

ROCKBRIDGE REPORTER

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THE TRUTH ABOUT WHOLE LANGUAGE

by Michael J. McKenna

The “whole language” (WL) method of reading instruction is widely popular and has been used in many (if not most) schools since its inception in the early 1970s. Most government schools, and even many independent schools, employ this method to one extent or another. However, recently WL has fallen under some sharp criticism. Devotees of the whole language approach to reading instruction maintain that students learn to read best in the informal, “natural” manner in which they first learned to speak as toddlers. Advocates of WL also state that children need to 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 reading skills. In response, WL advocates protest that DISEC is “inhumane;” a violation of the child’s unique, immutable “learning style;” stifling of teachers’ creativity by disempowering them; not “progressive” enough; too technical and mechanical; hostile to the culture of low-income families.

So who’s right?

If WL is to be understood, it must be seen as far more than just a method of reading instruction. It is the purpose of this article to demonstrate that whole language instruction is not, never has been, and never will be just about “teaching reading.” So what are the goals of whole language instruction?



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In 1991 education professor Kenneth Goodman edited the *Whole Language Catalog*. Included in the *Catalog* were chapters written by leading WL theorists, who sought to convince educators and other audiences of the validity of the political, social, economic, and cultural agenda of WL. According to these writers, the purpose of teaching in accord with the WL philosophy is simply a means to an end; that end being the bringing about of definitive social,

political, economic, and cultural changes, typically of a radically left-wing nature.

The *Catalog* objects to the DISEC methodology on political, economic, and cultural grounds. The book itself emphasizes the point that WL is more than a radical departure from traditional methods of teaching reading; it prepares students to challenge traditionally held political and socio-economic precedents.

In the *Catalog* Harry Giroux proclaims that, through WL reading instruction, students learn how to rise up against “the interests and values of the Anglo, white, middle and upper classes.”¹ Michael W. Apple writes that the students are being prepared to oppose “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.”²

For students to be truly literate, according to WL philosophy, means they are eager to disrupt the political, socioeconomic, and cultural status quo by committing themselves to a socio-historical reconstruction of society. Reading instruction by whole language teachers equips the student to engage in socio-

economic warfare whenever it is ordained, the *Catalog* casually explains. In fact, lest you think me alarmist, the WL instruction is even given a title which sounds as though it were conceived by Che Guevara or Fidel Castro: *Liberation/Emancipatory Pedagogy*.

As if that wasn’t enough, in 1997 the *Catalog* was updated in six articles published in the educational journal *Reading and Writing Quarterly*. Through these articles, seven education professors and a fourth grade

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teacher, all WL enthusiasts, describe what they refer to as “The Politics of Literacy.”

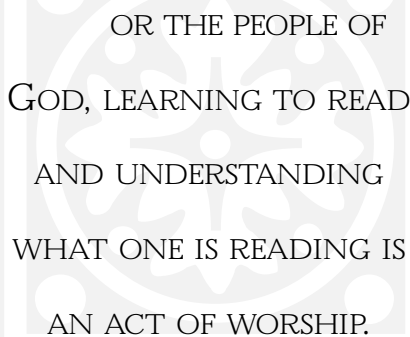
You might be wondering...what additional reasons could these advocates of WL produce to support this particular method of reading instruction? Quite simply, WL is necessary because America is not a “just and democratic society.” A radically new approach to reading is necessary because “high unemployment is becoming a permanent condition” in America. In addition, it is asserted that unemployed parents are provided only “\$208 a month” to “feed a family.” All the while, families are being “paralyzed by all the variables of pesticides and other chemicals” found in our foods. Just in case you were wondering what all this has to do with reading, the authors assert that the depressed “state of the American economy” has “dampened working class and poor students’ interests” in reading.³

As a result, DISEC literacy programs are pooh-poohed because they do not have the “power to overcome the effects of poverty and discrimination.” The authors maintain that the only way to overcome these obstacles is through the introduction of critical literacy programs. These are programs that teach students to “work toward a more just and democratic [again, read ‘socialist’?] society.”⁴ Whole Language reading instruction acts as the means “to help create the conditions for a more just and democratic society.” As with most modern programs, the fact that WL instruction, in place in many schools across the nation for years, has not achieved this goal, is not the fault of the WL philosophy. It is the fault of under-funded, inadequately dedicated teachers. Oh...now I understand.

Now, for those of you who think that the purpose of reading is to increase the students’ ability to comprehend precisely the meaning intended by the author, the supporters of WL have something else in mind entirely. The authors argue that teaching reading “should be viewed as socializing children into a particular set of social and cultural practices in particular social settings.”⁵ Educators who object to this approach are cast aside as “cultural dupes merely acting out extant literacy practices.”

The third main argument offered by the authors for employing the WL approach centers on an attack against standardized tests. This should not surprise anyone, given the fact that the tests are more or

less designed to measure how well students comprehend what they are reading and not how well they are being “socialized.” Among other grievances, the tests are “scientific,” statistically sophisticated, and based on “meritocratic principles,” that is, they “glorify” competitiveness. Proof that these tests “corrupt the concept of fairness” is that students who score low on them are typically from politically oppressed, low-income families. These students, the writers assert, do not possess “the knowledge



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required” to score high on the tests and do not have knowledge of “test-taking skills.” Obviously, testing such students in this way is proof of a “systematic bias” against them. Since the tests pander to those students who are “white, male, middle-class, and American,” scores on them thus “may be more findings of cultural differences than anything else.”⁶

When devotees of whole language seek to support the effectiveness of WL instruction, their evidence is invariably circular in nature, i.e., published reports typically refer to one another as proof of how the methodology works. In addition, reports in support of this approach typically defend the system with non-numerical, anecdotal, and subjective/impressionistic “results.” These kinds of studies eerily resemble the flurry of reports issued by the pigs in George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* as verification of how well the farm was doing, despite the fact that animals were cold and starving. No matter that the children taught under the WL regime for years can’t read—look at this glowing study!

Our God is a God of order and rationality. We can best take dominion over this world (including subjects like reading) when we approach them in a systematic and logical way (DISEC). Reading methodologies, like

anything else, which ignore the created order and attempt to work against it invariably fail. This is why so much of what passes for “education” today leaves nothing but victims in its wake. These approaches begin with Man at the center, and God out of the picture.

Clarence B. Carson, had this to say in his text book series *A Basic History of the United States*, “Since Christianity is a religion of the book, the written word assumes a special importance for Christians. Learning assumes a special importance. Careful construction of the meaning of words assumes a special importance. The original meaning, the original documents, the earliest applications, all assume a special importance. This is so especially for the scriptures, but the attitude and belief tend to be extended to more worldly books, documents, and words as well. While this attitude is true for all Christians, it is even stronger for Protestants than for others, and they set the religious tone for the United States.”⁷ For the people of God, learning to read—and understand what one is reading is an act of worship. God’s people cannot rightly determine “what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man,” if His Word cannot be read and understood. The early Puritans saw reading as a necessary means to that end. In my opinion, modern educational theorists understand that as well, and are actively seeking to create a nation of non-readers who would be more easily led by them.

I don’t know about you, but I thank God every day for the privilege of being part of the marvelous work He has established here at Rockbridge Academy; a work which has His Word at the center not only of the curriculum (what gets taught), but also at the center of the methodology (how it gets taught).

¹Harry Giroux, “Literacy, Cultural Diversity, and Public Life,” *The Whole Language Catalog* (Santa Rosa, CA: American School Publishers, 1991), p. 417.

²Michael W. Apple, “Teachers, Politics, and Whole Language,” in *ibid.*, p. 416.

³Curt Dudley-Marley, “Introduction: The Politics of Literacy,” *Reading and Writing Quarterly* 13 (1997), p. 201.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵David Bloome and Laurie Katz, “Literacy as Social Practice and Classroom Chronotypes,” in *Ibid.*, pp. 221-222.

⁶Sharon Murphy, “Literacy Assessment and the Politics of Identities,” in *Ibid.*, p. 269.

⁷Clarence B. Carson, *A Basic History of the United States*, vol. 1 (Wadley, Alabama: American Textbook Committee, 1983), p. 17.

School Board Update

At the April 2 meeting of the Rockbridge Academy School Board, the following actions were taken: A 4% pay-raise and benefits enhancement package for the faculty was approved. The Faculty Handbook was finalized, including the approval of Section 8.10 dealing with the mandatory enrollment of faculty/staff children at Rockbridge Academy. Mr. McKenna was given approval to put together a European Senior Trip Planning Committee. The 2001-2002 School Calendar was approved, and copies are available in the school office. Also, the board gave approval to begin soliciting school board member nominees from the school association. Rob Tucker gave a report dealing with the progress of the property search. A professional property developer, with extensive experience in finding and developing properties for non-profit organizations, has been hired to help with our search.

DRESS CODE FOR 2001-2002 SCHOOL YEAR

The Dress Code for the 2001-2002 school year is available in the school office. Please pick up a copy before you do any shopping for next year as there are minor changes to the current dress code—mainly the clarification of colors and styles. For example, at the grammar level, shirts, sweaters, and vests will need to be solid red, black or white with no accent colors on collars, sleeves, or plackets. Sneakers, for grammar level, will need to be solid black or white. Another change is that elastic waist pants are permitted for grades Kindergarten through 2nd only. All other pants, shorts, and skirts must be pleated. To achieve a more uniform look, a sample of the Rockbridge Academy khaki color is available in the office. We will no longer allow the lighter and darker shades of white or tan for pants, skirts, and shorts.

If you have a child moving from the Grammar to the Dialectic or the Dialectic to the Rhetoric stage, please pay close attention to the changes in the dress code for the different grade levels. If you have any questions about the dress code, please call the school office.

HEADMASTER'S HONORS

First Honors go to the following students who earned all A's on their report card in the 3rd quarter.

1st Grade—Leela Dawson, Aaron Eichelberger, Christian Furniss, Emily Hinz, Kate Miller, Brianna Ong, Noah Sheir, Paul Vanik. **2nd Grade**—Caroline Bajus, Heather Cate, Meredith Caton, Alina Cooper, Kristine Otto, Megan Ronk, Robert Schonhaler. **3rd Grade**—Schafer Eichelberger, Grace Godfrey, Abigail Harries, Michael McKenna, Jordan Stolle. **4th Grade**—Alexander Cochran, Kathleen Dowd, Julia Furniss, Monica Godfrey. **5th Grade**—Alexander Dwyer, Benjamin Heemstra, Adam Sheir. **6th Grade**—Chelsea Dotson, Leslie Janikowsky, Patrick Peroutka. **7th Grade**—Emily Cusimano. **8th Grade**—Kathy St. Cyr. **9th Grade**—Gavin Blair, Josh Davis, David Sheir.

Second Honors go to the following students who earned all A's and B's on their report card in the 3rd quarter.

1st Grade—Joshua Bradley, Naomi Coffman, Alissa Dillon, Trevor Dotson, Chip Dowd, Ryan Fadeley, Garrett Grove, Madeline Hulsey, Christopher Keagy, Charlie Kerr, Scott Lively, Ross Lively, Maggie Masters, Molly McKenna, Jake Miller, Brian Moreno, Lisa Moskowitz, Sonja Nelson, Zachary Smith, Kathryn Willoughby. **2nd Grade**—Brittney Aguilar, Mark Albritton, Heidi Blair, Matthew Bradley, Timmy Burkhardt, Nicholas Cooksey, Noah Cusimano, Deanna Drescher, Suzanne Duvall, Jack Flora, Krystal Keyton, Dalton Litschewski, Zachary Napolitano, Krista Parker, Haylee Scarborough, Corey Sentz, Krystyna St. Cyr, Drew Tucker, John Vanik Chandler Watson, Mary Beth Wilson, Kristen Wolfe. **3rd Grade**—Carrie Bisciotti, Beau Bustanoby, Elizabeth Coale, Emily Crawford, Katie Drescher, Gregg Dwyer, Joey Dwyer, Stephanie Gorski, Charlotte Hendrick, Amanda Hill, Grace Janvier, Caroline Kerr, Anna Kitchin, Garrett Masters, Krista Samek, Tara Scarborough, Chelsea Smith, Natalie Stephens, Suzy Wilson. **4th Grade**—Jacob Adomanis, Laura Collins, Megan Eden, Aaron Hannigan, Stephen Horst, Josh McKnew, Matt McKnew, Noelle Meiser, Matthew Moreno, Hannah Myer, Timmy Peroutka, Anthony Spargo, Ellie Stevens, Kelly Trovato, Adelaide Watson. **5th Grade**—Tyler Antkowiak, Ariel Berry, Joseph Bisciotti, Melissa Caton, Matthew Coale, Rachel Crawford, Ethan Cusimano, Elisabeth Duvall, Christopher Janvier, Kimberly Laser, Travis Masters, Colleen McKenna, David St. Cyr. **6th Grade**—Jennifer Dwyer, Jordan Hendrick, Kristyn Kinsey, Shawn Laser, Joanna McCarrick, Robert Merkert, Kenny Trovato. **7th Grade**—Zachary Cochran, Palmer Horst, Maggie Lively, Kevin Shafer, Allison Violette. **8th Grade**—Ian Blanchard, Rebecca Duvall, Amy Greenip, Janet Schonhaler. **9th Grade**—Justin Horst.

Awards Assembly & Field Day

This year's festivities on the last day of school, May 25th, will be a little different than in previous years. We will begin, as usual, with the Awards Assembly at 9:00 a.m., followed by an organized game of kickball between Rockbridge staff and any students in grades 6-9 who wish to challenge them. Children in grades K and up will be able to participate in one of several organized soccer games. Games will run until 11:30 a.m., when lunch begins. We are asking each family to provide a picnic lunch for themselves and Rockbridge will provide beverages. At 12:00 noon all will be dismissed to go home. Children will arrive at school at the normal time, by 8:20 a.m. Please remember that the Fellowship Hall is small, and parents should be prepared for standing room only.

Spelling Bee Winners

This year's Grammar School Spelling Bee winners are as follows:

1st Grade—Aaron Eichelberger,
2nd Grade—Jack Flora,
3rd Grade—Abigail Harries,
4th Grade—Monica Godfrey,
5th Grade—Alex Dwyer,
6th Grade—Jennifer Dwyer.

Congratulations!

ROOMS FOR RENT?

We have been searching for additional space to rent for classes in the fall. Do you have any suggestions of places we might be able to use? If you have any ideas, please contact Michael McKenna with them as soon as possible. Thanks!