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**Building a sense of community in whole language classrooms**

Woodward, Nancy Jo, Ed.D.

The University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 1994

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

Building a Sense of Community

in Whole Language Classrooms

by

Nancy Jo Woodward

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

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Interdepartmental Area of

Major: Administration, Curriculum & Instruction

Under the Supervision of Professor Larry Andrews

Lincoln, Nebraska

August, 1994

DISSERTATION TITLE

Building a Sense of Community in

Whole Language Classrooms


BY

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GRADUATE COLLEGE  
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# BUILDING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY IN WHOLE LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

Nancy Jo Woodward, Ed.D.

University of Nebraska, 1994

Advisor: Larry Andrews

The purpose of this case study was to describe how a teacher builds a sense of community within the context of a whole language classroom. The teacher's perceptions of how to facilitate a sense of community in a child-centered whole language classroom was an important component of the research. The focus of the study includes an overview of the research of whole language, learning tracks, and collaborative models of instructional delivery.

The study utilized purposeful sampling. Four whole language classroom teachers and their students were the participants in the study. A series of observations, as well as semistructured interviews were the primary source of data collection.

Teacher and student communications and interactions were noted as critical incidents, unitized, and subsequently coded into descriptive meaningful categories and themes as data analysis developed. A descriptive narrative text that communicated the participants' constructed realities and provided a holistic picture of community-building was the final result.

Two critical attributes of building community described were (a) providing a well structured environment that invites greater student participation and involvement and less teacher directed "control", and (b) providing extensive opportunities for student and whole group participation in decision-making, problem-solving, collaborative planning, and building consensus. Four themes that emerged from the data analysis were climate, affirming actions, events, and artifacts.

This study has significance for practitioners, administrators, and the research community. This research provides a descriptive model of the behaviors and thought processes of whole language teachers as they facilitate a sense of community in the classroom. The teachers' perceptions as well as the students' interactions contribute further insight to the understanding of the concept "community of learners" and its value as an effective learning environment for all students.



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N. J. W.

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PREVIEW

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this naturalistic study was to describe how a teacher builds a sense of community within the context of a whole language classroom. A natural outgrowth of a whole language classroom is a sense of connectedness and a sense of belonging among students and teacher. A commitment to and a respect for each other is the foundation for a sense of community in the classroom. The classroom teacher's perceptions of how to facilitate a sense of community was an important component of the research design.

#### Grand Tour Question

The grand tour question of this qualitative study was "How does a whole language teacher facilitate the development of a sense of community in the classroom?"

#### Sub-Questions

1. What is the organizational structure of the classroom?
2. What is the climate of the classroom?
3. What interactions and activities are encouraged and promoted by the teacher?
4. How is conflict managed?
5. In what ways are students encouraged to express themselves?
6. How do students respond to setbacks? Are they supported by peers? If so, in what ways?

7. What does the teacher do to encourage continued effort and risk-taking by the students?
8. What are the teacher's perceptions of the community building process?
9. How are decisions made in the classroom?
10. What choices are students making on a daily basis?
11. What are examples of collective knowledge in the classroom?

#### Context of the Problem

The paradigm shift from a basal driven instructional design to the emerging literacy philosophy of whole language provides the foundation for building a sense of community among students. Classrooms with a sense of community collaborate, deliberate, share responsibility for teaching and learning, and celebrate diversity and individual strengths, as well as collective knowledge.

Currently, in the educational community, 90% of all reading instruction is done by teachers using a basal series and placing students in learning tracks as opposed to the interactive child-centered environment of the whole language learning community (Shannon, 1989). A growing body of research describes the continued failure of basal reading programs and methodologies to teach all children to read, to problem-solve with peers, and to interact with authentic learning tasks.

Many children who start first grade in the bottom basal reading group stay in the bottom group throughout all of the elementary school years. As a result of homogeneous ability grouping, teachers' expectations of the student's performance and growth often carry over from year to year. In conjunction, the level of ability perceived by the students themselves who have been placed in a learning track often inhibits the learner's expectations of him/herself. The instructional design and structure of the teacher/basal directed classroom provides few opportunities for meaningful interaction among all learners. Learning activities are done primarily in isolation by the students. Slavin (1988) has done a comprehensive analysis of studies on ability grouping of elementary and secondary students that states that all means of grouping students by ability or performance level have detrimental effects that may be severe enough to offset any advantages. Schools' organization and structure have been described as isolating, grouping young people by age, interest, and often socio-economic background (Gillis, 1992). Routman (1991) states that if a teacher's job is to teach and develop whole students, not just teach academic subjects, educators must begin to structure classes heterogeneously and treat all students intelligently and with respect as opposed to placing them in learning tracks. Providing opportunities for all students to work together in meaningful

collaboration, rather than in isolation creates a sense of community in the classroom and promotes the self-esteem of all students.

Research in the area of whole language and community is congruent with the work of John Dewey (1940) and Jean Piaget (1960). Their compatible philosophies describe a child-centered approach to learning as opposed to a prescribed teacher directed approach used today in many classrooms. Halliday (1975) theorizes that we learn language by "learning how to mean" by creating meaning in functional, useful, and natural situations with the help of others around us. Lev Vygotsky (1962) describes the social interactive nature of literacy which is closely linked to the whole language philosophy and the interactive behaviors of a learning community. He states that the learners are in the most appropriate position to help other learners. Vygotsky and Halliday enrich the learning environment by placing others in the center along with the learner, thus providing a community of learners.

The personal-social value as well as the literacy growth for all students in whole language learning communities was the focus of this research. This study will provide a qualitative perspective of a whole language learning community. The objective of this study was to gain an understanding of the community building process of a whole language classroom. There is continued interest in

the merits of whole language classrooms as it relates to building a sense of community within a room where all students feel valued, and perceive themselves as teachers and learners. Insights into the process of building a cohesive classroom will provide further discussion for practitioners of whole language classrooms, as well as for building administrators who strive to provide effective classrooms for all students.

#### Definitions

##### Community of Learners

A community of learners is a community in which each member, including the teacher, considers that what he/she says, thinks, and writes will be treated with respect and acceptance. No one will be perceived as having all the answers; no one will be autocratic. Each person of this community will feel comfortable within the classroom. The classroom will be a safe place in which to think, talk, and write for each member of the community. Each member will feel that she/he has a significant contribution to make. All members are valued. Each member desires that all other members feel and be successful. A sense of cooperation is essential. Competition is not welcomed or desired. (Smith, 1986).

Graves (1983) states "Group sense is reached when the class becomes aware of what individual members can do. Helping other classes with conferences, sharing music and



choral speaking, and published books, are all contributions to this important dynamic. Classroom visitors who are continually told about the way the room functions, or what the class has accomplished, remind the children they have gone the full range from individual progress, to helping each other. The children then recognize that there is a force in the room, a group force that lifts each child, no matter what his ability" (p. 42).

Sergiovanni (1994) defines a sense of community as a sense of continuity of being connected to others, to ideas, and to values that make our lives meaningful and significant. He further describes a sense of community as a sense of belonging among its members.

As teachers facilitate a sense of community in the classroom, each student knows that they are needed, they are important to the successful deliberations of the class, they have meaningful contributions to make, and they are responsible for the welfare of the community as a whole.

#### Whole Language

Whole language is not easily and briefly defined. It is not an activity or simply a method or approach. Whole language is a philosophy about how language learning happens and a set of beliefs that guide classroom practice (Goodman, 1986). Whole language is a theory about teaching and learning in an environment that truly respects the

individual learner and expects active participation by both the teacher and the students.

Whole language teachers believe that language is learned naturally as it is used in meaningful contexts. Language is learned by actually using it, not by practicing its separate parts. Whole language teachers believe that schools should complement the way children are learning language effectively and naturally at home. They value the language and life experiences that children bring to school with them. They focus on the learner's strengths and watch for growth in their literacy development. Whole language teachers believe that learning is a social experience, and that all children can learn. Teacher should also perceive themselves as learners. Whole language is defined by a set of beliefs that shape practice in the classroom. (Burk & Melton-Pages, 1991).

In its natural setting, language is intact and whole. In many non-whole language instructional settings, language is broken into small segments in the belief that students can master its isolated parts more easily and that teachers can monitor learners' acquisition of it. Whole language is a point of view that language is inherently integrative, not disintegrative. It follows that language is learned and should be taught with all its systems intact. Situational context, semantics, syntax, and phonics must not be torn apart if language is to be learned naturally. Because

language develops within a culture, the student's culture must be recognized in the understanding of the language itself and in how language is learned (Watson, 1989).

#### Delimitations and Limitations

##### Delimitations

1. This study focused on interviewing and observing two first grade and two second grade whole language teachers.

2. Experienced primary level classroom teachers were chosen for the study who have an extensive background in the teaching of reading and the whole language approach.

3. Experienced primary teachers were chosen who develop the curriculum based on the students' interests and needs without use of a basal reading series.

##### Limitations

1. The design of the qualitative case study design does not include all grade levels of education.

2. To enhance the credibility of the study, intermediate and upper grade classrooms would become part of the research design.

3. The qualitative researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam, 1988).

4. Some researcher bias is built into the interview questions, as is true of all qualitative research.

### Significance of the Study

This study on community-building is significant to practitioners, administrators, and the research community.

This study contributes to the knowledge base of practitioners by providing a framework for greater understanding and facilitation of the community-building process in whole language classrooms.

For administrators, this study provides a descriptive model of the thought processes of successful teachers in building a community of learners in the classroom. This model will assist administrators in working with teachers to provide effective and successful learning environments for all students.

In the interest of the research community, this study provides a detailed description of community-building to complement the whole language philosophy at the primary level. The teachers' perceptions as well as the students' reactions in this learning environment contribute significantly to the understanding of the term "community of learners" and its value as an effective learning environment for all students.

## Chapter 2

### Introduction

#### Review of Literature

A whole language learning community derives its theoretical basis from the constructivist views of Piaget (1960), as well as the social learning theories of Vygotsky (1962), Dewey (1940), Chomsky (1957), and Halliday (1975). Halliday writes that children learn language by "learning how to mean" as they create meaning in functional, useful, and natural situations.

John Dewey (1940) theorized the importance of placing students at the center of the curriculum, and to make that center an appropriate and active one for learners. Vygotsky (1962) wrote that learning itself is social. Within a learner, there is a zone of proximal development, an area where the child is capable of learning through collaborative action with an adult or a more competent peer. Learners are in an appropriate position to help others. Vygotsky's learner is guided by and participates in a supportive, social-instructional environment. This notion is closely aligned with a whole language learning community.

#### Community

In the educational community, restructuring efforts around learning communities are guided by assumptions about revisiting organizational structures and practices. Currently, these efforts indicate a need to provide a rich learning environment for learners and teachers in an effort

to facilitate a culture of self-revitalization partly by decentralizing authority and responsibility (Smith, 1991).

Learning communities are congruent with the work of Piaget (1960), Dewey (1940), and Vygotsky (1962), who view learning and student-centered instruction as fundamental. Cooperative learning theorists Johnson and Johnson (1975), and Slavin (1988) have provided extensive research in the area of collaborative learning. A cooperative learning environment is seen as a positive interdependence among students' goal achievement. Students perceive that they can reach their goals only if all members of the learning group also achieve their goal.

Smith (1991) describes learning communities as an interactive structure that bonds people together to provide an empowering group structure. Children initially enter the classroom as individuals who have yet to form a community. As a community is established within a classroom, it provides encouragement and support for individuals as they learn to work together. Students value and celebrate the contributions of peers as well as their individual accomplishments.

A study done by Solomon, Watson, Delucchi, Schaps, and Battistich (1988) described the implementation of the Child Development Project in three elementary schools over a period of five years. Major components of the project are supportive teacher-students relationships, collaborative

learning, developmental discipline, and a literature based approach to reading instruction. Findings indicate that students become active participants in making decisions, developing rules, solving problems, as well as develop a shared sense of membership and responsibility for their learning community.

Kutz (1992) described myths and realities that were identified through the teacher-researcher model of data collection in several elementary schools. The most important and effective strategy is for teachers to work with their own students to create a collaborative research community. An additional reality discussed was the opportunity to create communities of researchers in our own classrooms to discover answers to the questions that arise.

Cairney and Langbien (1989) described a classroom that offers living evidence of the complex social nature of literacy. The social nature of literacy elicits an awareness that reading and writing are parts of a dynamic community. As children learn to relate to each other, literacy is learned within a complex community of relationships.

The social relationships involved in reading include establishing social groups and ways of interacting with others; gaining or maintaining status and social position; and acquiring culturally appropriate ways of thinking, problem-solving, valuing, and feeling.

An experimental change program was the focus of a study by Hertz-Lazarowitz and Od-Cohen (1992). The study was done to improve the social climate in 4th-6th grade classrooms in northern Israel. Thirty-three classrooms were divided into three treatments: one whole class setting, one small group setting, and one control group. The findings of the study indicate that there were increases in the positive social climate in the experimental small-group program at all grade levels. The whole-class treatment also showed improvement in higher grades. The control group demonstrated a significant decrease in classroom climate during the study.

#### Whole Language

A concern for all children to become literate adults has been the focus of a volume of educational research in recent years. The new understandings from basic research have set a direction in literacy development that is firmly grounded in the theoretical perspectives of Dewey, Vygotsky, Goodman, Watson, Graves, and others. Teachers are organizing their classrooms to address holistic needs of the students and are providing classrooms that promote literacy development and learning through collaboration.

Chomsky's Syntactic Structures (1957) described how language is generative in nature and is based on a set of complex syntactic rules for relating the sounds of language and meaning. Chomsky identifies a distinction between surface and deep structure. This distinction had an