

WHOLE LANGUAGE

by Erin Trenbeath-Murray

WHAT IS WHOLE LANGUAGE?

Whole language is an approach to reading that emphasizes functional, real purposes for writing and reading. It is a belief system that children learn language when it is whole, sensible, interesting, and relevant. Whole language incorporates reading, writing, listening, and speaking in a blended format into the curriculum.

WHAT WHOLE LANGUAGE IS NOT

Whole language is not artificial, dull, irrelevant, or out of context. Worksheets, dittos, or flash cards are not found in a whole language child care setting. Drills and skills (such as phonetic sounds) are not whole language, because the learner becomes distracted from the real purpose and goals of reading and writing. It is difficult to motivate children to learn to read and write when a functional purpose is not in sight.

WHAT DOES A WHOLE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM LOOK LIKE?

A whole language classroom has a print rich environment with items labeled throughout the room. Some materials that are often found in a whole language classroom are:

1. Books for the children to explore on their own
2. Poems or songs written on chart paper
3. Big books
4. A reading corner with soft pillows
5. A writing center with mailboxes
6. Salt, cornmeal, or flour for writing in
7. Magnetic letters, stencils, or stamp letters
8. A variety of paper
9. A variety of writing utensils
10. Paper available throughout the room such as in the dramatic play to write down food orders or in the block building to plan out designs.

WHAT ARE EXAMPLES OF WHOLE LANGUAGE CURRICULUM?

A whole language classroom focuses on providing hands-on experiences for children to learn language arts. Whole language puts into practice John Dewey's emphasis on "learning by doing". Activities are planned from an integrated and thematic approach. For example, a theme could be "The Very Hungry Caterpillar". After reading the story, activities could include making very hungry caterpillar salad from a recipe written down on chart paper with pictures for the children to read, painting butterflies, observing caterpillars in the science areas while a teacher records their observations, or dictating a story that is recorded on paper to a teacher about the very sleepy caterpillar.

WHY WHOLE LANGUAGE?

As childhood educators, we are aware that young children learn through play and by doing. Whole language is a natural extension to this philosophy with the goal that the children we teach will be life-long learners and lovers of reading.