How do day care centers and kindergartens integrate whole language approach into children’s curriculum in Taiwan?

Huey-Jiuan Lin
Chaoyang University of Technology, Taiwan

Purpose of the presentation
“Whole language” has been a popular term in Taiwan’s early childhood education recently. Professors mentioned it in professional preparation classes. Practitioners discussed it in conferences. Many day care centers and kindergartens put “whole language” as one important element in their curriculum design. Even early childhood education programs used this term to attract parents when parents were looking for learning centers for their children. It is easy to find literature on “whole language” in the US, but it is very difficult to find research on “whole language” in Taiwan, especially in early childhood education. This study deeply interviewed seven day care centers and kindergartens in Taiwan that thought they applied whole language approach in children’s curriculum. The results were very abundant and interesting. It must be valuable to share Taiwan’s experiences with people from different countries and to explore the varied genres of whole language implemented in different cultures.
Purpose of the study

There are some day care centers and kindergartens that declare they have applied whole language approach as a part of their curriculum and teaching policy. The research was intended to investigate the strategies they used and difficulties they had encountered in terms of integrating whole language philosophy in their programs. It was hoped to examine if day care centers and kindergartens really understand the theory of whole language.

Research questions

1. How many day care centers and kindergartens have been implementing whole language as a part of their curriculum approach?
2. For those that declared they already implemented whole language in their curriculum, what was their concept about whole language and what specific strategies did they applied?
3. What difficulties did they have in terms of implementing whole language philosophy?

Important concepts

This section presents some important information related to whole language, including its philosophy roots, definition, and strategies.

Whole language advocates support the natural approaches to learning fostered by Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Froebel. Pestalozzi and Froebel
added other dimensions with their concern for active learning through sensory experiences with materials. Dewey’s progressive education contributed to the philosophy with its child-centered approach that integrated the learning of information and literacy skill development into content area themes that were of interest to children. The influence of Piaget and Vygotsky is certainly seen in whole language through their emphasis on active learning and the adult as a facilitator of learning by guiding experiences in a social context (Morrow, 1997).

Whole language is a concept that embodies both a philosophy of language development as well as the instructional approaches embedded within, and supportive of, that philosophy. This concept includes the use of real literature and writing in the context of meaningful, functional, and cooperative experiences in order to develop in students motivation and interest in the process of learning (Bergeron, 1990).

Whole language is a philosophy concerning how children learn, from which educators derive strategies for teaching. Some of its concepts and their implications for instruction follow (Morrow, 1997).

Literacy leaning is child centered because it is designed to be meaningful and functional for children. The function and meaning are drawn from the child’s life experiences at home or those created in school. It may not be built into the prescribed curriculum, the teacher allows the spontaneous interest to be pursued.

Literacy activities are purposefully integrated into the learning of content area subjects such as art, music, social studies, science, math, and play. The use of social studies and science themes, such as the study of ecology, links the content areas and literacy experiences. Equal
emphasis is placed on the teaching of reading, writing, listening and oral language, because all help to create a literate individual.

Learning is self-regulated and individualized, with self-selection and choices of literacy activities. Rather than only lessons in literacy, teachers provide models of literacy activities for children to emulate. Literacy learning is an active, interactive social process. The foremost objective for literacy instruction is the development of a desire to read and write.

Skills are taught in classrooms that use holistic approaches when they are relevant and meaningful. For example, when studying a theme such as dinosaurs, the teacher may focus on some of the letters and sounds in the initial consonants found in the names of dinosaurs.

In a whole language approach, assessment is continuous and takes many forms: teachers collect daily performance samples of work; they observe and record children’s behavior; they audio and videotape them in different situations; and they build a portfolio filled with information about each child. The evaluation process is for both teacher and child, and conferences are held to discuss progress.

In a whole language orientation, teachers along with children are the decision makers about instructional strategies, the organization of instruction, and instructional materials used. Commercial materials do not dictate the instructional program although they may be used if desired.

Literacy learning is consciously embedded throughout the school day. Large blocks of time are needed for process projects. There will be whole-group, small-group, and individualized instruction, and children
will have time to read and write independently for long periods of time. Those involves in whole language should feel comfortable with what they are doing and help with the decisions about how to proceed.

Methods

This study first randomly sampled 200 day care centers and kindergartens in Taichung city and Taiching county, Taiwan to survey if they applied whole language as a part of their curriculum philosophy. In the 99 replied questionnaires, 19 answered “yes.” However only 7 of the 19 were willing to be interviewed by the researcher. Then the researcher interviewed each director of these 7 day care centers and kindergartens individually. The main objectives and content of the interview were to explore the following: 1. What is their knowledge about whole language? 2. What teaching strategies they applied were defined as whole language related? 3. What kind of difficulties did they encounter and how did they conquer it?

Results

The results of interviews indicated that only one kindergarten misunderstood the definition and spirit of whole language. The other six not only understood the philosophy of whole language well but also applied many appropriate teaching strategies, such as language experiences approach (LEA), environmental print, writing for children’s drawing, providing papers, pens, and books, encouraging children to write and read, and designing parent-child homework. Some of them also used portfolio assessment, but only one made curriculum
documentation. They also found children’s positive response to whole language strategies. However they encountered some difficulties in terms of enhancing teachers’ professional competencies in whole language specifically. On the other hand, they also had difficulties for persuading parents to accept the whole language instructional approach. But they still believed they had done the right things. Children also developed their literacy naturally under the prepared environment and activities. It evidenced that young children were born with learning abilities; they explored and learned themselves. They were active learners. It is also concurrent with the theories of constructivism, open education, and DAP.

Implication

If the present survey was believable, only about 1/5 early care and education programs integrated whole language approach into their curriculum and instruction. It means the philosophy of whole language needs to be more advocated in Taiwan. From the interviews, it is obvious that to fulfill the ideal of whole language approach in Taiwan’s early care and education world is not easy. Practitioners and parents need more education on “whole language” if we appreciate its spirit and believe it is an appropriate way for young children to learn.
References
