

**Looking Back to Look Forward: Understanding the Present By Revisiting The Past:  
An Australian Perspective**

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**Abstract**

Cambourne and Turbill trace the growth, change and finally marginalisation of progressive approaches to literacy education by examining whole language philosophy in Australia from the 1960s to the present. Using a critical lens, Cambourne and Turbill describe how whole language has been positioned throughout the last nearly 50 years in terms of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Cambourne and Turbill offer a personal history of whole language in Australia and draw connections of the educational changes occurring in their country to other western democracies. Their insights are valuable in order to examine other grass roots programs and to better understand how politics impact educational movements.

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## Introduction

During the trip back to Australia after the Whole Language Umbrella conference in Chicago in 2001 we were confused about the state of literacy education. In particular we were concerned about the steady marginalisation and ultimate demonisation of progressive approaches to literacy education such as whole language. “Why?” we asked, “How did this happen? What went wrong? What could be done?”

In the course of this discussion we revisited what we meant by *progressive approaches to literacy education*. We agreed that it meant using pedagogical ideas and practices that would make schools more effective agencies of democratic society. We agreed that progressive education had two core values, namely that each individual should be recognized for his or her own abilities, interests, ideas, needs, and cultural identity, and that the development of a critical, socially engaged form of ‘intelligence’ would enable individuals to understand and participate effectively in the affairs of their community by working collaboratively to achieve the common good. And finally we agreed that it meant teachers had to be thinkers and researchers in their own classrooms.

As our flight droned across the Pacific at 35,000 feet, we also agreed that the term *progressive education* could also be described as *child-centered*, and/or *social reconstructionist* or *Dewey-an* in orientation. Finally, before dozing off as we crossed the International Date Line we concluded that while the term *whole language* might have been the most commonly used descriptor of this kind of progressivism in North America, it had gone by different labels in other western democracies. In our country (Australia) it had been variously described as *contextualised learning*, *integrated learning*, *meaning centred learning*, *holistic learning*, *mindful learning*, and *constructivist*.

In hindsight we realise that our discussion was a reaction to two things: first, the dramatic decline of support for progressive pedagogies of literacy and second the simultaneous promotion of a much more traditional pedagogy identified by such generic labels as *explicit and systematic teaching of reading*, *direct instruction in the sub skills of reading*, (both with and without capital ‘d’ and ‘i’), or *balanced literacy instruction*.

As the flight touched down in Australia we agreed we had identified an interesting phenomenon, that there were almost identical educational changes occurring almost simultaneously in several western democracies. We found this synchronicity intriguing. We still do. In fact this article was motivated by a need to understand it.

The specific purpose of this paper is to explore, and then try to explain, why the strong support for one particular pedagogy suddenly and dramatically declined, and why, and how, a distinctly different pedagogy suddenly seemed to be dramatically promoted and supported in its stead. We use Australia as our case study, in the hope that our colleagues who have had similar experiences in other western democracies might find some relevance. The hope is that greater understanding will inform our ability to deal with and respond to the rapid socio-political changes that will continue to impact on all aspects of education, but especially literacy education.

## Looking Back

We will call our looking back our ‘potted history’ of Australian literacy education. It covers the period from when we both began our teaching careers to the present. It is important to realise that the term *whole language* was not used in Australia before the 1980s. We probably imported it from the USA and Canada. It has become a ubiquitous term that means many things to many people.<sup>1</sup> To define whole language, we think a more useful approach is to examine the emergence of whole language from an historical perspective. As both of us have been educators for more than four decades, we believe we are well positioned to provide a history, albeit a personal one, of language theories and practices in the Australian context. Whole language as we know it and its current status in Australia is inextricably linked to this history.<sup>2</sup>

We have organised our history across four decades from the 1960s to 2000s. We intend to discuss each decade from the perspectives of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Let us begin.

### The 1960s (and before): The Skills Era

We both remember this era vividly. We were young teachers following the mandated NSW (New South Wales) Curriculum for Primary Schools (1961). This was a two-inch thick, blue, hard-covered syllabus document that contained the curriculum content for all subjects and all grade levels we were required to teach (K-6), including the number of minutes to be spent on each subject each week. The teaching of reading was predominately the domain of the Grades 1 and 2 teachers. By Grade 3 it was assumed children had learned to read and therefore could use reading for learning. The ‘blue bible’ (as this curriculum document was commonly called) was organised into discrete segments for these early grades: phonics, comprehension, supplementary reading, and reading-appreciation. The skills of spelling, handwriting and grammar were considered to be quite discrete but essential skills and were therefore to be taught as self-contained subjects.

Reading and writing were also viewed as quite separate curriculum subjects. In fact the term *writing* referred to *handwriting* or *penmanship*. The act of composing texts was referred to as *composition* or *written expression*. Children were required to compose complete sentences with correct spelling, handwriting and grammar in one draft, on prescribed topics. The general expectation was children would be able to write correctly one sentence in Grade 1 and two in Grade 2. By the time the child entered Grade 3 it was expected that “the average child compose and write three consecutive sentences” (Department of Education 1961. p. 89).

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<sup>1</sup> A Google search found 224 million references to the term ‘whole language’ in just 24 seconds.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to point out for our readers that while we will be drawing on examples predominately from the state of New South Wales (in which we live), all states in Australia have centralised education systems and their respective curriculum over the years have been and still are very similar.

For children in their first year of school, (called Kindergarten in New South Wales [NSW]), the teaching of reading was not a major focus. In fact the NSW Curriculum -the blue bible- (1961) stated that,

No formal lessons [in reading] should be given in the Kindergarten. ... Modern research has shown that the child is not ready to begin formal reading before he [sic] has attained the mental age of six years. The Kindergarten teacher will therefore plan a pre-reading programme rather than a reading program. (p. 83)

The listed activities included *oral expression* through science, social and artistic experiences, *story, poetry and picture reading, pattern reading* (visual and auditory discrimination activities) and *book handling* (p. 83).

### **Pedagogy**

The pedagogy during this era reflected the belief that children must have control of the individual skills before they could put the pieces together and read or write. The Director General of Education for NSW in his opening section of the curriculum, *Statement of Guiding Aims and Underlying Principles*, stated that,

“Careful planning and grading of basic skills and knowledge are essential. ... Learning takes place more efficiently when there are prompt and regular reinforcements” (p.xi).

The teaching methods that were predominant followed the pattern *teach-practice-test* and were clearly underpinned by a learning theory that “came straight out of the experimental psychologist’s laboratory” (Smith 1986, p.67). We did flash card drills (recognition of whole word), phonic drills (recognition of individual sounds and their blends), spelling drills and worksheet after worksheet so that children could practice, practice, practice and we teachers could check to see if the child had mastered the required skills.

It is important to note that during this time a heated debate erupted in Australia between what was called *whole-word* or *look-and-say* and *phonics-first* advocates (see Holdaway, 1979, Thomas 1985). While both methods were based on principles of behaviourist theory of learning (Skinner, 1957) whole-word pedagogy was underpinned by Gestalt theory that argues that people perceive objects as ‘wholes’ and can be best summed up with the axiom the “whole is more than the sum of its parts” (Hufnus, n.d.). Therefore whole-word advocates argued children needed to learn the pattern of the whole word hence the use of flashcards and all the activities that were put in place around these. Phonics advocates argued that children needed to learn to analyse words and their component sounds. This debate can be seen to still take place today with media and politicians confusing whole word with whole language.

### **Assessment**

Assessment appeared to be relatively easy at the time as each worksheet or teacher-given test provided a numerical grade for each child. All teaching focussed on getting it right. Mistakes were not acceptable and had to be ruthlessly rooted out in case they became “permanently fixed in the child's repertoire” (Cambourne, 1988, p.19). The Primary Curriculum (1961) stated,

Evaluation at regular intervals is essential to ascertain the progress being made towards achieving the objectives of the curriculum. A variety of procedures will be followed: teachers own brief, informal classroom tests; more formal examinations at regular intervals; diagnostic and standardised tests (p. xi).

The two major stakeholders in the assessment of children outside the classroom were the Headmaster or Headmistress of the school, and the parents. Politicians seemed to have little or no interest in the teaching of reading, writing, spelling, grammar and written expression. During this era they seemed to be prepared to trust those of us who worked in the education system – a system that was directly accountable to the Minister of Education of the day whose responsibility was to manage the education portfolio.

### **How was whole language positioned in this era?**

While the term *whole language* was not well known at the time, it was a time when many of us were questioning the prevailing teaching/learning philosophy. Immigrants and refugees from countries where English was not the first language were arriving in Australia in large numbers. We were forced to examine language learning from the perspective of the child, to observe children more closely in order to understand what they could do. While the joy of story reading to children had always been part of our teaching, we realised that children's literature could also be used to teach children to read.

Towards the end of the 60s Australian K-2 teachers were introduced to *Language Experience* (Ashton-Warner 1963). Language Experience is based on the premise that if children could tell their 'story' and someone could scribe (i.e. convert this story to written text) the children would then be able to read and re-read it. Ashton-Warner's book, *Teacher* (1963) convinced many of us to use this approach to teach our young students to read. Not only did we find it very successful, particularly with the non-English speaking background children, but we realised it was fun for students to create individual Language Experience booklets. We used these child-created stories to teach children phonics, high frequency words, punctuation and much, much more. We began to see the advantages of modelled writing—that is scribing the child's story and thinking aloud about the process we were going through to spell the words and so on. Class libraries filled with the children's created books and these were read and reread by them.

### **The 1970s – The Era of Reading as Meaning-Making: Emergence of Whole Language Curriculum**

In this era the mandated curriculum in most Australian states changed dramatically. In NSW the thick ‘blue bible’ that incorporated all subjects was replaced with individual documents for each subject. The first of these for language and literacy was known as *Curriculum for Primary Schools: Language* (1974). This curriculum was considered radical with respect to content, philosophical underpinnings, pedagogy, and assessment. Unlike its predecessor (the ‘blue bible’) this small green document (16 pages in total) comprised a philosophical framework of *guiding statements on language learning*. This was a dramatic break from the previous era which was based on the assumption that teachers needed to be told explicitly what to do with respect to the teaching of reading, writing, spelling and so forth. Rather, this new document assumed that teachers were professionally equipped to read and understand these statements and use their professional knowledge to develop relevant pedagogy. Influenced by two UK government reports, the Plowden Report (1967) and the Bullock Report (1975), the curriculum was child-centred, recognised that children all come to school with “an extensive working knowledge of his [sic] language” (p.3), emphasised that “language learning is part of a child’s total development” (p.2) and that “the integration of language learning activities [talking and listening, reading and writing] is recommended” (p.2).

One striking comment made in a footnote in this curriculum had major ramifications in later years, particularly in the middle and secondary school years. It stated,

This syllabus contains no requirement for the teaching of a system of grammar. The whole approach to language learning emphasizes the use of language in meaningful situations (p. 5).

Most teachers interpreted this to mean there was no need to teach the grammar of English at all – hence a generation of students went through the school system with no knowledge of terms such as, *noun* or *verb*, nor did they understand their function in a sentence.

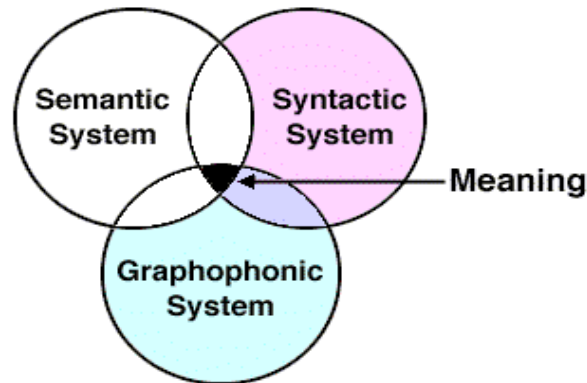
With such a change in curriculum requiring teachers of all elementary age children not to simply *do* what the curriculum told them, but to understand the reasons for what and why they taught, there was a large increase in professional development opportunities, conferences, research and publications. All these experiences aimed to support teachers who were given a great deal more responsibility for what they did in their classrooms.

Chall's (1967) concept that effective decoding to sound was the *sine qua non* of effective reading was seriously challenged in this era. The writings of Ken Goodman (1982), Yetta Goodman (Wilde, 1996), Dorothy Watson (Watson & Allen 1976), Jerry Harste (1989), Connie Weaver (1980), Brian Cambourne (1988), Don Holdaway (1979), Marie Clay (1979), James Britton (Barnes et al., 1989), and many others, moved teachers from focusing on reading as a decoding process only to focusing on reading as meaning-

making. The strong message emerging from these writers was that readers bring meaning *to* print in order to take meaning *from* print. Frank Smith talked about *reading from behind the eyes* as he and others demonstrated that reading is more than decoding print on the page (1978, p. 12). Ken and Yetta Goodman's work on miscue analysis (Goodman K. & Gollasch, 1982; Watson & Allen 1976; Goodman, Y. & Watson & Burke, 2006) showed us that all proficient readers use three major subsystems or cueing systems of language in order to construct meaning from text: the semantic, syntactic, and graphophonic systems.

This research and writings informed the second NSW curriculum of the 70s, *Reading K-12: Curriculum Policy Statement* (1978). The quote below provides a visual representation of the theory underpinning this curriculum.

Reading can be viewed diagrammatically as follows:



Effective readers use skills interdependently in all three areas – semantic, syntactic and grapho-phonetic – as the need arises. Many ineffective readers tend to rely too heavily on symbol-sound (grapho-phonetic) cues (p. 15).

## **Pedagogy**

There was a notable shift in pedagogy in the teaching of reading during this time also. Although widely accepted now, the philosophical changes in curriculum meant a major pedagogical shift for teachers in their teaching of reading, particularly for teachers of the early years of schooling. (Some have still not made this paradigm shift but that is another story!) With the teaching of reading now being described as a *process*, it was argued that children continue to learn to read long after Grade 2. Thus, the focus of teaching reading broadened across the elementary years and all elementary school teachers were expected to be teachers of reading.

The concept that children learn to read so they can use reading for learning also emerged at this time. However, if children were to be successful at being able to use

reading for learning, there were additional skills that needed to be taught in the upper years of elementary school. These included research or library skills, reading graphs and diagrams, using tables of contents and indexes, locating information in books, reading non-fiction and a variety of other genres.

While spelling, handwriting, and composition were in the main still taught as separate subjects, the teaching of reading saw the integration of its disparate components into organised reading groups or activities. Often this meant that the physical organization of the classroom needed to change so that children could work easily in small groups.

There was more reading *to* children from Kindergarten through to Grade 6. The choice of books to read aloud as well as those that the children were asked to read themselves began to change; they were interesting, modern, and engaging. NSW Department of Education stopped producing their own reading materials, and publishers moved in with a plethora of reading programs in which there were many interesting and colorful books organized into levels. Published manuals to support teachers in what to teach and how to teach it tended to replace the syllabus as the main source of information on teaching reading.

Both the publishers and the state system provided teacher in-service on new and interesting ways to teach reading within a meaning-making focus. An important emphasis of these courses was to help the teachers not only learn new strategies to use in their classrooms but to understand the reading process and how readers read. Teachers were now becoming *thinkers* as well as *doers*, especially with respect to teaching reading.

While the graphophonic system was still seen as an important focus, the guiding force behind our teaching was to encourage readers to *go for meaning*. Children were asked to predict unknown words by drawing on the graphophonic system (rather than sounding out each letter), their syntactic knowledge (or feel for the grammar), as well as the meaning that they were already constructing; to read on or to reread to confirm the meaning; and to use the illustrations to support their predictions. At university we began to talk about reading at a *metacognitive level* with our student teachers. Miscues were acceptable as long as what was said made sense. Teachers created new activities in order to emphasise these reading strategies. The use of *cloze*, *repeated readings*, *readers' theatre*, *retelling*, and many others became prevalent.

This focus on reading for meaning meant that more 'real' reading was done. Classroom libraries with high-quality children's literature appeared and children were encouraged to read as many books as they could. Records were kept of what they read as well as the amount read. The practice of taking books from school to home began. Whole school planning for the teaching of reading saw the introduction of allocated time each day for everyone to read. This time had various labels, such as Drop Everything and Read (DEAR), and Sustained Silent Reading (SSR).



Two Australian professional associations emerged in the 70s in order to provide teachers with new understandings and teaching practices. The Australian Reading Association affiliated with the International Reading Association (now known as the Australian Literacy Educators' Association [ALEA]) and the Primary English Teaching Association (PETA) saw their memberships grow rapidly and teachers seized the opportunities to pick up new ideas.

Teachers began to program thematically often using children's literature as the focus. For instance, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1969) could be used to teach days of the week, counting, healthy foods, as well as the life cycle of a butterfly.

We remember these as exciting times for the teaching of reading.

### **Assessment**

It was a period of mixed paradigms with respect to assessment. Teachers still gave many tests to check that students had learned what was expected. However they were also beginning to consider what the child could do rather than focus only on what the child couldn't do. This thinking then led to asking the question so what do I teach this child next? Assessment strategies such as *kidwatching* (Goodman, Y., 1978), *miscue analysis* (Goodman, Y., Watson, & Burke, 2006 2<sup>nd</sup> ed) and *running records* (Clay, 1979) became part of teachers' repertoires.

Such assessments highlighted for teachers what children needed to know and so informed the teachers' future planning and instruction at the whole class level and for individual children.

### **How was whole language positioned during the 70s?**

The 70s certainly saw a radical shift in thinking about reading theory and practice that could be viewed as the emergence of whole language, although this term was still not widely used. There was greater interconnectedness of the language components and a focus on the child as a learner. This meant there was greater cultural sensitivity. However, there were many teachers and educators who challenged the focus on reading-for-meaning, arguing that it was teaching children to make wild guesses. Others argued that all children, especially those who had learning or language problems needed to be taught phonics and decoding quite explicitly before they could make meaning. The debate between *phonics-and-decoding-first* and *reading-for-meaning* groups resulted in the emergence of two distinct schools (some called them camps) of reading theorists and pedagogies. The phonics and decoding group became strongly aligned with special education.

Another major issue that was constantly contested during this time was the testing of reading. Many argued that standardized reading instruments only measured decoding skills and not the full spectrum of reading skills and strategies that proficient readers use. Miscue analysis, running records, retellings, cloze passages, and informal reading

inventories were seen as more useful instruments for measuring reading progress while also diagnosing the child's reading needs. Others argued that these instruments were too subjective and allowed children to *fall between the cracks*.

### **The 1980s: The Era of Focus on Process and the Reading-Writing Connections**

The 80s, we argue, was the zenith of whole language in Australia, particularly the early 80s. It was also a period where the focus shifted from reading and the teaching of reading to writing and its teaching. In 1980 Sydney hosted the International Federation for the Teaching of English (IFTE) conference. International speakers from all over the world arrived on our shores. We heard people speak whom in the past we had only ever read. We met new people who shared their new and exciting research. One such person was Donald Graves. His research into early writing development was a revelation to many of us in the audience (Graves, 1983; Walshe, 1981a). The Primary English Teaching Association (PETA) invited Graves back to Australia and many of us set up similar writing projects in early-years classrooms. R.D. Walshe released his book *Every Child Can Write* in 1981 (Walshe, 1981b). Walshe's book drew our attention to the work of Donald Murray, Graves and many others and linked their writing to the Australian classroom. He focused on what he called the *process approach to the teaching of writing*, drawing on what professional writers do in order to compose a piece of writing to its final publication. PETA published many books in a few short years on this area (Turbill, 1982, 1983; Butler and Turbill, 1984; Cambourne and Turbill, 1987) and teachers welcomed the Australian nature of these books.

The focus on writing and its connections to reading was highlighted by Frank Smith's work. Smith introduced us to the concept of *reading like a writer* (Smith 1982, 1983) which in turn reinforced the notion that constructing meaning using alphabetic script, whether as a reader or writer, were all part of the same language process. This concept highlighted for teachers that they could teach many skills during reading lessons that could be used in writing lessons.

It was during this era that Cambourne introduced us to his *theory of learning* that he called *The Conditions of Learning* (Butler and Turbill, 1984; Cambourne, 1988). These conditions many would argue became the basis for what was known as whole language in Australia. They could be applied to all language learning, as well as to other curriculum areas.

One outcome of these publications was that the term *literacy* rather than *reading* and/or *writing* emerged and became integral to curriculum discussions.

### **Curriculum**

The mandated NSW curriculum *Writing K-12* was launched in 1987 after wide consultation with teachers and educators. It was the partner to the *Reading K-12* curriculum published in the 70s. It too was revolutionary for a mandated curriculum. There were three components: Statement of Principles (K-12), Syllabus for Writing (K-6)

and Support Statements (K-12). Throughout there were photographs and examples of children's writing. These served to demonstrate the curriculum requirements as much as the text did.

By the time this mandated curriculum hit the NSW schools many teachers had already begun to change what they did in the name of teaching writing. The many Australian publications, as well as some U.S. publications, had served as the curriculum in the early years of the decade.

### **Pedagogy**

There was a dramatic change in pedagogy during this decade. Most classrooms were filled with books - children's literature as well as new reading programs that looked and sounded far more interesting and relevant than the old department-supplied texts. Colourful Big Books were everywhere, all featuring the '3 Rs' of rhyme, rhythm, and repetition. These were used for teaching reading, but also used as models for teaching writing and spelling.

Teachers were reading more to children, and children were also reading more. Such activities became great resources for the teaching and learning of writing. Teachers began to examine what writers do - the process writers go through - and to apply this to the teaching of their children.

Observations of young children attempting to write gave us insights into how readers and writers learn to become literate, insights that we had not realised before, and thus raised our expectations of what young children could do. We became researchers in our own classrooms as we watched five- and six-year-olds dispel theories we had held about them as learners. We heard as well as saw these children unravel the graphophonic mystery as they *invented* their spellings in their attempts to write. Classrooms became what could be called *phonic factories*. Children were developing and using their phonemic awareness (we didn't call it that).

We began to understand the connections between reading, writing, and spelling. It became apparent that if we wanted our young writers to write, they had to be immersed in the language of books. This may seem obvious to us now, but we didn't always think this way. And so the pedagogy reflected this understanding and the literacy period seemed to be seamless with no distinct lessons on reading skills or spelling drills. Teachers attempted to teach these skills within the context of the reading-writing workshop which was usually a two-hour block each day.

### **Assessment**

The impact of the Process Writing movement on our curriculum and pedagogy led to many changes in the way we thought about assessment. Teachers began to look for assessment practices that were more responsive to students' needs, were more qualitative, and which focused on both process and product. Teachers collected students' writings

over time and analysed these to note their growth and progression. This information along with records of reading progression, using miscue analysis, running records and reading inventories became the basis for each child's portfolio. Teachers amassed so much information on each child that the problem arose as to how to store it all, and more importantly how to analyse and report the results to parents. It would be fair to say that it was a time of confusion for teachers with respect to assessment. Teachers were caught in a paradigm shift where the changes in understandings about assessment had not kept pace with the understandings in the learning and teaching of literacy (Cambourne and Turbill, 1994).

### **How was whole language positioned during the 80s?**

It was during the 80s that the term whole language began to be used for how and what we were teaching with respect to literacy.

Towards the end of the 80s many of us began to recognize the importance of purpose and audience in shaping the different types of writing. Many teachers were frustrated with the quality of their children's writing and were beginning to ask: "What is 'good' writing?" and, "How do we teach students to write a variety of text forms?"

Australian functional linguists including Michael Halliday (1980, 1985), Jim Martin (1985), Frances Christie (1989) and Beverly Derewianka (1990) helped us understand how different texts are structured, and which texts are important for school success. They warned us that young writers tended always to recount or to create simply talk written down, unless they are encouraged to write other text types. This led us to consider the need to introduce a wider range of text types to young children, to read fiction and non-fiction in the classroom. It also led us to reconsider the role that grammar played, and the need for our students to learn about the grammar of their language. It was imperative the linguists argued to have a language to talk about language. The label *story* was no longer acceptable for all types of texts children might write. Instead, they argued students should know and be able to write recounts, reports, narratives, descriptions, procedures, and so on.

This focus on structure of texts forced us to examine more deeply the syntactic system and what information about syntax or grammar students need to know in order to be more effective language users. It was the beginning of what we called *the genre movement*.

Toward the end of the 1980s, controversies were rampant. There were cries that students were not being taught spelling, that acceptance of invented spelling was creating a nation of illiterates, that our students were not being taught phonics, that student writing was too personal, and that there was a need for students to be taught the skills of reading and writing (including spelling and grammar) explicitly. The call for greater accountability in public spending led to the introduction in 1988 to the first statewide testing in New South Wales, and there were calls for a national curriculum and national

testing. Claims were being made that standards were falling, that students were leaving school with insufficient literacy skills.

At the end of the era, whole language was beginning to be blamed for all these so-called shortcomings.

### **The 90s: Focus on Text Types, Genres and Critical Literacy**

In Australia, this was the era that coincided with the marginalisation of whole language. In the competition for curriculum influence and government funding some writers in the genre movement turned on whole language describing it as “romantic”, “progressive”, and “idealistic” (Christie, 1989; Martin, 1985). At the same time they promoted Halliday's Functional Systemic Grammar model (Halliday, 1980, 1985) as the theoretical basis for the literacy curriculum. Those of us who had been promoting the curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment practices of the 70s and 80s were confused by this attempt to marginalise whole language, as from our perspective we seemed to be promoting identical philosophies.

Elkind (1995) suggested that the 90s was the beginning of the *postmodern* period and therefore there was a strong move towards critical literacy (Luke, 1987; Comber 2001, 2003).

While there may be clear connections between these new movements, for most teachers it seemed that new fads were being introduced. Literacy was becoming a political tool. Grand rhetorical statements decreed that “no child would live in poverty” and “all children would read and write by Grade 3.” Media headlines claimed literacy standards were falling and that whole language was to blame.

The word literacy began to take on new meaning, as indicated in the definition in the Australian Literacy Policy (Department of Education and Employment, 1991):

Literacy is the ability to read and use written information and to write appropriately, in a range of contexts. It is used to develop knowledge and understanding, to achieve personal growth and to function effectively in our society. Literacy also includes the recognition of numbers and basic mathematical signs and symbols within text.

Literacy involves the integration of speaking, listening and critical thinking with reading and writing. Effective literacy is intrinsically purposeful, flexible and dynamic and continues to develop throughout an individual's lifetime.

All Australians need to have effective literacy in English, not only for their personal benefit and welfare, but also for Australia to reach its social and economic goals. (p. 6)

## **Curriculum**

Advocates who supported a strong focus on the teaching of text types and critical literacy seemed to base their argument on three principles. These were:

- Language and literacy are cultural capital which the less affluent can use to level the economic playing field (Luke, 1987; Comber, 2001),
- Control over a wide range of language genre (text-types) is a medium for accessing power (Knapp & Watkins, 2005; Martin, 1985),
- Social equity can only be promoted if schools develop critical intelligence in their students (Comber 2001, 2003; Comber and Barnett 2003; Christie, F., Devlin, B., Freebody, P., Luke, A., Martin, J., Threadgold, T, & Walton, C., 1991).

The NSW Syllabus, *English K-6* (1998) based on outcomes standards framework stated:

Competence in English will enable students to learning about the role of language in their own lives, and in their own and other cultures. They will then be able to communicate their thoughts and feelings, to participate in society, to make informed decisions about personal and social issues, to analyse information and viewpoints, to use their imaginations and to think about the influence of culture on the meanings made in language (p.6).

These curricula principles spilled over into the pedagogies that were strongly promoted in the Syllabus.

## **Pedagogy**

The new syllabus *English K-6* (1998) was accompanied by support modules that were designed to help teachers focus on the teaching of a range of text types. The pedagogy now involved a great deal of time spent in identifying and categorising different genres (text-types), their generic structures and grammatical features.

This in turn, permitted the formal study of the relationships between context, purpose, audience, and linguistic choice as indicators being applied to all aspects of literacy teaching. Many teachers incorporated this pedagogy into their existing repertoire of practices (Freebody and Luke, 1990). Many others however, moved into formulaic orthodoxies of teaching of text types.

For many teachers having to work within an outcomes framework was overwhelming, as there seemed to be so many outcomes for each of the four areas of reading, writing, talking and listening.

## **Assessment**

The 'outcomes standard framework' was also to be used as a framework for assessment and future planning. The framework identified explicit indicators of achievement along a broad continuum of literacy development K-6. Teachers now had a clear direction for assessment and planning. It also meant that teachers could be held more accountable for their literacy teaching. This accountability was complemented by the introduction of a mandatory statewide basic skills testing regime for grades three, five, and seven.

## **How was whole language positioned during the 90s?**

It was during this period that the concept of ‘whole language’ was marginalised and scapegoated to such a degree that the very use of the term invoked negative responses, especially from politicians and policy makers. Just how and why this occurred was both frustrating and at times very confusing. In order to understand this we need to digress and review the processes of scapegoating as we interpret these events.

When we look back and try to make sense of the 70s, 80s and 90s, we can recognise five distinct phases in the decline of support for whole language or what was often called progressive approaches to literacy education.

### *Phase 1: Progressive Forms of Literacy Education As The Dominant and Privileged Pedagogy*

As indicated in our potted history of the 70s, 80s and 90s, progressive approaches to literacy education enjoyed a great deal of support and experienced a huge surge of popularity. As we wrote in 1997:

During the 1980s, the whole language club was the club to be seen at and belong to, and many teachers quickly joined, with too many of them not really knowing or really wanting to know the basic philosophy underpinning the existence of the club (Turbill and Cambourne 1997, p.4).

### *Phase 2: The Decline Begins*

In the same piece we noted,

As we entered the 1990s, there were some who became dissatisfied with their membership and moved out to begin their own clubs. There were others who never joined the whole language club and remained suspicious of its philosophy and practices. These groups became the critics of whole language; some were useful allies, others were bitter and bigoted enemies (Turbill & Cambourne 1997, p.4).

The “bitterness and bigotry” reached a peak in late 90s. This phase was characterised by a series of events that were remarkably similar in the other countries in which this decline occurred. We like to call this the *Henny Penny syndrome*.

Aspects of this syndrome included claims that:

- A crisis or serious decline in literacy standards existed;
- The root cause of this literacy crisis was a serious inadequacy of current progressive teaching methods, namely whole language;
- This literacy crisis could be turned around, however any action must be quick and decisive; and

- There was a readily available, proven, non-progressive pedagogy that would reverse the literacy crisis if only schools and teachers would adopt it.

Evidence to support these claims was dubious or non-existent.

### *Phase 3: From Marginalisation to The Repression of Dissent*

With whole language identified as the alleged cause of the crisis, those who were perceived to be its advocates were quickly subjected to a campaign of marginalisation. The techniques of this marginalisation took a number of forms, from personal abuse, to professional scapegoating, to professional harassment, to professional isolation by those in positions of power within state systems, to the introduction of infrastructures that are used to repress dissent.

### *Phase 4: From Rational Dissent to The Discourse of Denial*

During this phase, advocates of whole language who had been subjected to the marginalisation processes described in Phase 3 began to recognise what was happening. As a consequence we began to respond to many alleged claims. Initially the discourse we employed was more one of polite rationality than adversarial debate. We described those who were trying to discredit whole language as being *genuinely misinformed*, or, *not understanding the full picture*. However, as the marginalisation process continued, the tenor of the discourse shifted to what Brennan describes as the *discourse of denial* (Brennan 1994). Brennan argues that the discourse of denial is a feature of all adversarial debate. It is exemplified in the discourse used by lawyers in cross-examination. Its purpose is to discredit a witness's evidence. During this phase both advocates and adversaries of whole language adopted strong adversarial postures. The tenor of the language shifted from suggesting that one's opponents were *genuinely misinformed* to accusations of *deliberately dealing in untruths*, or *deliberately spreading dis- and or mis-information*. A feature of the discourse has been an increase in *the rhetoric of certitude* or *the rhetoric of camouflage* (Cambourne 1994) by both sides.

### *Phase 5: Emerging Consensus*

In a country with such a relatively small academic community we realised towards the end of the 90s that warring factions were detrimental to any forward thinking in literacy education. A spirit of inclusiveness emerged which we believe began with Freebody and Luke's seminal work on the "Four Roles of the Reader" (Freebody and Luke, 1990; Luke and Freebody, 1999). Their thinking gave us an ideal heuristic for reframing the literacy debates. In turn we could begin to identify the key aspects of literacy philosophy and pedagogy and assessment that would most likely respond to the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. An outcome of this inclusiveness was a move away from using the term *whole language* and simply using *literacy*. To us the principles underpinning the word literacy were similar but did not bring with it the negative connotations.



### **The 00s: The Era of Literacy For Social Purposes**

As we moved into the 21st century the concept of literacy was recognized by most as involving a much more complex set of skills than had been understood in the past. Today's culture requires readers and writers to be able not only to read and write for pleasure and information but to ask questions of the text, to recognize how the writer tries to position the reader, and to understand that literacy is used for social purposes.

Literacy and the teaching of literacy have become more complex and reach out across wider and wider audiences, so that we now accept that we are lifelong literacy learners. We accept that we will need to learn new literacy skills in new contexts. It is a K-adult curriculum now.

However, it is an era when politics and politicians have taken control of the literacy agenda. This is not surprising, as those who don't have high levels of literacy are more likely to end up on some sort of social support and thus viewed as a burden to society. So, in order to save money in the long term, it seems politicians have agreed that literacy begins in the early years. And they are finally prepared to support this concept financially. This support includes mandating (even legislating) how early childhood educators should teach children to read and write and how and what pre-service and in-service teachers should be taught in teacher education and staff development programs. Each state in Australia has developed a literacy strategy that is supported by strong government spending. Teachers are once again required to use the materials written and published by their state systems. The government-initiated and -developed programs from Western Australia and Victoria are now marketed commercially across the world.

However, there is a danger that these programs will de-skill teachers, returning them to being simple *doers* of other people's thinking. There is a strong contradiction emerging here -- wanting teachers to be teachers of critical literacy yet not encouraging them to be critically literate themselves and making their own decisions about the materials and teaching strategies to use in their teaching of literacy.

Where there is political interference there are lobby groups, and one that has become very strong during this era includes those who never quite left the focus on the skills such as explicit decoding. These groups have been beavering away, many with their own small research projects that prove categorically that children must have a well-developed sense of phonemic awareness, must know the alphabetic principles, and must be taught phonics through systematic and explicit instruction. Their message has been passed down since the 60s. What is frightening is that the spin these people have put on their message today has convinced so many in positions of power and financial control that this narrow (and, we would argue, out of touch with the real world) view of literacy is the only pedagogy for the teaching of literacy (Teaching Reading Report, 2005).

We, who have taught through these years, have observed children learning to read and write; we know that there is more to becoming literate than this narrow view. We have brought with us through the years what works for us in the teaching of literacy. We

have learned a great deal more about literacy, about learning, about language as each era passed. There is so much that we know now, there are so many resources that we have access to, that it is often difficult to know where to start with our young readers, writers, and spellers. We certainly know a lot more than the politicians and media, although it is increasingly difficult for us to be heard.

There are still the contradictions that exist that create great frustration and uncertainty among teachers. Such anxiety leads to confusion, and it becomes easy for teachers to lose confidence in themselves and their teaching. We need reassure teachers that they can no longer simply be *doers*; they must be thinkers and researchers in their classrooms and schools. We are professionals -- better trained than ever before. We must take control. We must take time to work with one another, share with one another, collaborate, and reflect together on philosophy and pedagogy. We must learn from our students so we can develop programs and curriculum that best suit the needs of our students. Together with our students, we can take control, and can respond to the challenges and contradictions that emerge from the politicians and bureaucrats (and from narrow-viewed academics!)

Teachers and teaching do make a difference in the literacy education of students. It is important, as Luke and Freebody (1999b) suggest,

To recognize that there is no evidence that literacy education could possibly “end poverty” or “solve unemployment” in Australia or anywhere else, despite the cyclical claims by politicians and others that literacy is both the cause and the solution to all that ails us. But there is evidence that literacy education can make a substantial contribution to transforming the social distribution of knowledge, discourse, and with these, real economic and social capital among communities, groups and individuals. (unpaged)

### **Where to next?**

We think we have moved into a new era, *a focus on multiliteracies*. Meaning making now involves being able to read and write not only print text but also e-texts that include color, sound, movement, and visual representations. It seems there is much we need to learn about how readers and writers draw on these different symbolic, or semiotic systems to make meaning of their worlds. How do we read and write these different systems? What strategies and skills do we use? What do we need to teach out students if they are to become proficient readers and writers of today’s texts that draw on multiple semiotic systems to represent meaning? We believe these are the significant research questions that we must urgently address, not studies of fragmented aspects of the literacy process.

Literacy is certainly a far more complex process in the ’00s than it was in the ’60s. It is imperative, we believe, that teachers of literacy -- and particularly teachers of early literacy -- broaden their view of what literacy is in today’s world. The digital world is here to stay, and it is a highly literacy-dependent world in which readers and writers

need to have highly refined skills and access to multiple strategies that go beyond paper-based print texts (Turbill, 2001a, 2001b, 2003).

Whole language is still with us, strongly embedded in current curriculum, pedagogy and assessment strategies. Adversaries of whole language still complain that the term whole language may not be used however the philosophy is alive and well in each state system. These same adversaries of whole language are now lobbying governments to ensure that the content of pre-service teacher education be examined and scourged of any whole language principles, on the threat of withholding government funding.

Some in Australia lament that the term is no longer in vogue, others of us have moved on. There are and always will be battles to be fought; nevertheless, we are excited about where we are heading. We believe that in spite of all that has threatened progressive education in Australian classrooms and whole language in particular, four key principles are evident in today's Australian classrooms (Louden et al., 2005). These are a focus on:

1. Social justice,
2. Interconnectedness of language,
3. Cultural sensitivity, and
4. Teachers as researchers.

When the literacy curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are underpinned by these principles, whole language is still really with us. It has, like good wine, simply aged and matured.

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