Whole Language For Native Students

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Some of the basic premises of the whole language approach in teaching are discussed, including an emphasis on language experience; the requirement for relevance to the child's experience; and the requirement for the teacher to model by being an active learner and collaborator, and by incorporting children's choices in content among reading resources. The author states that this approach in teaching and learning is consistent with Native learning styles, because it is a holistic approach. A bibliography of recent commentary, explanation, criticism, and research about the whole language approach is appended.

The whole language approach to introducing language studies is one that integrates language studies with other subjects and with the child's own experiences. As such, it seems to fit very well with the literature that deals with Native children's learning styles and with teaching styles in Native schools. It is certainly consistent with Kaulback's (1984) argument, in "Styles of Learning Among Native Children: A Review of the Research," that a more holistic approach to reading was called for. The key component to the whole language approach is the recognition of language *experience*. The "creed" of language-experience teachers can be summarized thus:

> Experiencing leads to thinking;
> Thinking leads to talking;
> Talking leads to writing;
> Writing leads to reading.

Language experience is based on the premise that the ability to interpret written language is related directly to a child's ability to communicate by talking. A basic illustration of a language-experience approach in a classroom, for example, would be when a child dictates a sentence to the teacher, who then writes it on poster-sized paper in large letters. By this interaction, the teacher demonstrates that what the child says is being heard and is being repeated as writing that the youngster can read back. In this process, the teacher demonstrates the integrated nature of language based on shared experience between child and adult.

Before one can write, one must have something to say. For children, the language experience approach provides a way to express themselves in school about activities with which the child is familiar through experience in the school and in the community. Activities such as hunting, skinning, tanning, trapping, fishing, berrypicking, making bannock, wild rice picking, stackwell housing, dog sledding, powwows, sweating, and so forth, are often not included in other learning resources, but in the language experience—or whole language—

approach, if they are activities with which the child is familiar, they may be the topics involved in a language learning process that is shared with others.

The whole language mandate is to create a type of environment in which all children can become literate. Literacy, the ability to read and write for specific purposes, is achieved in this approach through an integrated approach to all aspects of language: listening, speaking, writing, and reading.

Another key concept in the whole language approach is relevance. Traditional teaching methods are usually characterized by the use of materials written for someone else by someone else. Many children have found it difficult to relate to the language of the basal reader with its accent on simple, controlled vocabulary, its restricted sentence structure, and its shallow literary depth. Whole language materials, on the other hand, are relevant because they are chosen by the children or created by the children themselves, through language experience and then classroom publishing. The use of relevant or interest-based literature can also furnish the "experience" on which can flourish writing and reading. Such literature can come in the form of library and trade books. *The Circle Program*, a series of study booklets published by Fitzhenry and Whiteside, is based on Native values and culture and is an example of print resources that might be incorporated into this approach.

The whole language teacher, as learner and collaborator, is the crucial actor in making the educational program coherent with the child's learning style. Whole language is diverse and open enough to let teachers invest their individual personalities into the realization of whole langauge ideals. Whole language is not a particular dogma that comes with a prescriptive teacher's guide, but rather is a general approach to language and to finding out how it can be learned in the most natural and enjoyable way. Whole language teachers thus have to be responsive teachers who acknowledge that they too are learners, and that they can learn from the diverse backgrounds of all the other learners in the classroom.

In whole language classrooms, teachers model the behaviour they expect from their students. Thus, teachers write when their students are writing, and read when their students are reading. Children observe these acts, which speak louder than words. Whole language teachers invite children to make decisions about topic selections in writing and reading. They urge children to become independent learners and they stress self-evaluation and peer-evaluation as opposed to teacher-evaluation. Students are expected to work cooperatively, as well as individually, in a classroom community of learners that includes the teacher.

Every child has a backpack of experiences that he or she brings to school each day. It is the mandate of whole language teachers to use this experience, and the use of language in dealing with this experience, to complement the curriculum in any subject. An important part of that backpack of experience is the child's first language, so it is axiomatic that this approach must not just "take into account" the child's first language, but must depend upon that language.

Whole language classrooms are characterized by open areas, learning centres, and tables with chairs instead of rows of desks. There are comfortable areas for whole shared reading sessions. Learning centres can include themes that deal

with writing/publishing, art, authors, drama, listening, and so forth. There is much opportunity to learn spatially as well as verbally through picture and print, which should abound from wall to wall.

In facilitating activities in a whole language classroom, teachers use grouping dynamics in a flexible way as they work with children in a non-directive manner.

The goals of whole language are best met when there is a close home-school liaison. Whole language activities initiated at school through recognition of appropriate learning styles can be extended to the home through parent-teacher collaboration; holistic language development should not be confined by boundaries. The single most important way that parents can help children prepare for school is by reading with them.

Patience and a positive smiling outlook from a whole language teacher will be mirrored by the class. In summary, the whole language approach stresses those values that are emphasized in Native child-rearing practices. Literacy through whole language is based on the concept that language is meant to be discovered by children, much as they discover the physical world around them in their individual pursuits.

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