teaching phonemic awareness through real reading activities rather than worksheets (Cunningham, 1990), dialogue journals (Wham & Lenski, 1994), webbing (Reutzel & Hollingsworth, 1991), and questioning strategies (Jenkins & Lawler, 1990).

It's worth asking why many people don't know about this extensive research and why others
dismiss it even when they do hear it. Perhaps the controversy isn't really about what works, or what research supports, but about what people believe schools are for. Nevertheless, a rich heritage of research—not just today's faddish studies—is available. A good place to trace the research is Connie Weaver's excellent, regularly updated database on the Heinemann Educational Books Web site (www.Heinemann.com; search for Creating Support for Effective Literacy Education; click on "Fact Sheets."

Read the research yourself. It's empowering and uplifting to know that even as we teach from the heart, we're backed by hard-headed evidence. Don't let zealots, prophets, or promoters decide for you what works in literacy teaching or what is best for children.

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Harvey Daniels, Steve Zemelman, and Marilyn Bizar are Senior Faculty at the Center for City Schools, National-Louis University, 122 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60603 (e-mail: smoeylit@aol.com).

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