

# WHOLE LANGUAGE: EMANCIPATORY PEDAGOGY OR SOCIALIST NONSENSE?

Whole Language Reading Instruction Rests Largely on a Fiction

by Dr. Patrick Groff

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The “whole language” method of reading instruction is a highly popular, yet experimentally discredited teaching innovation. The educational principle that governs it falsely states that students best learn to read in the same informal, natural manner they previously learned to speak as preschoolers. The WL doctrine also erroneously insists that children 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 discrete reading skills. The WL movement protests that DISEC teaching of reading is inhumane; a violation of each child’s unique, immutable “learning style”; stifling of teachers’ creativity by disempowering them; not “progressive” enough; too technical and mechanical; and hostile to the culture of low-income families.

**But WL is misunderstood if it is seen as just a method of reading instruction.**

In 1991 education professor Kenneth Goodman, co-founder of the whole language (WL) literacy development movement, edited the Whole Language Catalog.<sup>1</sup> It includes chapters written by leading WL economic/political theorists, who sought to convince educators and other audiences of the validity of the political, social, economic, and cultural agenda of WL. The writers made clear that the WL “philosophy,” as it is dubbed, views teaching students to read as a prime means to bring about definitive political, social, economic, and cultural changes—of a radically left-wing nature.

## **The Ultimate Aim of WL Teaching**

The DISEC teaching of reading is objected to by the Catalog on ideological (political, social, economic, cultural) grounds. The book emphasizes that WL is more than a sweeping reconstruction of how to teach reading skills; it prepares students to challenge traditionally or historically venerated political and socioeconomic mores or precedents.

The politically active WL teacher uses reading instruction as a convenient vehicle to aid and abet the establishment of socialist goals, policies, values, and ideals. Through bona fide WL reading instruction, students learn how to rise up and challenge “the interests and values of the Anglo, white, middle and upper classes,” Harry Giroux proclaims in the Catalog.<sup>2</sup> They are prepared to oppose, writes Michael W. Apple, “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.<sup>4</sup> Elimination of the present “economic, cultural, and social policies of business and industry” clearly is the ultimate aim of WL reading teaching.<sup>5</sup>

In WL terms, for students to be literate in the full and finest sense means they are eager to disrupt the political, socioeconomic, and cultural status quo by committing themselves to a socio-historical reconstruction of society.<sup>5</sup> Reading instruction by WL teachers arms students to engage in socioeconomic class warfare, whenever and wherever it is ordained, the Catalog explains. The WL teaching envisioned to that end is given a fetchingly revolutionary title: Liberation/Emancipatory Pedagogy.

### **Update on WL's Supreme Purpose**

The socio-political agenda of WL, as expressed in the Catalog, was updated in six articles in the summer 1997 edition of the educational journal *Reading and Writing Quarterly*. Here, seven education professors, all well-known enthusiastic defenders of WL, and a fourth-grade teacher of like persuasion, expanded on what they call “The Politics of Literacy.”

The first argument posed for the need to transform students’ literacy development into political action is that the United States is not “a just and democratic society.”<sup>7</sup> Proof of this provocative allegation is the supposed fact that “high unemployment is becoming a permanent condition” in America. It is claimed that unemployed parents are provided only “\$208 a month” to “feed a family.” At the same time, the family is “paralyzed by all the variables of pesticides and other chemicals” found in its food. The writers find that the depressed “state of the American economy” has “dampened working class and poor students’ interests” in learning to read.

Also, so much “discrimination” now abounds in the nation that “many Americans” give up hope of finding a job. It thus is deemed outlandish to propose “individuals must stand on their own”; that is, be expected to show personal initiative and responsibility for their future lives. Even philanthropies “are losing any sense of social responsibility”<sup>7</sup> for ameliorating the above evils, the writers complain.

Therefore, DISEC literacy development programs are criticized as not having “the power to overcome the effects of poverty and discrimination,” as they are described. As the writer puts it, the goal of reading instruction “should be to educate students for democracy as a means of challenging a status quo in which a relatively small number of people—privileged by their race, class, gender, language, and sexual orientation—control a disproportionate share of society’s social and economic resources.”<sup>8</sup> Only “critical literacy” programs suffice in this respect. These are ones that teach students “to work toward a more just and democratic [again, read ‘socialist’] society.” Through the WL version of reading instruction, students are trained to attack the economic “status quo.” Whole language reading instruction acts as the means “to help create the conditions for a more just and democratic society,”<sup>9</sup> the author emphasizes. That WL instruction has not yet achieved this goal purportedly is the fault of inadequately dedicated teachers, and not the WL theory.

The second major argument in the articles for using WL for political purposes concerns the conventional definition of reading ability. The historical conceptualization of reading ability was students’ capacity to comprehend precisely the meanings that authors intended to impart.

It is argued, to the contrary, that teaching reading “should be viewed as socializing children into a particular set of social and cultural practices in particular social settings.”<sup>10</sup> Educators who object to the validity of this approach are summarily dismissed as “cultural dupes merely acting out extant literacy practices.”

The fourth-grade teacher-author in the Reading and Writing Quarterly describes how certain “social and cultural practices” are developed through WL teaching.<sup>11</sup> Her students first were led to be “shocked and angered” by past scenes of apartheid in South Africa. Then, through the selection of literature, a “connection between racism in South Africa” in the past and “racism and injustice in the United States” in the present was established.

The third prominent argument for employing WL teaching to convey political-economic ideology centers on an attack on standardized reading tests.<sup>11</sup> That assault on those tests is not surprising since they measure how well students comprehend precisely the meanings authors planned to convey and not how well they are “socialized into particular social practices” of a left-wing origin.

The Quarterly writers voice vigorous grievances against the tests: they are “scientific,” statistically sophisticated, and based on “meritocratic principles,” that is, “glorify” competitiveness. Proof that these tests “corrupt the concept of fairness” is that students who score low on them typically are from politically oppressed low-income minority families. These students do not possess “the knowledge required” to score high on the tests and do not have “knowledge of test-taking skills.” Therefore, testing these students signifies a “systematic bias” against them of a “racist” nature. Since it is held that the tests pander to students who are “white, male, middleclass, and American,” scores on them thus “may be more findings of cultural difference [among students] than anything else.”<sup>13</sup>

From the advent of the WL movement in the 1970s, its members have charged that standardized reading tests deliberately project socioeconomically disadvantaged students onto “a trajectory of school-based failure.” The Quarterly writers repeated the common

WL outcry that such testing must be abandoned and replaced with “individualized assessment” by bona fide WL teachers. This changeover, if activated, doubtless would work to the advantage of WL’s reputation. So far, all the published accounts of WL instruction involving teacher assessment of students’ reading conclude that it is superior to DISEC teaching. On the other hand, an overwhelming preponderance of relevant experimental research findings conclude the opposite.

The writers’ fourth main argument for the necessity of WL teaching that politically indoctrinates students is that DISEC instruction is expressly designed to “protect the privilege of the upper and upper-middle classes by encoding their values and intentions into school reading practices.” This encoding is said to take place through schools’ adoption of traditional reading instruction textbook series, called basal readers. These series of books are castigated as a dastardly “remote control” device operated by “the upper-middle and upper classes” to “neutralize other peoples’ [the downtrodden masses] literacies in their efforts to control their lives.”<sup>14</sup> Lower-class and minority students, the writers claim, cannot satisfy the rigorous requirements imposed by the readers, for example, “completing daily assignments and periodical tests,” because they do not reflect these students’ peculiar cultural “intentions and values” and “ways of making sense of [written] text.”<sup>15</sup>

According to the writers, the economic upper-classes induce frustration among students by “design.” Through the imposed adoption of basal readers, the socioeconomic despots engage in “manufacturing reading failures among their [lower-class] children and hindering their prospects for the future” for jobs with decent wages. As a result, under-class students “doubt the value of who they are and what they do and could know.”<sup>15</sup>

## Reflections on the WL Agenda

The WL movement's contention that certain members of the public school establishment must be authorized to shape the economic, political, and cultural institutions of the nation has distinctive precedents. For example, at the height of its influence in the 1930s, the Progressive Education Association expressed the same ambitions.

However, in light of the abject failure of socialism in the intervening years, revival of claims to its effectiveness, as currently made by the WL movement, takes on a particular distressing tone of déjà vu. The uneasiness one experiences in this regard is intensified by the statistically inaccurate, intensely partisan, and pitifully self-indulgent manner in which the WL theorists construct their argument for reading instruction as emancipatory pedagogy.

The scientifically invalid nature of WL reading instruction has been known since its inception. None of its unique principles or novel practices is corroborated by relevant experimental research findings. Whole language thus defends itself with qualitative (nonnumerical, anecdotal, subjective/impressionistic) research findings. A circular form of verification is adopted. Published reports refer exclusively to one another for confirmation.

Complimentary accounts of WL thus are notorious for their practice of the propaganda tactic called "stacking the deck." Any form of evidence that appears to support WL is approvingly displayed. None of the larger bulk of experimental data that finds WL inferior is cited. Examination of the defenses of WL thus leaves one with an eerie sense of disbelief, similar to that experienced on reading documents of Stalin's regime.

The greatest danger of Wigs vision of politically oriented reading instruction doubtless lies in its irony. The WL plan, to liberate proletarian students from under the heel of the diabolical business and industrial class, rests largely on a fiction. It depicts a nonexistent society created as a convenient scapegoat for economic problems of the lower class, which in actuality are self-imposed to a great extent. It impetuously plays the "race card" whenever that expedient serves its purposes. It blames the messenger for the message in its aspersions on standardized reading tests.

Thus while it professes to be the savior of abused racial minorities, the WL political-economic agenda paradoxically turns out to be their deceiver. It delivers no demonstrably effective pathways for them to become literate, join in the prosperity of the nation, and actively contribute to its improvement. Why educators loyal to WL appear blind to its weakness in these respects is one of the notable enigmas in the history of government schools.

## Notes

1. Kenneth S. Goodman, Lois Bridges Bird, and Yetta M. Goodman, eds., *The Whole Language Catalog* (Santa Rosa, Calif.: American School Publishers, 1991).
2. Harry Giroux, "Literacy, Cultural Diversity, and Public Life," in *Ibid.*, p. 417.
3. Michael W. Apple, "Teachers Politics, and Whole Language," in *Ibid.*, p. 416.
4. Stanley Aronowitz and Harry Giroux, "Education under Siege" (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey, 1985), p. 66.
5. Bess Altwerger and Barbara Flores, "The Politics of Whole Language," in Goodman et al.
6. Curt Dudley-Marley, "Introduction: The Politics of Literacy," *Reading and Writing Quarterly* 13 (1997), p. 201.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. David Bloome and Laurie Katz, "Literacy as Social Practice and Classroom Chronotypes," in *Ibid.*, pp. 221-22.
11. Maria Sweeney, "No Easy Road to Freedom: Critical Literacy in a Fourth-Grade Classroom," in *Ibid.*, p. 280.
12. Sharon Murphy, "Literacy Assessment and the Politics of Identities," in *Ibid.*, p. 263-66.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 269.
14. Patrick Shannon and Patricia Crawford, "Manufacturing Descent: Basal Readers and the Creation of Reading Failures," in *Ibid.*, p. 228.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 242.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 234.

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<https://fee.org/articles/whole-language-emancipatory-pedagogy-or-socialist-nonsense/>

## Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

December 3, 2017

This essay is no doubt one of the most important papers Dr. Patrick Groff ever penned. I am publishing it in this easy-to-read format in hopes of securing for it a wider readership.

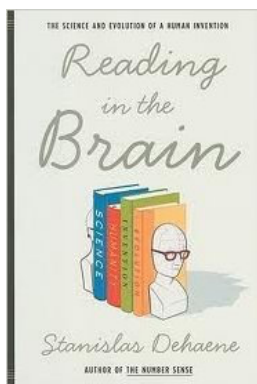
I was an elementary bilingual teacher for the Ector County School district when Whole Language swept through the schools. I attended dozens of Whole Language workshops and listened to highly degreed people spout its doctrines and practices.

I was appalled when the district took away our spelling and handwriting books, effectively eliminating systematic instruction in those areas. We were told that children did not need direct handwriting. It was called “embedded” instruction. The kids would learn to write by writing simply by watching the teachers write.

Spelling was viewed the same way. We were told that kids learned to spell better when they were allowed to figure out the system of English orthography on their own. The weekly spelling words were to chosen from the Whole Language reading selections with little or no regard paid to spelling patterns in a developmentally appropriate manner.

In the lower grades, the student read big books as a classroom activity. There were three steps in teaching reading: First the teachers read the stories **TO** the student as they followed along looking at the words in the big books. Next the kids would read **WITH** the teacher as she reread the stories. Finally, as if by magic, the kids were supposed to take off reading those stories **BY** themselves. In far too many cases it didn’t happen. This is the reason for the large number of illiterates in America today.

Dr. Groff’s article explain the twisted logic of the Whole Language crowd that tried to tie Whole Language in with Social Justice, getting everything exactly backwards. Phonics was said to be the providence of elitist. The truth is that phonics was the missing tool to lift all races and classes out of poverty and ignorance. Great black educators like Obadiah Williams of Cincinnati, Ohio have conclusively demonstrated how phonics can transform young students of all social backgrounds into avid readers and productive citizens. <http://donpotter.net/pdf/williamsobadiah.pdf>



For a first class scientific demolition of Whole Language you will want to read Stanislas Dehaene’s *Reading in the Brain: The Science and Evolution of a Human Invention*.

<http://amzn.to/2BHkHcf>

I have published Marilyn Jager Adams significant essay, “Why Not Phonics and Whole Language?”

<http://donpotter.net/pdf/why-not-phonics-and-whole.pdf> v

A prominent feature of Whole Language was Muscue Analysis:

<http://donpotter.net/pdf/miscue-analysis.pdf>

In 1995 - when I was receiving WL indoctrination – Constance Weaver edited a comprehensive introduction to WL entitle, *Reconsidering a Balanced Approach to Reading* with articles from leaders in the field. For a better understanding of the theoretical underpinning of the WL movement, this is a very good one-stop place to start. The WL approach to phonics (if you can call it that) was “Whole to Part Phonics” which theorized that kids would use onset-rime (b-at) to learn to read by analogy without any need whatsoever for direct phonics instruction. In fact Margaret Moustafa maintained that kids who learned phonics on their own by memorizing lots of words (look-say memorization) would learn phonics better than students taught with explicit instruction. Moustafa contrasts her so called “Whole to Part Phonics” to “Part to Whole Phonics ” Part to Whole Phonics is the same phonics that Pat Groff calls (DISEC).

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED418388.pdf>

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED334557.pdf>

In her 1994, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *Reading Progress and Practice: From socio-psycholinguistics to Whole Language*, Constance Weaver has a whole chapter entitled, “Phonics and Whole Language: From Politics to Research.”

Weaver writes:

My interest in the possible hidden agenda of heavy phonics instruction was aroused in 1989 when a U.S. Senate Republican Policy Committee document on phonics was read into the *Congressional Record*. Titled “Illiteracy: An Incurable Disease or Educational Malpractice?” This paper was in effect a rallying cry for extensive and intensive phonics instruction. Ostensibly drawing conclusions from the available research, the apparent author of the report, Robert W. Sweet concluded: The overwhelming evidence from research and classroom results indicates that the cure for the “disease of illiteracy” is the restoration of the instructional practice of intensive, systematic phonics in ever primary school in America!” (“Illiteracy,” 1989, p 13).

This is demonstrably untrue. Before considering research evidence, however, we need to describe this kind of phonics instruction more clearly, discuss the source of advocacy for such instruction, and clarify its hidden agenda.” (294)

Weaver the mentions several popular phonics programs. Concerning Sam Blumenfeld’s program, she writes:

Something of a maverick, Samuel Blumenfeld’s *Alpha-Phonics* (1983) also provides extensive and intensive attention to letter/sound patterns, but simply presenting words in patterned lists, not teaching the patterns per se; thus the program is based on the (psycho) linguistic principle that readers only need exposure to the patterns to induce them. (294)

I remember reading this for the first time in a copy of the book that Mr. Frank Rogers sent me in the winter of 1999. By that time, I had I had been teaching *Alpha-Phonics* to English and Spanish speaking students for five or six years. I was astonished that she totally failed to understand how Mr. Blumenfeld and I taught the book. We taught the letter names and letter sounds first and showed the kids how to sound out the words. We included cursive handwriting along with both oral and written spelling. I felt that Weaver had done my esteemed mentor a great disservice by failing to carefully read and understand the mini teacher’s manual in the back of the book. Her description of the method is highly distorted.

Weaver continues:

There is substantial evidence that advocacy for heavy phonics instruction is coming from the Far Right.

What motivates such advocacy? Oddly enough, it may not necessarily be what the proponents claim: namely, the desire to teach all children to read. A great deal of force behind such advocacy seems to be the desire to promote a religious agenda and/or to maintain the socioeconomic status quo. (295)

Curiously the claim that the motive behind intensive phonics is to maintain the socioeconomic status is an example of the pot calling the kettle black. It is WL that has done great harm to minority communities in denying them the literacy skills necessary for upward social mobility.

Weaver's next comments are far over the top.

#### The Political Connection

If at least some elements within the religious Far Right are eager to preserve the authority of home and church and therefore, it seems, to promote form so instruction that require adherence to a prescribed and thought-limiting curriculum, so some elements within the Far Right are equally eager to preserve the socioeconomic status quo.

The political Far Right's agenda is well-served by promoting docility and obedience – on the part of the lower classes. The school is an ideal vehicle for teaching and preserving socioeconomic stratification. We assess students; divide them into “ability” groups, different tracks, and regular versus resource rooms; and teach them differently, according to their alleged abilities. By the time they leave school, those in the lower groups/tracks/programs have generally lived down to the expectation of others and accept their lower-class status.

Far-fetched? That's what I used to think, until I began reading more and more of so-called critical theory. This reading and my subsequent reflection have convinced me that such a stratification is not innocent – that, for example, recent government and business instance upon more standardized tests for “accountability” is, in significant measure, an attempt to make schools ever more effective as a means of preserving social stratification.

The last three paragraphs are full of unsubstantiated claims that it would take a book just to deal with them all. I fail to see what teaching intensive phonics has to do with social stratification. I regularly give my students reading assessments for grade level and dyslexia and I group them according to their ability so I can provide appropriate instruction for each student. My experience is that when student receive appropriate instruction they make rapid advances and move on to higher levels.

Weaver continues:

#### The Hidden Curriculum

From one point of view, though, what matters is not whether certain groups *try* to keep children passive and obedient, but what actually happens to them during their schooling. Therefore, what I want to address next is the hidden agenda on heavy phonics instruction – the probable, educational, political, and social consequences of such instruction, regardless of whether such consequences are or are not a conscious agenda of those who promote phonics and more phonics.



When such implicit assumptions direct the development of curriculum guides the instructional materials, control and decision making are primarily autocratic and authoritarian. Both teachers and students are devalued and disempowered

Clearly, these assumptions underlie phonics instruction that is both extensive and intensive. Heavy phonics instruction trains students to be passive and obedient, not to be active in their own learning. This may be another reason why such instruction appeals to businesses people and politicians, who are accustomed to top-down control. It simply reflects their assumptions about how the world should be run. But more important, such instruction contributes to maintaining the unequal distribution of money and power among different social and ethnic groups.

I think Weaver got it all backwards. The lack of control in the classroom has lead to a chaos where nobody can learn. The disadvantages suffer the most because they are learning the least. This may sound extreme, but I am convinced that it is the lack of direct instruction in intensive phonics that has lead to the enormous number of illiterates in our country, and lead to their lack of upward social mobility. Weaver is blaming the wrong people.

The next section shows that her hastily drawn conclusions based on thin air.

#### Intensive Phonics and Skills for the Less Advantaged

Whether the ultraconservative forces are conscious aware of it or not, intensive skills instruction, including intensive phonics instruction, tends to promote the traditional conservative agenda of maintaining a stratified society, through both the hidden agenda and the overt curriculum.

I will end my quotes from Weaver's book here. There is much more. She somehow associates intensive phonics with assigning disadvantages children to lower ability groups. My experience is quite the opposite. In schools where intensive phonics is taught there is far less need for remedial reading programs or ability grouping. Even when there is grouping, it is meant to make sure that children are reading on their instructional level and not experiencing frustration. Frustration is the leading cause of student failure.

Perhaps the best way to understand the absurdities of WL is to read some of their publications.

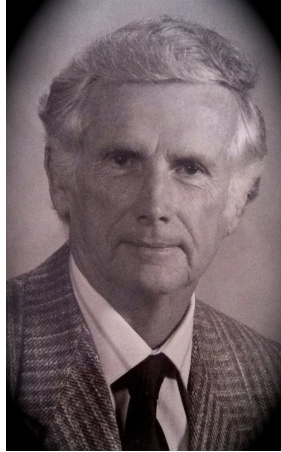
<https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1429&context=lajm>

<https://www.nifdi.org/docman/dr-kerry-hempenstall-s-referenced-documents/341-what-whole-language-really-implies/file>

Here is material on "phonics" from the third edition of Weaver's book (2002).

<http://pd.heinemann.com/shared/onlineresources/E00377/chapter14.pdf>

Last revised by Mr. Potter on February 23, 2019 and January 18, 2021.



**Patrick J. Groff**

**Professor Emeritus, San Diego State University**

**January 20, 1923 – April 2, 2014**

The National Right to Read Foundation honors the memory of our dear friend and colleague Pat Groff. He served on our Board of Directors for more than 20 years, and his articles and books have provided help and hope to untold numbers of parents and teachers seeking the truth about how children learn to read. He acted with courage in the face of adamant opposition from within his own profession, and at the expense of his own personal career. But he never wavered in his dedication to the truth about how children and adults learn to read because his belief was founded on “sound empirical research.”

His wit, graciousness, delightful humor and love for children permeated his every word and deed, and he dedicated his life and his extraordinary intellect to improving educational opportunities for the rising generations of students.

It is with sadness that we say “goodbye” to Dr. Groff, but his legacy will live on through his 9 books and more than 325 publications. The National Right to Read Foundation’s 2014 “Patrick J. Groff Annual Teacher of the Year Award” will be presented to an outstanding teacher who exemplifies in the classroom the methods, and techniques that he advocated.

The following statement by his family at his Memorial Service speaks volumes to all of us:

“I wish you could have stayed longer...but your mission was COMPLETE. I’ll see you as soon as mine...is too.