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The Revolution Continues — Middle School Success Stories in Two Inner-City Detroit Whole Language Classrooms

Toby Kahn Curry and Kevin LaPlante

"I believe a blade of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars."

Walt Whitman

For the last fifteen years I've (Toby) described myself as a "becoming" whole language teacher. As I have struggled to create child-centered learning communities for my students, many teachers have helped me discover my own literacy as a reader, writer, and researcher. When Kevin LaPlante and I began collaborating six years ago, we took on the role of "peer mentors" for one another. We often share curriculum, conference with one another about our writing, and confer about books and authors.

For several years now, Kevin and I have seen the work that we do with children as part of an educational revolution launched by the teachings of John Dewey. As we continue to reflect on our teaching and learning we have been encouraged and validated by the work of researchers and writers such as Ken and Yetta Goodman, Jonathan Kozol, and Mike Rose.

This school year, Kevin and I found ourselves in a unique position. We had a group of 22 students (out of a class of 30) that had had three continuous years of experienced whole language teachers for their entire middle school experience. I had the kids for Reading, Writing, and Social Studies in 6th grade, Kevin had them for all three subjects in 7th and 8th grade, and I became their 8th grade science teacher last fall when I accepted a new position in our building. Kevin suggested

that we take this opportunity to take a close look at these 22 kids and see what we could learn from their perspective.

We know that three continuous years of whole language teaching is unique in American schools. Students sometimes have one or two whole language teachers in their school lives, and the opportunity to have three middle school years of whole language instruction was definitely unusual. We decided to find out how our kids viewed their school life and what their perceptions were about the curriculum and communities that we strive to build in our classrooms.

Starting with Statistics

In the National "Kids Count" study from three years ago, Detroit had the highest rate of children living in poverty of any of the other 200 major cities in America. In spite of the 81 percent poverty level at our school, Dewey Center, these were the 1996 MEAP results from our seventh-grade homerooms:

Satisfactory	Moderate	Low
79%	7%	14%

In contrast, the average seventh-grade scores throughout the district are much lower than those demonstrated by this group of 22 students.

Satisfactory	Moderate	Low
10%	20%	70%

When it came to attitudes towards school, reading, and writing the twenty-two students interviewed indicated the following:

Do you like school?	Yes=55%	No=45%
Do you like reading?	Yes=91%	No =9%
Do you like writing?	Yes 86%	No=14%

In the three years these students had us as teachers all but one have remained with us. Their daily attendance rate was ninety-five percent.

Attitudes towards School:

Do you like school? Reading? Writing?

"I like school. I like reading because I get to read Sci-Fi and adventure novels that I like. Writing helps me show what kind of writer I am and helps me be more creative with my drawings. I get ideas for my drawings from reading different action-adventure novels."

"Yes, I like school. The only thing I can't stand is math."

"No, I don't like it. You've got to get up too early to come to school."

"Yes, It's fun. You get to learn different stuff from the real world."

"No, I don't like it. I don't like sitting all day in a desk for like half a year."

"Yes, It's fun—you learn stuff. I'm slow. The rest of the kids are not. But, I like it."

How do you feel when you're in my class?

Addressed to Toby:

"I enjoyed when we got to learn about animals and how people lived all over the world from the JS magazine."

"When we took the trip to MSU I felt good and I like the country research."

"I like 6th grade better because it seemed like you trusted us to do our work more—not like 7th and 8th grade where you stand over us to do our work. I liked your Spanish class best."

"Making learning fun and explaining it so we can really understand it."

"In science, I feel at home because there are so many books. In 6th at first I was nervous, but as the weeks went by I started learning how to be a better writer and reader."

Addressed to Kevin:

"I feel pretty good. Sometimes I would rather hear you talk than read from the books. What I mean is I like our discussions. You can make a boring book interesting. We just finished reading *Maniac Magee*, and I never knew there was so much in there. When I was younger a teacher read it to me. This time I read it for myself and I got a whole new understanding. I used to think it was just about a kid who runs fast. Now I know it's about a kid who tries to run away from pain, loss, and racism. But *Maniac* learns the only way to beat racism is to run at it. Yeah, I like the class."

"Sometimes the words go in one ear and out the other, but that might be my fault. You can feel good in here if you want."

"I feel good. You teach us what we need to know so that we are prepared for high school. I like the way you explain the work completely. I have had teachers who just put a page number on the board and said, 'Do it.' You're different. If we don't get it you keep trying so that we get into it."

"Sometimes I feel you are boring. I have fun when we work in groups and during 'Independent Work' time."

How are Mr. La Plante and Ms. Curry's rooms similar?

"You both teach around the same kind of lesson—and you both encourage kids to do their best on the tests."

"Ms. Curry is more like a Sci-Fi kind of person, you know, like the literature we read—*The Giver* and *Ender's Game*. Mr. LaPlante is more like a mystery-historical kind of guy because that's mostly what we read. You both have oral presentations and you're both in Write For Your Life at MSU."

"You both use the same grading scale and you both have the same amount of tolerance, you'll only stand for so much and then you go off. You both give research assignments where the students get to choose their topics."

"You both have lots of books, group activities and we read a lot."

"You both give lots of writing."

"You both use independent work and extra assignment invitations."

"There are also a lot of discussions and debates."

"There is a big creative writing emphasis and a lot of interactive projects. You two get into real life involvement, and you let us partake in the results of what we did."

"You both do tons of research. I don't know how many I-Searches I've done. Oh yeah, you read a lot of books out loud, too."

"We read a lot in both classes, and we get enough of our time. . . to do Independent Work."

"You do 'Write For Your Life' and you take us on trips to Michigan State."

"If we need something explained, you will."

"You two are strange in a lot of ways. You get involved with the student's lives. You listen and seem to care. We are always doing some kind of research. I think our learning is more active."

"You read books real well. . . with feeling."

"Between the two of you I think I know the Writing Process backwards and forward. I think you could drop me off anywhere in the middle of the Writing Process and I'd find my way home."

"You create a lot of projects about everyday life. Sometimes I'm walking down the street and I see something that reminds me about something we learned in class and I say, 'I'm not falling for that.'"

How are the two rooms different?

"He's a man and you're a woman."

"Mr. La Plante doesn't have any animals."

"Ms. Curry has more student presentations and Mr. La Plante has us read more non-fiction. Ms. Curry had us read more Science Fiction."

"In science it's easier because we stick to one subject at a time."

"In 6th grade we could come to you when we had questions on independent work."

"Your two classes have different amounts of time."

"We have to study different subjects in home-room. We have to take more notes off the board too."

"Sometimes it's easier to talk to the teacher in here."

"It's about trust too. It's like you trust us to get our work done."

"In here the books are resources, not just novels."

"The discipline is different. Ms. Curry is real serious and you joke around more. Plus, Mr. LaPlante, I know your habits better and you know mine. You know that even if I play around I'll get good grades. Ms. Curry doesn't know me that well yet."

"Ms. Curry is real easy going and nonchalant. Mr. LaPlante, you're emotional. You get into it. Sometimes you scare me."

"With Mr. LaPlante I have more time. I need that. Sometimes it takes a while for me to get going."

"Mr. LaPlante plays around with the boys more so we feel that school isn't so strange. Ms. Curry relates better to the girls."

"Ms. Curry teaches to one level and sometimes people can't keep up. She does this because she believes all kids can succeed. You know all kids can't keep up. You teach to everyone's level. You try to hit the high end and not leave out the low end so everyone relates."

"You are real patient. Ms. Curry has less patience this year because she teaches more children and she's feeling overwhelmed."

How is science class different between this year and last?

"Well, this year I'm getting better grades. The curriculum is more organized—like on different units, not like last year. Last year we did stuff at random it seemed—just out of the book, busy work. We only used one book and everybody brought Gameboys to school to play with."

"This year it's more fun. You don't just give us whole chapters for homework and make us all read out loud. We didn't do research projects last year. Seating arrangements are different too. We get to sit at tables."

"We learned a lot more about animals and the earth. Last year we learned about minerals and energy. Mostly what we worked on was our one Science Fair project."

"You grade better. Last year his grading was a disgrace. We spent half of the year on a Science Project and the other half doing nothing. He gave some kids Ds and Fs for no reason. This year it's better. We learned more stuff doing more research projects."

"Last year we had 'Mr. Smith Bucks' to buy candy. This year we're learning about the world."

"Last year every week we had a different chapter."

"We had to read the book and answer the questions. Last year the journals were just about our life. They didn't have any point. It didn't make sense for a science class. Also, you couldn't talk to the other kids. It was all in straight rows. And we'd do an experiment and he never explained what happened. Great — we did this experiment, now what does it mean? He never told us. We didn't do any research projects. There weren't really any books around. There weren't any animals last year either. I hated it."

How do you go about learning something? In other words, what ways of teaching and learning work best for you?

"Listening and trial and error. I try something and if it isn't right, I try again."

"If the teacher gets straight to the point and sticks to the subject they're talking about. A class without a PA system would help me learn more. Lots of books to use instead of just one book."

"Making it fun and explaining it so we can really understand it."

"I learn best when teachers don't get mad. School is supposed to be fun—not terrorizing. Being able to ask questions of the teacher helps me too."

"Asking questions and getting more information is good."

"It's more fun and easier to learn when you're able to figure out how to do things yourself. Being able to ask questions without somebody saying, 'Stupid — that's a dumb question.' And having more stuff where you're not just writing — where you're actually doing something."

"Like group projects where you work with kids and learn from each other."

"Yeah, where the kids can learn from each other."

"I need to take a lot of notes and stay focused. I do a lot of memorizing at home. I like the way you showed us how to create mental models so I don't have to memorize so much."

"I learn from good explanations and one-on-one work."

"I learn by doing. Growing up I have lived inside a dictionary. My Mom wouldn't dummy stuff down. You're like that. You push us. But really I think I learn more because we get to learn a lot of stuff about things we want to know."

How does the work we do in class impact your real life?

"Science is meaningful, especially the animal research. I want to be an animal researcher and work with wolves. Mr. LaPlante's writing projects are preparing us to write a book some day. Both classes prepare us for those standardized tests like the MEAP."

"It's just an educational tool that helps us prepare for the tests."

"The work we do is very important. It impacts on our real life—politics, taxes, different animals and what can happen to our city."

"Most of the stuff is important. But, right now our real life is going home and playing. If we're into baseball, how important is the Revolutionary War? But later on in high school it'll help us — we won't have to learn it all at once —we'll already have a little bit of an understanding."

"It is important, teaching us a little bit of stuff that we can carry on into our life. How people, say in the year 2000, will be different—learning a lot about politics and government."

"Maybe we'll want to be a politician or a scientist or a mathematician when we grow up."

"The work we do is important. You get grades for what you do and they can get you into a good high school or college."

"I know this class will help us with tests. The research definitely has to do with our lives. I am doing 'Teen Pregnancy' and I always wanted to know more because I didn't want to end up a teen mama like my cousin. [My old teacher never let us do something important that we wanted to research....We had to do Egypt.]"

"I feel regular now. The books that we read in here are deep. They challenge us. Last year we read some stupid stuff."

"We're almost there and we'll get there. I feel good about the progress, and I know that I can make it."

"Your personalities have helped me and the way you teach. You go out of your way, and you've helped me bring up my grades."

"I've learned to write business letters."

"I know how to write research projects and essays."

"Well, I know how to talk properly. I've learned two languages, but I never gave up my original one."

"I'll be ready for job interviews. I know how to organize and put things in order, and I know how to paraphrase."

"It's been tough, but I've learned how to handle deadlines."

"I've learned about the world, history, and my language is better."

"I think I'm ready for those standardized tests."

"I know I can compete with anyone."

"I don't want this to sound funny, but I've learned that my Grandpa is wrong and that all white people aren't bad."

If you could create your perfect class, what would it be like?

"The lessons would revolve around the student's personal schedule. Every student would have their own personal computer."

"We'd have art classes everyday. There would be two gyms, one for basketball and one for free choice activities. There would be swimming pools and no PA system. We would learn a lot about our America's wars. Everyone would have two optional classes that you have to take, one would be reading and one would be writing."

"We need to study about the problems of today so we can figure out how to solve them. We need to study the problems in history so we don't repeat them."

"Everyone would have their own computer and grade book. There would be a TV in every class and every room would be decorated."

"I would empty all the rooms and turn half of them into arcades, laser tag areas, gyms and swimming pools. Every day kids would have three hours of choice time and three hours of learning time."

"Every student would have their own computer and everyone would be on the Internet. There would be 10 kids in a class and the teacher would work with each student directly. School would start later in the day. We'd only spend a half of a year in school. The other half of the

year we'd be out learning in real life situations. There would be smaller classrooms and more teachers. All of the schools would be equal. One school wouldn't have a big screen TV and another have no TV at all. All the walls would be decorated with posters of information like your room. The conditions of the rooms would be good—good heating and good air-conditioning. The students could be comfortable year round."

"Every seat would be cushioned. All the school districts would come together and there'd be one big Michigan School District."

"There'd be lots of social events like dances, playdays, pool parties and vending machines."

"We'd have animals around the room—dogs, rabbits, all kinds of animals to study and learn from. Every week my dogs do something that teach me that humans aren't the only ones who think and have logic."

"It would have to be more high-tech. You've given us a little taste of it, but that only makes us want more. I'd put a computer in every desk. Not on every desk, in every desk. You know, I would build them in so when you look down you'd see the screen. All of our computers would be tied into yours, and yours would show up on a giant screen in the front of the room."

"I only want two things: Smaller and more money. Everything else is pretty perfect."

"I need more room for private space. I want some more compartments for my stuff."

Our Reflections

"We never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment. Whether we permit chance environments to do the work, or whether we design environments for the purpose makes a great difference."

John Dewey

After transcribing the results of the oral interviews of all twenty-two students and looking closely at what was said, we believe the interviews reveal the following about our students:

- They want a safe place to be;
- They need their own private space and value smaller classes;
- They realize how different learning environments can be; Peer pressure affects all the children. When the environment is one that values learning, the kids will react and adapt;
- They are aware that the social impact of school can be devastating;

- They value oral discussion and are aware that they have a voice.
- They find value in different learning opportunities that serve their own particular needs;
- They are learning to evaluate their own growth because they have the opportunity to revisit text and ideas which can be powerful learning tools.
- They value choice and being challenged by high expectations;
- They value interactive learning and real life involvement;
- They know what active learning means and they can recognize teachers who get involved with their students' lives;
- They value a variety of ways to demonstrate their learning;
- They value working together (over 74 percent interviewed said they learn best from group work);
- They value a teacher who will take the time to explain things;
- They value fair grading;
- They have confidence in their writing abilities;
- They have confidence that their learning applies to the real world;
- They feel confident that they can compete anywhere;
- They value what we've been teaching them because they see it can help them reach their immediate goals;
- They have a strong sense of how different texts function in school;

- They value and recognize print-rich classrooms and work that has meaning;
- They value intrinsic rewards and real learning; they don't need to be enticed with games and external rewards;
- When teachers value multiple literacies, children make stronger learning connections;
- Given the opportunity, they can rethink the values they bring with them from home.

Conclusion

Whole-language teaching works when teachers are knowledgeable professionals who see themselves as learners and recognize the organic nature of schooling and learning. When schooling requires students to build on what they know and research what they are interested in, there's no limit to what can be achieved. Whole language works in any setting, if teachers have knowledge, experience, collegial support and really trust in their students' natural desire to learn.

About the Authors

Toby Kahn Curry, a middle school teacher at the Dewey Center in Detroit and a Red Cedar Writing Project participant, is an advocate for equity in education. She is a frequent conference presenter both nationally and locally.

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