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ABSTRACT

Focusing on a whole language program for the middle grades in Canada's Northwest Territories, this interview transcript consists of responses by Anne Davies, a teacher from Yellow Knife, in the Northwest Territories, and currently a doctoral student, to questions posed by Norma Mickelson, a professor at the University of Victoria in British Columbia. Davies claims that the whole language program is still evolving, but is already a viable alternative to traditional approaches in intermediate grade classrooms. Davies begins by asserting that very few modifications are necessary to use the whole language approach with older students, then describes a typical day in the classroom, which includes (1) reading; (2) sharing; (3) journal writing; (4) editing; (5) written reactions to reading; (6) logic exercises; (7) whole language content area instruction; and (8) quiet time. Davies next describes her holistic evaluation methods, which are based on observation. Davies' discussion then turns to using microcomputers in middle grade classrooms, including use of language arts software and interactive games. Finally, Davies talks about the role of the whole language teacher, interaction with administrators, the teaching philosophy, and the atmosphere in whole language classrooms. (One reference is included.) (SKC)

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A Whole Language Program In the Intermediate Grades:

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Questions and Answers

Dr. Norma Mickelson

Anne Davies

University of Victoria

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Running Head: A Whole Language Program

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Dr. Mickelson is a Professor at the University of Victoria. She is concerned with assisting practicing teachers to evolve their practice such that it can better approximate a whole language model of language arts. Anne Davies, a teacher from Yellowknife, N.W.T., is currently a doctoral student at the University of Victoria. During the following interview with Norma Mickelson, Anne Davies elaborates on both a day in an intermediate classroom and one approach to the language arts. Anne discusses a programme that is, in her words, "still being refined" but nevertheless it is presented and discussed as one alternative to the traditional approach used in many intermediate grade classroom.

Norma Mickelson (Norma): Anne, you've taught both primary and intermediate grades in the Territories, in Yellowknife and the first question I want to ask you is do you see any fundamental difference in the philosophy or the underlying rationale for whole language as it applies to the intermediate or the primary grades?

Anne Davies (Anne): No, there's no real difference. Children can understand more of what you as the their teacher are trying to do and they can participate at a more sophisticated level than they do in the primary level. The intermediate class is similar but it does hold different challenges for the teacher. The same philosophy stands. You still want to help students take control of their learning, to be active learners, to

generate their ideas and respond to them, and to help them learn through reading.

Norma: So often teachers feel that it is much more applicable to primary grades than to intermediate. It is interesting to me to hear you as a classroom teacher saying the fundamental principles are the same.

Anne: Yes, they are the same. Intermediate students also learn by doing. I think that we deprive intermediate students of a lot of experiences because we say, 'Oh well, they're not primary and they won't enjoy that'. For example, last year I took my students on a series of field trips as part of a careers project we were doing. I wanted them to go out and look at a person working 'on location'. We visited some of the same places I used to take my primary classes. I hesitated at first. I made sure there was something there for them to look for but I needn't have worried. I found that they reacted the same way the primary children did. They wanted to see, they wanted to learn and they wanted to ask questions.

Norma: Let's get down to some very specific issues. Can you outline for me some of the strategies that you use? Let's look at your day. Could you just sort of walk through your day with me so we have some clear idea as to the actual strategies that you'd use in your classroom?

Anne: I still like routines. I find find that if the students and I have a routine it helps to provide structure for our day and everything proceeds much easier than it might otherwise. First thing in the morning I say good morning to people, take attendance and get things settled down. I make any necessary reminders and then we begin U.S.S.R. It's a nice way to start

the day. It's a particularly good way for me to start the day and I believe it's effective for most of my students. We start to read almost immediately.

Norma: What are you doing?

Anne: I'm reading also. I'm reading anything from novels to teaching or professional journals. When we're finished reading, just as they will share with me, I will share with them and tell them, for example, how a particular researcher thinks they learn best. They enjoy that! Once our reading time is finished, usually thirty minutes later, I have them write in journals. This is an opportunity for them to respond to what they've read. Most often it's an unstructured response but if I want them to focus on the setting or the characters or some particular facet of what they're reading then I will structure that and they'll make their entry according to how I've asked them to respond. Once we've written in our journals and shared what we've been reading, then I have them do a Daily Edit. This is my guarantee that I've taken care of the skills things that I need to take care of with them. It will usually be a message of some sort to them that they will transcribe into their books without the errors. So they will put in the capitals or correct the misspelling or correct the punctuation or split the sentences up properly or whatever it may be that I'm focusing on at that point. It's often just a quick five minute activity that we then correct together although it can last much longer than that. It depends on my purpose.

Norma: Let me understand what you're saying. You start by everybody reading. And then you have the students put their reactions to what they have read - their personal idiosyncratic feelings or ideas about the reading in writing and then at the conclusion of that you have a Daily Edit. So what you're doing with the Daily Edit is dealing with skills as they arise out of the children's writing. Is that what you're saying?

Anne: Sometimes it is that or it may also be based on other observations that I've made during the previous day. I will know what they need to work on. Or, I will know what I haven't introduced and what hasn't yet come up in their writing or in their reading that needs to come up. I can force its entry through the Daily Edit. Most often I make the connection back to their writing. It tends to be the same kind of error but I try to make the message meaningful. It will be something to do with our projects or something else that will be occurring. The other facet of the journal is the record of the books read. There's a list in the back where they record all the titles and the authors. I can't, at least I better not be able, to keep track of all their reading. I need this list of books and authors and page numbers so I will know what they're reading. It's useful in other ways also.

Norma: Why do you say you'd better not be able to keep track of it?

Anne: If I know all that they are reading then they are not reading enough. It's just the same with the writing. If I can read everything that they write they're not writing enough.

Norma: After the Daily Edit what happens?

Anne: I will often do a Logic exercise. It's most often an analogy that gets them thinking and solving problems. Then we move into a writing time. The writing time varies. I like to work on Projects which results in a chunk of writing time where they are very focused and writing for a specific purpose. I will also have writing times where it's more along the Writing Process model that Donald Graves puts forward where they write perhaps aiming towards a fictional story being published. This may be thirty or forty minutes and sometimes longer. Prior to lunch I'll read aloud to them. This has changed from the primary. I'll read and they'll want to take the book home to finish. They are more capable of finishing it and they are more capable of finding a copy of the book if I don't happen to loan them my copy. So while at the primary end I could control the 'chapter book' more easily, I can't do that at the intermediate level. In practice what usually happens is that I read a chapter or an excerpt and in response to, "Who would like this book now?" the book disappears. It keeps me busy reading and sharing books. The students take them and go!

Norma: Does this bring us to lunch time?

Anne: Yes, after lunch I like to have Math. I am working on integrating mathematics into my projects. After Math time we're into Project time again. It's usually a Social Studies project or a Science project. It has some content where reading and writing and listening and speaking are all used as processes to push that content along to reach the goals that are part of the project.

Norma: One of the underlying principles of Whole Language is that the concept is an integrated one, not only within the Language Arts, listening, speaking, reading and writing and viewing but also across the curriculum. Am I correct in inferring that your projects are the way you integrate across the curriculum?

Anne: Yes, this is the way I do it. You can't have students reading about reading. They have to read about something. In the primary end we tend to focus children's reading on fiction materials. We can make the same mistake in the intermediate class. If we keep them reading fiction then they don't get used to the other important kind of reading - non-fiction. You have to find a balance. I handle content reading through projects. The students contribute some of the ideas for the projects. I try to build in what I can so I'll know they'll have the motivation to do the best they can!

Norma: I haven't heard you mention Art, Music or P.E..

Anne: Art gets built into the projects. I have Music specialist and a Phys. Ed. specialist. Their instruction times are timetabled. I don't have to take care of those things. Ideally I suppose I would and I'd try to build them into the projects as much as possible but I haven't had to do that.

Norma: How would you finish your day?

Anne: I like to stop with a quiet time, a time to reflect on what we've accomplished. It's too easy to go home not knowing what you've accomplished as a teacher. I think students often go home and the day has been a blurr. They've been busy and active. If they're in the middle of a

project they may not have finished anything that day or realize that they've finished something. Spend ten minutes and let them write in their own diary or talk about the day, what they're proud of, what they'd like to change and what they hope to do the next day.

Norma: It took me a long time to learn to finish my day with that evaluation.

Anne: When I was learning with my primary cooperating teacher she said to me that everyday before the children left you should ask them what they learned that day. My principal, Louise Jovanovic, deserves credit for sharing the intermediate version with me and her other staff members.

Norma: Do intermediate children respond well?

Anne: Yes and they love to keep a diary but it can be pushed on them. It can be a unpleasant experience but it doesn't have to be. I've found them to really enjoy it. They enjoy writing and talking about what they've done.

Norma: In working with teachers in the Whole Language area, there are several questions which come up constantly. One has to do with skills and I think you've partially answered that. The skills come out of the children's work and their language.

Anne: Yes, but there's a bit more to that though. When I write my long range plans I go through the relevant curriculums and I 'chunk' my year. I also list all the things that the children need help with or that they may need help with or that I need to check for. I build my projects after learning the kinds of activities they want to do or what subject they're interested

in. I go to my list and build the project. Last year for example, we did a Halley's Comet project. The children were eager to learn more about Halley's Comet. They had lots of newspaper articles and books. I had to focus on note-taking, building rough drafts, forming paragraphs and producing a final copy. So that's what we did. We practiced all those skills while learning about Halley's comet.

Norma: And things like using encyclopedias, dictionaries are all part of the process?

Anne: Yes, that's right.

Norma: But you know these are the competencies that you want the children to have?

Anne: That's what I'm looking for and I also tell the students that's what I'm looking for. There are no secrets. When the project is evaluated there are points for the process, points for how well they've worked with other people, points if they've been looking for other sources, points for their rough draft and for the final product itself. So that's most of their marks. That letter grade is primarily built on what they've accomplished while cooperating with other people and a smaller bit is for their individual effort of final proof reading and putting it together in a nice format.

Norma: Another topic that gets raised over and over again is evaluation. How do you evaluate and in fact communicate with parents about the progress of their children?

Anne: I have had a marvelous principal over the last few years and one of

the things she's drilled into me is that you can not evaluate something which you haven't set out to teach. If I haven't set out to teach or to watch the students learn something in particular then it's difficult to evaluate it. When I divide up my work into my projects I have a list of things that my students are to learn through them. I'm continually observing to see if we're meeting those goals and I'm modifying to ensure that we do. For example, when we were doing the note taking I found that we had to compose the first third of that document together on the overhead because they couldn't go from the notes that they'd taken to a document. Since I was evaluating, shifting and moving the project along as it grew when it came to the end it was fairly simple to evaluate it because I had collected appropriate documented evidence of all the children's work. I had all my observations and a package of student materials. I also have their comments regarding how well they've worked. I have all sorts of evidence. Evaluation is possible.

Norma: Do you find that they can comment realistically on what they're doing?

Anne: It's amazing how realistically they can comment. Last year as an extra writing exercise I had the students evaluating their work. Since I was sharing more and more of my expectations, I wondered how well they could write for an audience, their parents and how well they could write as a teacher - writing as I would write. On the board I listed and elaborated on our terms accomplishments. I asked them to comment on their term's work in all areas. I had been struggling through my own rough

drafts at the time and I handed, to the principal, my own rough drafts and their rough drafts. She said theirs were better! It was awful in one way but it was good in another. With her encouragement, I used their own reports to report to the parents. They were accurate, detailed and very realistic. Also, when handing back projects I would ask them to, according to the criteria for that project, give themselves a grade. Their grades almost always matched the grades I'd assigned.

Norma: What you seem to be saying is that they know where they are and what is a realistic grade for them?

Anne: Yes, or at least they know what my expectations are. Perhaps that's a function of my being clear about what I expected or of them knowing me. I think children are very astute and they know what's expected of them and they know who they are and who they are in relationship to other people.

Norma: What I hear you saying is if they know what the expectations are and they're prepared to meet those expectations then they have a realistic assessment of in fact whether they did or not.

Anne: Yes.

Norma: What about parents? How do you report what's going on to parents?

Anne: Well, as a primary teacher I had more parents in the classroom. The focus changed as the students became intermediate. I think part of it is they don't really want their parents in quite as much and in my experience the parents are less available as they're usually both working.

To communicate I sent home a note asking parents to outline the hopes that they had for their children, the expectations they had for me, and detail their educational priorities for their children for that year. As a result I had a lot of direction as to what the parents thought was important. Parents are experts on their children. It wasn't until I was a parent that I realized how much I knew and that I hadn't given parents enough credit for what they know. The parents sent me some incredibly detailed lists of information, things that I needed to know as their child's teacher. I referred to those all year long. I also had parents in to make book covers for the books that we were publishing and talked with them about the writing process and what occurs during that process. I was also open to having parents come in or to phone me. We talked a lot. When students were having problems, I made sure I was in close contact with the parents because they could give me the most up to date information about their child. I could then build the program to help.

Norma: I want to ask you one more question Anne because I know you've had a lot of experience with micro-computers in the intermediate grades particularly. I want to focus in on whether you see micro-computers as an asset in terms of children's writing or is it something where they are working independently. What's your assessment of the use of micro-computers in a whole language program?

Anne: Well, there's two different ways of handling micro-computers. One is when they are all tucked away in a lab somewhere and the other is having them in your classroom with you. I like to have them in my

classroom with me. That's our environment and that's where we're at home. That's where we have all our books and all our belongings. I don't care to move off into a lab. I didn't have twenty-three or twenty-six or twenty-seven computers in the classroom, I used have one, sometimes two occasionally three. I would use them for projects. We would have groups of us working together.. We would be working together on a written project, working together on developing a flowchart to write a choose your own adventure story or working together with a simulation and doing a lot of talking and interaction. The computers were always vehicles for generating more talk, for generating more ideas, for generating more writing. If I had a lab, I would do a lot more word processing with the students. I'd probably still keep them in pairs as I don't think one on one is very good. I think it's a wonderful tool for them. It's a wonderful tool for me. I also have a teaching jacket which I made. It's a Language Arts jacket and it has the words Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking and all sorts of pictures and slogans about books and reading. It was done using the Macintosh and its graphics capabilities. I used iron-on transfers to make myself a walking, living, breathing Language Arts person.

Norma: I'm very interested in what you're saying. I've just been reading Glasser's new book on control theory and basically what he's saying is that children if they work together generate for each other an interaction which just gets them involved.

Anne: Yes, definitely. We had one simulation called Geography Search. The students were crews on ships going to find the lost city of gold. I

split them into groups depending on where they sat and they had to elect their own Captain and get started on the voyage. One group happened to have four girls and two boys. They were four very assertive females. They crew elected one of the boys as the Captain and halfway through their journey there was a mutiny. With mutinies, pirates and being lost at sea there were all sorts of opportunities for language. They could keep their diaries and write about the action that had occurred right there in that group. There was much more action and talk and interaction and thinking than could ever take place with one individual sitting by a computer.

Norma: Do you see a basic change in the role of the teacher in terms of being involved with whole language?

Anne: The change from primary to intermediate or just the more traditional way of teaching?

Norma: ...a more traditional way of teaching. When I began teaching, and for many years after, the teacher was seen as the authority - the person from whom came all the ideas. It was almost like the old 'tabular rasa' or empty vessel. You filled the children's minds with these ideas. As I hear you talking in terms of Whole Language and as I work with other teachers it seems to me that there is a changing role. The teacher becomes more of a collaborator... more of a helper.

Anne: Yes, more of a facilitator. But at the same time you don't give up your basic responsibilities. As a teacher, I have a professional responsibility. I am in charge of what goes on in that room and what happens to those children. So while we learn cooperatively and work

together, I have to step back from that whole process and observe, record and plan. The result is that I'm a 'layered' person. I have to be careful that I don't control the talk and the action; that I not only say that I give them more authority or permission to act but that I really give it to them. I must step back and let them learn. I have to trust them.

Norma: Would you go back to your "old way of teaching"?

Anne: No, I could never go back to the old way of teaching. It's just not as satisfying. Now, I'm ready to go all the time. I never know what's going to happen and where they may lead me!

Norma: What do you see as the basic satisfactions, the main satisfactions in what you're now doing?

Anne: I am happy about my work and I'm fulfilled by it. I don't push people to do things they don't want to do. Instead we learn and we grow together and I suppose that's my ideal - a cooperative learning venture. I really think learning is a life long process and I demonstrate to children that I'm still learning and I expect them to be learning all of their lives. In my classroom I can demonstrate my learning and they can demonstrate their learning and we can both grow together. That's not possible for me in a traditional classroom.

Norma: Another question that I'd like to ask because it comes up for me over and over again, and that is, with respect to other teachers in the school and with administrators. Now I happen to know because we talked before that you've been very fortunate with your administration because you've had that support. How do you feel in terms of working with other

teachers. Supposing other teachers see things differently than you do or indeed your administrator. What would you do about that?

Anne: Well, I haven't always got along well with my administrator. It's something that grew over a period of time. Looking back, I think perhaps I wasn't sure enough of myself and I don't think the administrator could give permission for me to do what I wanted to do until I was more certain. The relationship has evolved over time. Now when I talk over my long range plans she knows what I mean and that I'm able to do what I say I'm able to do. Maybe I'm answering the questions better and they really know there's some depth there. But I also realized that as I began to change my teaching style, I was like a stereotyped overbearing preacher towards my colleagues. I really intimidated a lot of people. Over time I found out that that wasn't the best way at all. You are better off just to do what it is that you're doing and to share things with other people. And if you're there, quiet, helpful and obviously successful, you can bring about a lot of change. If people ask then I've got a wealth of information to share with them and I'm happy to share but I no longer go and tell someone that this is what they need to know and do. I think that is important.

Norma: Anne, what about the comment that well if I do this in my class and next year they go into a class that is very much more traditional, what about the children, am I in fact short changing them?

Anne: Well, I tend to educate children in terms of what some people will expect from them. For example, I may inform them of effective test-taking strategies. Students are very adaptable and they will adapt

to the teacher at hand. They will sort out what it is that's required and they will do that. I'm not sure they will learn as much as they would learn if they were participants in the process but they can adapt. They can adapt quite well. Also, I've noticed that students that may be discipline problems before they are with me and after but rarely when they are with me. I don't think it's luck. I think it is because they are involved. They know they have a part in the process and that there is room for them.

Norma: That's one of the things I've noticed and it's of great interest to me that of classrooms in which I go and where I'm working with teachers that the competitive feeling in the classroom begins to change to one of cooperation. It's really wonderful to see that.

Anne: That's right. There's not the feeling of competition. They know that some people are better at some things than other people but they all sort of see their strengths. I was reading a book about different kinds of intelligence and I shared it with them. They were really quite pleased to hear that those who were musically talented, for example, were just as intelligent but in a different way as someone else who might be academically talented for example. Children need to be reassured that they are all special, even at the intermediate level. Some things don't change. You still have to let them know they are valuable.

Norma: Right, perhaps more so!!

Anne: Yes! Maybe more so!

Norma: How do you handle basal materials?

Anne: Well, they are still in my classroom just as they were in the

primary grades. I use them occasionally because the projects are very intense activities and it's not realistic to start another project immediately. That's when I'll pull in other things to give them a breather. We'll all read the same novel, for example, or we'll bring out the same basal reader and do some work in that. It doesn't hurt them because it's something I've selected and I've selected it because it fits in with what they need to know and what they need to be doing.

Norma: I think possibly with the intermediate materials they may be some selections within the anthologies that are very interesting and that you might want to use?

Anne: There was one reader full of legends and they were quite interested in that. I thought it was worthwhile. It makes a difference if the teacher also enjoys the material.

Norma: Now, one other issue that comes up has to do with the library and the resource center and of course some teachers feel that it should all be in the main library. What's your perception about the access to libraries?

Anne: Access should be free and open. Books may be needed at any time as are other resource materials. Our library was fairly open. There were groups of children going down to access materials and at times we'd all move down and work there. We'd also go to the public library once a month, even at 30 below. We'd come trudging home with six or eight books for the next two weeks until they went back on their own or until we went back the following month. It's important for them to have as much access to libraries as possible. Classrooms need lots of books but I know I

couldn't keep up with the books as well as I could at the primary level. They could totally outstrip me and my meagre supply. There were lots of books coming in and out of the classroom. We were constantly sharing books with each other. Also, the teacher/librarian was involved in most of our projects; her role varied from collecting books or assisting in the planning process to providing display space for project work.

Norma: How much choice do you allow students in terms of reading material? I'm specifically thinking about projects. The students are generating the projects and going off in various directions, but in terms of your "language arts program", do you allow children choice in terms of reading materials?

Anne: They have almost complete choice in terms of materials. What I will do is guide their selection or try to get them off and onto something else but no, they have total choice over what they're reading. They may sit down and read the Guinness World Book of Records for three days in a row, which I couldn't personally do, but they are reading and they're involved and they're enjoying it. They have their own interests. I couldn't read somebody else's library, at least I wouldn't want to be forced to. They would pick and choose from what I have to offer and from what the library has to offer and they need to make those selections themselves. That means of course that I need an incredible knowledge of books at the intermediate level. I didn't see an adult book for a long time because I was busy trying to keep up with all of their reading until I realized that I couldn't keep up. I would read selections. I found that I could flip through

a book be able to discuss it with them or by reading their journals? I would find out about the books as well. So free choice, completely. Then I don't limit them.

Norma: Are you ever concerned about the level of reading? Supposing a youngster is not stuck on a particular topic but reading material that seems to be very, very easy for a long period of time?

Anne: I have talked to students who are doing that but what I invariably find that that's where they are comfortable and until they want and are ready for something more difficult it doesn't do them any good to push them. They are fulfilling some sort of need. Now it may be that what I have to do is to pull in something to support that child in another way. Give him more supports so that he'll be able to take risks but basically he has to make the decision to go into another level. You don't find intermediate children reading picture books unless you give them permission to - which I do. We read a whole series of picture books so we know how to read them out loud to our little buddies and so they have permission to read those sorts of things. But they don't stick to literature that's not challenging for them. They go to what's challenging.

Norma: I think we probably said this when we talked about primary, it would be my position that if a child is focusing on material for whatever reason he is getting something out of it. Where you think it's too difficult or too easy, he's needing to consolidate or wanting to stretch and if he's focused he's getting something out of it. We'd better observe and watch that.

Anne: I had one student who read *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* and her mother was upset because she had read that book in grade four. She went to the principal and Louise asked her if she'd ever read a book twice and the Mom said, "Yeah, I have." When Louise asked why she said, "Well, I read it differently the second time." Louise suggested that that was perhaps what her daughter was doing. I think perhaps we don't give students enough credit. They read for different reasons and they read for different purposes just like we do. They are real people!

Norma: They write for different purposes, they speak for different purposes!

Anne: Yes, that's right!

Norma: I guess perhaps for me the whole language philosophy is predicated on the notion of empowering students to become more competent people. That's what I find so exciting about what I'm seeing going on.

Anne: That's right and the students really take it up. When you give them the chance you can't hold them back. They want to learn more. They set new challenges for themselves all the time!

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