

Book Review

Taylor, Monica (Ed.) (2007). *Whole language teaching, whole-hearted practice: Looking back, looking forward*. NJ: Peter Lang.

Reviewed by

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Whole Language Teaching, Whole-Hearted Practice...

Whole Language Teaching, Whole-Hearted Practice: Looking Back, Looking Forward (Taylor, Ed., 2005) is an edited collection of narratives authored by teachers, teacher educators, and researchers as they recount the impact of whole language on their teaching and learning. The essence of the book is captured in the subtitle, *Looking Back, Looking Forward*. There are chapters devoted to the history of the whole language movement, as well as chapters highlighting the current and future practices of whole language. Important to recognize is that this book is not just a chronology or timeline of the whole language movement. Each chapter also addresses the multilayered dimensions of social justice activism involved in whole language teaching. Education, and in this case, whole language, is never a neutral practice, but rather reflects the social, cultural, political, and historical milieu of the society and the times. Readers come to appreciate the commitment that whole language teachers have to teaching, to their beliefs around language learning, and to initiating change in their communities and schools. They learn that whole language teachers are committed to social justice and critical thinking through their beliefs about teaching, learning, and curriculum. As the narratives unfold, it is also possible to see that whole language teaching is a collaborative practice with students, families, and colleagues. Collaboration is powerful and can lead to social change and action. The narratives invite readers to examine their own practices and activism and to continually strive for equitable, just, and empowering contexts that children and teachers deserve.

The book is comprised of nine narratives. The first chapter, authored by Monica Taylor, establishes the connections among the chapters and lays out for the reader the multidimensional nature of whole language teaching. She notes that whole language teachers: (a) interact and build relationships with students; (b) are grounded in their beliefs about teaching, learning, and curriculum; (c) find ways to “teach against the grain;” (d) engage with parents and others in the community; (e) collaborate with other teachers; and (f) see their role as leaders of change. The first chapter also reminds us that whole language was founded during a time of political, social, and cultural upheaval and tension. Teachers and researchers were responding to the mechanistic view of literacy and the reading process.

Chapters two and three by Debra Goodman recount the beginnings of the whole language movement in the urban center of Detroit from the early 1980s through the 1990s. Debra, the daughter of Ken and Yetta, grew up with language, literacy, and linguistics as part of the dinner conversation. Because of this, she knew many teachers and researchers instrumental in whole language, including Dorothy Watson, Dorothy Menosky, David Bloome, and Carolyn Burke. Debra reflects on the initial conversations among a community of teachers to tell the story of how she and a colleague, Toby Kahn Loftus, brought whole language to the classroom. They collaborated on a variety of projects and organized their curriculum around theme cycles, research, community studies, and oral presentations instead of “reports.” In 1989 at the peak of whole language interest, the Dewey Center for Urban Education opened. The school was a place to rethink language learning and teaching practices. While the Dewey School was an oasis of pedagogical possibilities, it also faced ambivalent teachers, questioning parents, and administrators with little vision of whole language curriculum. The chapters conclude by reminding readers that even in a climate of political attack, teachers must continue to advocate on behalf of children for curricula and environments that are transforming. Moreover, teachers do not do it alone. Debra notes that we, “speak out and proudly identify ourselves as whole language teachers but also a part of a transformative teacher’s movement” (p. 41).

Carole Stice, Nancy Bertrand, and Maryann Manning offer a historical view of the reading research process that eventually led to winter workshops. The chapter provides a picture of the educational context of the 1960s through the 1980s. Basic skills dominated the instruction; children were taught with basal readers that were solely constructed to teach reading. By the mid 1970s, however, teachers began to rebel against the bits and pieces of reading instruction. The work of Ken and Yetta Goodman, among many others (Dorothy Watson, Carolyn Burke, Jerry Harste, Brian Cambourne, Dorothy Menosky, to name a few) was beginning to be noticed. Teacher educators, such as the three authors, wanted access and opportunities to learn from these researchers. The winter workshops became the venue for such work. The first workshop focused on miscue analysis. Participants learned they were right. The reading process was highly complex--more than sounding out, recognizing sight words, and applying structural analysis. For the next 12 years, the workshops flourished. Each workshop offered sessions on miscue analysis, but additional topics were added—reading writing connection, whole language evaluation, kidwatching, authenticity in learning engagements, transactional model of reading, and ethnography in research. There was international participation. By the mid 1990s, however, the climate had shifted. Whole language was under attack from the Back to Basics movement and other conservative forces. A final workshop in 2000 returned to the foundations of whole language and liberatory pedagogy. Throughout the years, the workshops were a place to learn, to understand the reading process more deeply, and to be energized and empowered.

Chapter five, then, brings us into the 21st century with the work of Monica Taylor and Gennifer Otinsky. Monica and Gennifer engage in a conversation about their histories, backgrounds, roads to teaching, and becoming whole language educators. The collaboration between Monica (a teacher educator) and Gennifer (a sixth-grade teacher)

highlights how social justice and whole language cannot be accomplished in isolation. The collaboration began by co-teaching a personal memoir unit in Gennifer's classroom with Monica's pre-service teachers. Following this success, they moved to teaching a collaborative unit on social justice. In teaching a unit on social justice, both Monica and Gennifer strengthened their own views of whole language. They were able to grapple with issues of democracy, race, ethnicity, stereotypes, hate and agencies of change. Monica and Gennifer saw social justice and whole language as being intimately connected — risky, time consuming, challenging, and ever changing.

Chapter six by M. Tamzin Sawyer opens with an interview with a student after completing an inquiry project on Egypt. The child indicates that the project was fun and that he learned how to do research. This opening sets the stage for M. Tamzin's narrative on her own struggles and challenges of becoming a whole language teacher. She began her career as a pre-service teacher in a whole language block taught by Yetta Goodman. Her initial experience was in a first grade where each student was engaged in inquiry. What M. Tamzin discovered was that kids learned much about their topic because they were engaged and interested. When M. Tamzin accepted her first teaching job, she was in a school with a more traditional approach to literacy instruction. For the first two years, she dutifully followed the school's literacy program of a basal reader, workbooks, and teacher's manual. As she began her third year, M. Tamzin returned to graduate school under the advisement of Yetta Goodman and rediscovered what she learned in her whole language block, but had not yet put into practice. She implemented a range of reading and writing activities along with inquiry projects. Administrative changes, designation as an "underperforming school" and pressures from the district required that the school move to a PDCA (Plan Do Check Act) model that had teachers teaching the same performance objective at the same time. This shift had taken the power and trust away from teachers like M. Tamzin and the students she taught. The chapter ends on a hopeful note of working within the system to do what is best for students.

The chapter authored by Lian-Ju Lee and Wen-Yun Lin provides readers with an international focus. These authors detail the whole language movement in Taiwan. They begin by sharing the educational practices that were in place when whole language was introduced. Test directed teaching and learning were rooted practices, along with a strong presence of unification. Both of these are significant obstacles to overcome when shifting to whole language pedagogy. Lian-Ju and Wen-Yun share the history of those initial years of whole language in Taiwan when academic papers and presentations were first presented to the educational community in the early 1990s. As the country engaged in various reform efforts through the 1990s, whole language principles influenced curriculum and teacher development. In their chapter, Lian-Ju and Wen-Yun present two case studies of classroom teachers implementing whole language. The case studies are helpful in demonstrating the change in teachers' and children's learning processes. Additionally, this chapter chronicles the development of Teachers Applying Whole Language (TAWL) of Southern Taiwan. The group is registered as a nationwide educational association, with over 200 members.

Chapter eight, authored by Denny Taylor, is clearly centered on both the historical and the political lenses of whole language. Denny takes readers back to an interview that was conducted between Ken and Yetta Goodman and James Collins, a reporter for *Time Magazine*. While reading the chapter, readers learn more about the epistemological foundations of the miscue research and their research on reading as a transactional, sociopsycholinguistic process. The Goodmans offer their own understandings of the differences that exist between teachers and researchers who are holistic in their practices and teachers and researchers who focus more on a skills approach. Throughout the interview, there is a sense that James Collins does not quite understand the complexity of the reading process that Ken and Yetta are talking about. Following the *Time Magazine* interview, Denny then crafts a fictional interview between an investigative reporter and a retired teacher, dated 2027. In this interview, readers come to see that whole language was eradicated along with other liberatory and progressive pedagogies of the late 20th century. The resulting future is bleak. The Reading Excellence Act, No Child Left Behind, the National Reading Panel and a number of articles and essays critiquing whole language are seen as ways to mandate and control curriculum. As Denny offers commentary on the interviews (both real and fiction), she reminds readers that it is essential that we carry on the work of the Goodmans, Margaret Meek Spencer, Louise Rosenblatt, and Maxine Greene, among others. We cannot afford to sit back and wait.

The final chapter in this edited collection of narratives is by Yetta and Ken Goodman. The chapter opens by listing the central principles of whole language philosophy. These principles are evident in each of the preceding narratives and in whole language teachers' classrooms throughout the country and world. The Goodmans return to Monica's themes in chapter one as a way to acknowledge the connecting threads that run through each piece. They talk about how whole language teachers know language as well as the content they teach. Whole language teachers also build close relationships between teachers, students, students' families and community members. Whole language teaching and activism are not isolated events. Participating in a democracy is also at the crux of the whole language movement. Teachers must discover ways to engage the public in making more informed decisions about liberatory pedagogy and achieving the original goal of universal public education.

To conclude, this book is an excellent resource for those new to whole language philosophy and those who are familiar with whole language but want to have a more detailed picture of the events and histories of the movement. As a past president of the Whole Language Umbrella, I found the chapters to be informative and inspiring. The historical lens is necessary as teachers, teacher educators, and researchers continue fighting for liberatory and progressive pedagogies in the 21st century. I enjoyed getting to know how my mentors took risks and persevered (even when the climate was more tolerant and accepting of diverse perspectives). By knowing our past and the political decisions made by those instrumental in the early years, we can begin to shape the future of education in democratic societies.