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Reflections on Whole Language from a Late Bloomer



BY KAY JONES JANKOWSKY

Having spent many hours reading articles, pouring over whole language books, taking part in recent workshops, attending the 1992 Michigan Reading Association conference, and building exciting teaching files, I have become a whole language convert and advocate. I have also come to the conclusion that had I had a print-rich environment as an elementary student, I would not have missed many hours reading during my childhood.

My first grade teacher told me that I learned to read easily. So why didn't I choose to read outside the sacred halls of knowledge? Upon reflection, I think that this result dragged down year after year with dull and incredibly boring workbooks, basal texts, and dreadfully dry science and social studies textbooks.

My perception was that reading is an activity that involved boring sentences, uninteresting paragraphs, and long chapters. Why would I choose to read outside of school? Books were clearly enemies to be avoided when not in school.

How I pitied the poor, deprived children that actually chose to read outside of school. I had better things to do with my time! There were sidewalks to roller skate on, forts to build, kites to fly, bugs to catch and examine, a dog to walk, and neighborhood children to play with. Little did I know that I was leading a deprived childhood myself. The books that I avoided like the plague would have opened new horizons for me. Instead of being bored stiff on a rainy day or being all

alone in the back seat of our car during family trips, I could have had the company of Three Billy Goats Gruff, Little Red Hen, Chicken Little, Peter Rabbit, The Little Engine That Could, Winnie the Pooh, Make Way for Ducklings, Mr. Popper's Penguins, Charlotte's Web, and Millions of cats! But unfortunately I felt children who chose reading as a fun activity were in need of professional help. Why else would they imprison themselves on a glorious day?

When did I become enlightened that books were friends to be cherished and shared? Not until I began my own teaching career in the 70s. How I looked forward to that period after lunch. Oh, the adventures my students and I shared! The giggles and belly laughs we had! On occasion, I was so overcome with emotion that my eyes would well up with tears, but I would keep reading even when tears would fall. Sometimes I would need to stop momentarily and a dear student would give me a tissue. And I'd notice that I was not the only person in that state. Other times, I would simultaneously laugh and cry because I had bared such a private part of myself. Upon completion of each chapter book, students scrambled madly to see who could borrow it first. If we had a copy in the library, then several heads would be huddled over the same book as I read aloud. I didn't realize it at the time, but that daily half hour of reading aloud was probably the best gift I could have given them.

But between those incredibly blissful moments with Dahl, London, Cleary, and others, I am a little sad to admit that I gave my students lessons from basals, workbook pages, and worksheets. Were those short read aloud periods enough to entice students to be lifelong readers or did I stifle their desire to read for fun? In defense of myself, I must say that we did do some creative writing, wrote to authors, and always had a spring play for the school. So I did do a few things right, but was it enough?

My love of children's authors spilled over into my personal life. Little by little, I also found adult books by wonderful authors. Rosamunde Pilcher and Mauve Binchey have invited me for tea and have taken me to lovely English manors for the weekend. Sidney Sheldon has kept me on the edge of my seat more than once. For romance, I have relied on Jude Deveraux or LaVyrle Spencer to spin a good love story. I also like the self-help books, child psychology, craft books, books on puppetry, autobiographies, and biographies. I look forward to my nightly ritual of reading and journal writing.

My own boys, ages four and five, look forward to our nightly stories. They have even taken books to bed instead of their favorite stuffed companion. Some of "Teddy's" rivals have been *Snowy Day* by Keats, *Caps for Sale* by Slobodkin, *Jack and Beanstalk* by Galdone, *Where the Wild Things Are* by Sendak, Dr. Seuss books, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Carle, *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* by Numeroff, and *Berenstain Bears* books by Stan and Jan Berenstain.

I will continue to do all I can to foster my sons' love of books and will continue to enhance their reading at home regardless of what happens in the classroom. But will history repeat itself? Will my children's love of books be crushed by worksheets, workbooks, basals, and textbooks. I hope not. If so, as was true for their mother, there will be a wide void in their reading experience.

Kay Jones Jankowsky is an MRA member from Eaton Rapids. She has taught for 12 years. ☞