

# The Blumenfeld Education Letter

"My People Are Destroyed For Lack Of Knowledge" HOSEA 4:6

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The purpose of this newsletter is to provide knowledge for parents and educators who want to save the children of America from the destructive forces that endanger them. Our children in the public schools are at grave risk in 4 ways: academically, spiritually, morally, and physically — and only a well-informed public will be able to reduce these risks.  
"Without vision, the people perish."

## "The Whole Language Catalog" or A Review of the Fetish of the Whole

*The Whole Language Catalog*, authored by Kenneth and Yetta Goodman and Lois Bridges Bird, and published by American School Publishers, tells you everything you ever wanted to know about whole language and more. After having read critically through every page and every article in this 445-page monster of a book, I can say that I am impressed with the scope and depth of the whole-language movement. With all of the emphasis placed on beliefs and values, one gets the distinct feeling that this is a religious movement, with its high priests, its sacred literature, its disciples and fanatics, its proselytizers. It even has its own canon law. For example: Thou shalt not teach intensive, systematic phonics in a whole language classroom. Thou shalt not correct the spelling of a learner for fear that his or her spontaneity in writing will be thwarted. Thou shalt not teach anything that requires rote memorization. Thou shalt not fragment language for phonic or spelling exercises.

Actually, I agree with some of the things that whole-language educators have done. They've gotten rid of those dreadful

basal readers and replaced them with "real literature." They've gotten rid of the inane workbooks where children circle things and fill in blank spaces. Children should be permitted to write their own whole sentences. But unfortunately, like so much of the pedagogical nonsense in whole language, the children are encouraged to write before they have been taught to read. They use invented spelling to express their thoughts.

Moreover, in whole language, you don't teach children to read. They learn to read in the same way they learned to speak: naturally. It is assumed that if you read to the children, surround them with texts, immerse them in literature, that somehow they will learn to read through a process known in biology as osmosis. It's supposed to be quite liberating. Ken Goodman, professor of language, reading and culture at Arizona University, and probably America's most famous whole-language advocate, writes (p. 207):

"Whole language classrooms liberate pupils to try new things, to invent spellings,

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to experiment with a new genre, to guess at meanings in their reading, or to read and write imperfectly. Our research on reading and writing has strongly supported the importance of error in language development. Miscues represent the tension between invention and convention in reading. . . . In whole language classrooms risk-taking is not simply tolerated, it is celebrated. Learners have always been free to fail."

And fail they do. According to Prof. Jeanne S. Chall, who runs a reading lab at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education, "I see the failures from it already. Children are coming into the lab who were in [whole language] classes." (*Wash. Post*, 11/29/86)

## The Guessing Game

But whole language educators do not acknowledge failure in terms of traditional pedagogy, because to them reading is, in Ken Goodman's words, "a psycholinguistic guessing game." And the reason why they have to guess is because they have not been drilled in intensive, systematic phonics which provides readers with an automatic ability to associate letters with sounds. Oh yes, they are taught some phonics, but only incidentally. As La Donna Hauser, writes (p. 115):

"I want students to realize what they do as they read. I'd like them to discover these word-level strategies: (1) skipping an unknown word, (2) using context clues, (3) looking for structural clues within words, (4) sounding out the word, (5) using a dictionary, and (6) asking for help. I accept all productive strategies that students use."

Notice that "sounding out the word" is just one strategy among many. The children are taught some letter sounds, but not in a systematic way. Judy Peters writes (p. 114):

"A focus on decoding and pronuncia-

tion may lead to the idea that correct oral performance is the goal of reading, rather than understanding the text, and minimise the amount of risk-taking attempted."

Risk-taking is a euphemism for guessing. Naturally, if children are not taught the means of easy decoding through intensive, systematic phonics, they will have to rely on "strategies" that are much less reliable. The whole language people do it all backwards. They want children to understand what they are reading before they know how to read. Those of us who advocate "phonics first" know from years of experience that you must know *how* to read before you can understand *what* you are reading. After all, if you didn't know how to decode the Russian alphabet you would not be able to articulate the words and therefore not know what you were reading.

It's downright criminal to teach children that reading is a guessing game. Some years ago when I was tutoring a youngster with a severe reading problem, I discovered that he believed that good readers were simply good guessers, and that his problem was that he was a bad guesser. He had been so badly damaged by this idea that it took months of hard work to get him to see things differently. He had been taught to read in a public school which used the whole-word method.

## Goodman's "Research"

What led Ken Goodman to define reading as a "psycholinguistic guessing game"? He writes (p. 98):

"In my research I found readers anticipating what was coming. They predicted grammatical patterns; they reworded the text; they inserted, omitted, substituted, and changed the word sequence. Sometimes they lost themselves in the process, but often they produced sensible text readings that

differed in remarkable ways from an expected reading."

What Goodman has described in the above paragraph is a disabled reader, a so-called dyslexic. Every disabled reader I've ever tutored read that way, and the only cure was to turn that whole-word guesser into an accurate phonetic reader. And that required teaching the individual our English alphabetic system and how to apply this new phonetic knowledge to his or her reading. Every disabled reader I have ever tutored lacked this basic phonetic knowledge. They had either never been taught it or had been taught it in a fragmentary, incidental manner.

And so when Goodman talks of reading as being a "psycholinguistic guessing game," he is referring to a disabled sight reader, not an accurate phonetic reader. To the latter, reading is not at all a guessing game. It is a highly accurate, automatic process in which the written word is translated instantaneously into its spoken equivalent which, in turn, transmits meaning to the brain. It is the sight method of teaching reading that produces the kind of hobbled reader Goodman considers to be a normal reader. After years of such reading instruction in American schools, there are indeed millions of Americans who read that way. Goodman writes:

"In the reading guessing game we use strategies to make sense of print. We sample or select from the print — it would be too slow and distracting to use it all. We predict what will be coming ahead from what we already know. We make inferences and merge them with what we explicitly know so that we can't tell when we're done what we took from the text and what we put into it. And we have strategies for correcting when we lose the meaning."

No wonder so many Americans don't like to read! Some years ago I tutored a very

successful, intelligent man, a graduate of a midwestern university, who couldn't read. He was a typical victim of the whole-word, sight method. He had no phonetic knowledge whatever. But when he told me that he would rather be beaten than have to read, I understood for the first time the kind of unbearable psychic pain that the sight method can cause. I taught him our alphabetic system, and in a short time he was reading smoothly and easily.

### Basal Boredom

Of course, one of the reasons why the whole-language movement has appealed to so many teachers is the inanity of the basal reading programs in their schools. Kathy O'Brien, who teaches at California State University San Bernardino, describes what it was like using a basal reading program (p. 392):

"I had a curriculum that consisted of isolated skills taught for the sake of passing a proficiency test at the end of the book, as well as a district achievement test. It was a curriculum entirely prescribed by textbook publishers who didn't know my kids. And my students marched mindlessly through these programs, touched by nothing, including me. I know now that this curriculum went against everything I knew and felt about the way kids learn. I was extremely unhappy with the basal reader and fragmented curriculum I was teaching . . ."

And so Ms. O'Brien fell for whole language hook, line and sinker. Who could blame her? She writes:

"My classroom began to change from a teacher-directed skill-and-drill classroom to a student-centered whole language classroom. . . . I believe learning and students, not basal readers and skill lists, should be at the heart of every classroom."

And, of course, Ken Goodman agrees

with her wholeheartedly. He writes (p. 10):

"I know of no other movement in the history of education that has so caught the imagination of teachers and developed so strong a grass-roots base among classroom teachers as whole language. I believe that's because the teaching profession, particularly in the English-speaking world, has come of age. Teachers are taking seriously their responsibilities as decision-makers and as advocates for the young people they teach. . . . They are taking power, as professionals, in their classrooms. . . . We share the belief system that underlies whole language."

And so, it is not difficult to understand why so many teachers find whole language preferable to the workbook-oriented basal programs. They are not pleased with the results they get from the basals and the children are bored. And suddenly there is whole language which promises fun and joy and liberation and empowerment. The belief system tells you that children learn to read by reading. No need to teach them to read. They can do it themselves. The classroom becomes a joy-filled community where everyone helps everyone else. Competition is replaced by cooperation. You don't even have to teach spelling. Children invent their own spelling and eventually correct themselves. There is no such thing as a reading error, only a "miscue."

## Whole Language Belief System

What is this belief system they all have? According to Jeanette Veatch of Arizona State University, whole language "is but the newest manifestation of progressive education." (p. 235)

Thomas Newkirk, a professor at the University of New Hampshire, writes (p.217): "The whole language approach is, of course, not new. It has strong similarities to the New Education of the 1880s — the

Progressive Education of the 1920s and 1930s, and the open classroom movement that had a short life in the late 1960s and 1970s."

Yetta Goodman writes (p. 387): "Influences on whole language include the traditions of humanism and science. . . . The educational theories and beliefs that whole language represents today will be foundational to educational understandings and practices in the future. In the same way that those of us who call ourselves whole language proponents today discover our roots in the humanistic and scientific beliefs of those who came before, future humanistic and scientific beliefs will have their roots in the dynamic movement called whole language."

The *Catalog* pays homage to John Dewey, who is considered one of the pioneers of whole language. Of course, it was John Dewey who advocated deemphasizing the teaching of reading in the primary school in favor of a curriculum that emphasized socialization. His essay, "The Primary-Education Fetish," published in 1898, outlined the new primary curriculum. Dewey wrote:

"The plea for the predominance of learning to read in early school life because of the great importance attaching to literature seems to me a perversion."

His recommendations led to the adoption of the look-say, whole-word, sight reading method of instruction that has resulted in millions of Americans becoming functionally illiterate. All of those dull, inane basal readers were designed to implement the Dewey program. Even though they were sight-oriented, they also taught some incidental phonics as phonetic clues, for it was known quite early that children could not learn to read by merely memorizing words by their configurations alone. Today, whole language educators are immersing the children in literature but not teaching them to

read! The basals may be missing, but Dewey's progressive psycho-socio-political agenda is still intact.

## Leaning to the Left

In fact, the whole language movement is so skewed to the left, that one wonders why no one in the establishment has complained about it. But then the whole establishment is biased to the left, and bringing this fact to the public only gets one branded right-wing extremist.

The whole language pantheon of educators who have contributed to the belief system that shapes the movement include such luminaries as Paulo Freire, the Brazilian Marxist who advocates using literacy campaigns to foment revolutionary change; linguist Noam Chomsky, a rabid socialist if there ever was one; Lev S. Vygotsky, the Soviet psychologist who developed a Marxist psychology that could be applied in the classroom. Although Vygotsky died in 1934, his contribution to the whole language belief system is considered quite important. One of Vygotsky's most devoted disciples was A.R. Luria who experimented on ways to artificially induce behavioral disorganization.

There is no doubt in my mind that the look-say, sight, or whole-word method creates symbolic disorganization in the child's mind. And, indeed, it was Dr. Samuel T. Orton who, in the February 1929 issue of the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, pointed out that the sight method did cause reading disability in a large number of children. And in 1955, Dr. Rudolf Flesch made it quite clear that imposing an ideographic teaching technique on an alphabetic writing system produced reading disability.

Ironically, it was the work of Vygotsky and Luria that persuaded the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet

Union in 1932 to abandon progressive education in favor of a structured, subject-oriented curriculum. According to *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia* (Vol. 4, p. 423), "The first Soviet primers, compiled according to the so-called whole-words method, were replaced in 1932 by primers in which the analytic-synthetic sound method was revived (P.O. Afanas'ev and N.A. Kostin). Since then all primers have been compiled according to this method."

And so, since 1932, all Soviet children were taught to read by way of a purely phonetic method, which explains why the Soviet Union never had a reading problem and never needed any "miscue analysis." If you went to school in the Soviet Union you learned to read. And maybe that's why communism finally lost out in the Soviet Union. The people could read and eventually ferret out the truth.

## Molding Children's Minds

But whole language advocates are more interested in what Vygotsky had to say about how children's minds are molded than how to teach them to read. Luis Moll writes (p. 413):

"Vygotsky regarded education not only as central to cognitive development, but also as the quintessential sociocultural activity. . . [H]is work focused primarily on the social origins and cultural bases of individual development. . . . His central educational concept, that of the zone of proximal development, highlights this connection between social activity and individual thinking. . . . The key point of the concept is the interdependence between children's thinking and the social and cultural resources provided to help develop (mediate) that thinking."

Whole language educators certainly endeavor to provide the social and cultural resources that will enable the children to

develop politically and ecologically correct thought patterns.

Another progressive educator in the whole language hall of fame is Joseph Neef (1770-1854), a disciple of Pestalozzi. According to Ron Miller (p. 109), Neef emigrated to America in 1806 and in 1808 published one of the first systematic explanations of holistic education, *Sketch of a Plan and Method of Education*. In 1826 Neef became head teacher at the experimental communist colony at New Harmony, Indiana, founded by Robert Owen, the English industrialist. The experiment lasted only two years because, as Owen concluded, people educated under the old system could not become true communists even though they sympathized with the idea. Owen's son, Robert Dale Owen, then launched a movement to create a national government system of public schools in America which would prepare children for a socialist way of life.

## Literacy as Politics

Henry A. Giroux is perhaps the most radical of the writers in the *Catalog*. He is a professor of education and director of the Center for Education and Cultural Studies at Miami University (Ohio). He writes (p. 417):

"In the most general sense, literacy can be defined in pedagogical terms that adapt people to existing configurations of power, as in the advocacy of functional literacy. . . . In the most emancipatory sense, literacy is a political and pedagogical process of naming the world, which is biographical, historical, and collective. . . . In short, literacy is about the issues of politics, power, and possibility.

...

"One of the most important projects for teachers in the next decade will be the development of a critical literacy that incorporates the politics of cultural diversity with a view of pedagogy that recognizes the importance

of democratic public life. . . . Eurocentric culturally dominated curricula must be rejected as resistant to seeing schools as places for educating students to be critical citizens in a vital, democratic society. On the other hand, progressive views of literacy must openly acknowledge their own politics and commitment to pedagogical practices that deepen the goals of democratic struggle and cultural justice. . . .

"Whole language has done much to provide educators with both a language of critique and possibility, particularly in terms of its emphasis on the necessity for teachers to incorporate into their teaching the voices that students bring with them to the classroom."

So whole language is more than just another reading program. It's a call for socialist revolution!

Michael Apple, professor of Curriculum and Instruction and Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, is another leftist concerned about the future of whole language. He is concerned about attacks on public education coming from the political right. He writes (p. 416):

"Conservative groups have nearly always attempted to control the daily lives of teachers and to blame them for serious problems in the larger society over which teachers usually have little control. . . . And there are reasons for the current emphasis on an educationally and politically problematic return to a curriculum based on the 'western tradition' and 'cultural literacy.'

"This means that — for all its meritorious goals — the whole language movement cannot insure that its own goals and methods will have a lasting and widespread impact unless it is willing to act not only within the school, but outside it as well. Its proponents need to join with others in the wider social movements that aim at democ-

ratizing our economy, politics, and culture, and that act against a society that is so unequal in gender, race, and class terms."

Despite the demise of communism in the Soviet Union, Marxist rhetoric is alive and well in the American university!

Bess Altwerger and Barbara Flores write in an article entitled "The Politics of Whole Language" (p. 418):

"The traditional approach to teaching reading works effectively as this sorting mechanism, virtually assuring that one group of children — usually the poor and minorities — don't win or earn that admission ticket. Whole language teaching is subversive, in the best sense of the word, because it seeks to restore equality and democracy to our schools, to our children, and in essence, to our society. . . .

"Whole language puts power for learning, decision-making, and problem-solving back into the hands of teachers and students. It creates active learners; it empowers all of us to act upon and transform our environments and society in general. We are not just asking for a change in the teaching of reading, but a radical change in the social and political structure of schooling and society (Giroux and McLaren 1986)."

## Toward a Brave New Culture

Pretty radical stuff, don't you think? Whole language is also considered part of the holistic education movement. Don Miller, founder and editor of *Holistic Education Review*, defines holistic education as follows (p. 427):

"Holistic education seeks to nurture the development of the whole person. It is not enough to educate for academic achievement and vocational skills alone; the human personality is an integrated complex of intellectual, physical, social, moral, emotional, and spiritual possibilities. All of these must

be taken into account in the education of children. . . .

"Holistic education is a spiritual worldview rather than a materialist one. It is belief in, and a reverence for, a self-directing life force that lies beyond our rational, intellectual understanding."

Miller goes on to say that holistic spirituality is not religion, but "self-actualization," the process outlined by humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow. What is quite clear however is that holistic education gets into areas that public schools have no business getting into: the spiritual and emotional lives of its students. Miller continues:

"The holistic perspective is an inclusive, phenomenological, ecological, global perspective that seeks to encompass all aspects of human experience. . . . [H]olistic education is a radical break from traditional ways of understanding human development. . . . [It] represents a new paradigm. In essence, it is the educational approach of a new culture — an emerging postindustrial, post-technocratic civilization, in which the whole human being may yet be nurtured."

And you thought kids go to school just to learn to read and write!

Perhaps what makes whole language so appealing to so many teachers is that the atmosphere in the classroom is more home-like than schoollike. It deals with the whole child, it nurtures, it cuddles. There is no ability grouping, older kids help younger kids, and the kids are active learners reading real books not textbooks. There's lots of dialogue, lots of "critical thinking." It's as if the classroom were transformed into a surrogate home, replacing the child's real home by offering so much more "enrichment" than parents can provide. A perfect scheme for weaning children away from their traditional religious upbringing and inculcating them in the liberating, empowering dogma of holistic, ecological paganism.

## High School Graduate Learns to Read 15 Years Later

The following article is taken verbatim from the *Middlesex News* (Mass.) of 7/27/92:

When he'd try to read, words didn't look or sound right, so time after time, he'd give up and just look at the pictures. Although he'd graduated from a Bronx high school 15 years ago, something just wasn't right. He wouldn't tell anyone, when returning home after a weekend visit with family in New York, there were times he'd get lost because the road signs were like Japanese to him.

When his daughter wanted to hear a bedtime story, he'd turn his tear-filled eyes away and say, "Not tonight, honey." And there were times he'd go out on a job assignment to replace a window in a home, and have to stop and ask a passerby to read a street sign for him.

"I was embarrassed all these years. I thought I was stupid," said Tony Grayson, 32, a father of four. An avid basketball player, Grayson said he used to stare at pictures in *Sports Illustrated*, wanting desperately to know what the words said about the picture.

Something happened a few weeks ago that has changed Grayson's life. Separated from his family, Grayson spent Father's Day at John Stone's Inn, sipping beers, eating shrimp cocktail, watching sports events on the bar's television. When it came time for him to pay his tab, he turned to another man with whom he had chatted throughout the evening.

"He said, 'I can't find the total,'" said Ted, who asked that his real name not be used. "I said, 'Well, it's right there.'" Ted said when he picked up a flyer off the bar and asked Grayson to read it, the words he could recognize, he read backward. Grayson said he has since learned that he has dyslexia, a learning disorder that a younger brother was diagnosed with, but Grayson wasn't.

Since their first encounter at the bar, Ted has visited Grayson, teaching him how to read by sounding out words in syllables. The two men have made plans to spend more time together at the Framingham library.

"I thought we'd start out with something he'd enjoy, like 'Chronicles of Narnia.' That's a marvelous adventure story," said Ted.

Ted says he has no experience teaching. The 35-year-old Natick man is an unemployed free-lance movie and video editor, who has a lot of free time and

an unquenchable thirst for reading. "He's really intelligent, but he thinks he isn't," Ted said about Tony. "He can sound out words if he takes his time. He tries to read very fast."

Grayson said Ted is a godsend. "This man has really helped me. The thought that he would have the heart to want to help me . . . a total stranger, really touches my heart," Grayson said. "Because of him, I can drive down the highway and know where I'm going. And now I'll be able to read a bedtime story to my children."

Grayson, a warm-hearted man who loves being the life of a party, is delighted about learning to read and write, but he's also angry. He's angry that former school teachers who he said must have sensed he had a problem gave him passing grades. He's angry that his mother and an aunt, who taught school, didn't see that he had a problem.

"They had to know. They just had to. Why didn't they help me?" Grayson said. "If I knew how to write, I could have written a letter and got my kids back," Grayson said referring to his inability to write to the mother of his two daughters in North Carolina about his desire to have custody of his children.

"He has a lot of anger in him. He's someone that nobody stood up for," continued Ted. "He's just so honest. He's angry, but not cynical." Grayson, a Siltan Glass Co. employee, said reading has opened up a new world for him.

**Comment:** There are millions of Tony Graysons in the United States, high-school graduates and dropouts, who lead lives of quiet torment because their primary school teachers didn't know how to teach them to read. Yet, all it took were some elementary lessons in phonics from a stranger to convince Tony Grayson that he could, indeed, learn to read. And he got these lessons from someone who had never attended a teachers college or gotten state certification! And now whole language has taken over the schools with its anti-phonics mania. So we can expect to have many more millions of Tony Graysons in the American future. It's not easy to destroy a nation. But leave it to our educators to give it their best try.