

Are Basal Readers Obsolete?

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Are basal readers obsolete? The confirmed individualist is likely to answer with a thunderous, "Yes!" The more conservative teacher, loyal to materials which have served him well, will respond with an equally resounding, "No!". At times the critics and advocates of basal readers have taken such extreme positions as to leave themselves little opportunity for evaluating the readers objectively. Although the mounting tide of research in the English language arts has not yet revealed the one best way to teach reading — if indeed such a one may be found — it has emphatically demonstrated that children learn to read by several different methods and by using a wide variety of reading materials, among them basal readers.

There is no doubt that basal readers are the major materials used for teaching reading both in Canada and the United States. A survey of a nation-wide sample of 1,300 teachers in the United States conducted in 1961 by the Bureau of Applied Social Research of Columbia University showed that an estimated "ninety-five to ninety-eight per cent of primary teachers and at least eighty per cent of intermediate grade teachers use basal readers every school day." Another survey of 6,000 teachers attending summer courses within a two hundred miles radius of Toronto, Ontario, carried out in 1964 by the Ontario Curriculum Institute, led to the conclusion that "a large number of teachers used a basal reader approach, alone or in some combination." It is likely that prevailing practice and response in other Canadian provinces would not differ markedly.

The Case Against Basal Readers

Criticisms of the traditional basals are both lexical and sociological. The vocabulary load of different series of basal readers varies so greatly that the difficulty level of any word cannot be arbitrarily fixed. Partly because of this, even the exponents of basal readers agree that no one series of basal readers can by itself provide appropriate reading experiences for all pupils in a given

class. In addition, it is said that basal readers are socially unrealistic, represent only middle-class North American life, and may even set up barriers to children of deprived cultural and social backgrounds or of non-Caucasian origin who find it impossible to "identify" with the central characters; that the mores they demonstrate are reminiscent of McGuffey or the New England Primer; that they tend to emasculate boys and set them at a disadvantage against the verbally more precocious girls because of the "feminine" situations and values they illustrate.

The most damning criticisms, however, appear to be pedagogic: that the grouping procedures usually associated with basal readers as a means of providing for individual differences are psychologically unsound; that teachers frequently assign workbook material inappropriately, and in a conscientious effort to teach the pupils as effectively as possible — or out of inexperience or insecurity — accord the teachers' guidebook the veneration due to holy writ and fail to modify suggested procedures in terms of the needs of their particular class; that because of the conservatism of their language patterns the basals may actually retard rather than promote language development.

Now, it *is* true that some basal readers *are* out-of-date: they are in content and appearance unattractive to space-age children. There *is* no conclusive evidence that any given pattern of "a sequential development of reading skills" contributes significantly to effective reading as we interpret the word today. Some teachers *do* plod unimaginatively through a series of basal readers following the guidebook slavishly in every dot and title. Some pupils *have* become discouraged because they have found themselves always in the "slow" group. It *is* true that a major cause of high-school dropout is reading inefficiency. Therefore, since the chief means of teaching reading to date has been the basal readers and their accompanying procedures (chiefly the directed reading lesson and ability and achievement grouping) the major part of the blame for reading failure appears to rest inexorably on them.

The Case for Basal Readers

On the other hand, basal readers are being constantly revised and improved. The language of beginning basals more closely approximates that of children's spoken language and, as the child's proficiency in reading develops, the contents of the readers include an increasing quantity of good literature rather than material specially written for teaching reading. Readers are becoming more attractive in appearance as typescript, photographic and other illustrative material are made appealing, colourful and varied. Nu-

merous topics of current interest to children are now being included. Some readers provide aids for the teacher in the form of vocabulary and comprehension exercises which assist in individualizing instruction. Finally, publishers are preparing basals designed for particular achievement and interest levels rather than merely one text for each grade.

In addition to this, basal readers are being supplemented not only by other basals but by skill-building materials available on stencils, in pamphlets, boxes and kits of all kinds. More and more teachers are using tradebooks as complementary, rather than supplementary, to the basal reader. The one-to-one relationship of individualized reading is being integrated with the grouping activities of the basal-reader programme. For research has not conclusively demonstrated that individualized reading, despite its advantages, is more effective for teaching reading than achievement grouping with the basal reader. Though the opportunity to read library books in classtime can no longer be allocated as a prize to the fast worker, and one library period per week is manifestly inadequate for stimulating a lasting interest in books in most children, the directed reading lesson still serves a valuable purpose in enabling the teacher to reinforce a skill by methodical emphasis.

The basal reader is particularly useful to the beginning teacher who needs guidelines for that overwhelming first year of teaching. It is helpful even for the experienced teacher who has little time to assemble for himself a major core of materials for a particular grade but can be provided with basic lessons under one cover for at least a section of his class. Perhaps the most conclusive arguments in favour of basal readers are that the majority of children exposed to them have learned to read and that in carefully controlled research studies they usually demonstrate undeniable strengths — as well as weaknesses — when evaluated with other tested materials.

The Teacher's Role

Having said this, one must examine other sources of inadequacy in the basal reader programme and the finger of research points unwaveringly at the teaching profession. Teachers must accept research findings that no one series of basals can form an adequate reading programme for all the children in a given grade. No longer should they assign one level of textbooks for a given grade in flagrant disregard for the wide ranges of reading achievement among the pupils of any one class. (Several copies of three or four different levels of basals in any one room cost no more than thirty-five of one level). No longer should teachers expect all thirty-five children in a given grade to read at the same pace at the same time. Nor are grouping procedures so infallible that they alone can solve

the problem of catering to individual differences in reading development. Each teacher must be so skilled in the application of several approaches to the teaching of reading, so sensitive to the needs of the individual child, so flexible in his attitude to teaching that having accurately ascertained the reading level, strengths and weaknesses of each of his pupils, he can adopt procedures and select materials which will enable each child to progress at his own rate. The teacher must be ready and able to combine the teacher-initiated activities of a skill-building programme with those associated with pupil-selected material in a manner beneficial for each child.

In short, the effectiveness of basal readers — or for that matter any teaching tool — depends as much on its appropriateness for the specific learner as on the competence and training of the teacher to whom his instruction has been entrusted. Austin's report on the reading courses offered in teacher-training institutions in the United States indicated that:

Almost every college requires elementary education students to enroll in basic reading instruction, although one-half of them include it as a part of a course in Language Arts. Among the latter group, 60 per cent devote between 4½ and 11¼ hours to it; 30 per cent give it less time.³

It is likely that conditions in Canada also leave room for improvement. At McGill's Faculty of Education most student teachers preparing for teaching receive thirty-six lecture hours of instruction in the teaching of reading, a time allotment barely adequate for treating the major aspects of the subject. Granted that these students after graduation will learn from experience and by attending local workshops or short summer courses, it is doubtful, whether they and most other teachers can, unaided, select from the vast supply of material available the most suitable collection for their classes. The prescribed basal readers provide systematic, welcome and necessary guidance and ensure that children will receive at least a minimum programme of reading instruction.

It is possible, of course, that too much emphasis is now being placed on discovering *what* materials are most effective rather than *how* children of various categories learn to read. When research is directed to the basic problem of how children learn, then materials take their proper and equally important place as aids to learning.

Possible Future Use of Basals

What, then, of the future? The recent trend to multiple series of basals in any one classroom is likely to accelerate. These will be increasingly supplemented with other skill-building materials and trade books. Not only basal readers but also other reading materials

will be used more flexibly to cater to individual rates of learning. For, what with programmed readers such as those being developed by Sullivan Associates in California⁴ and the rising spate of "good books for children," it is conceivable that the "basal reader" may become a basic core of teaching aids which might include "children's literature," structured materials, films, filmstrips, records and tapes supplemented with an ever-expanding library of illustrated books, encyclopaedias and other reference works.

Because this mass of materials will be available, the teacher must actively participate in the selection of those which are likely to be appropriate for his class. It is equally evident that the individual teacher needs guidance in the wise selection of reading aids. Reading consultants have a place, but equally important, major supervisory bodies should indicate which of the existing materials and procedures are most effective for teaching specific skills to particular categories of children so that local authorities can more intelligently decide on specific texts for their own schools.

Finally the teaching profession must subject to the scrutiny of long-range, extensive, carefully-controlled research and supervised practice all approaches and materials for use in schools, constantly removing the obsolescent and prudently introducing the more useful. (Publishers, always sensitive to the temper of the market, are likely to cooperate with — and indeed have initiated — reasonable moves towards a better product.) At the same time provision must be made for the retraining of teachers as more successful approaches become available.

It seems quite clear that basal readers are not obsolete; only their misuses are.

References

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3. Mary C. Austin *et al.*, *The Torch Lighters*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Graduate School of Education, 1961, p. xiii.
4. Cynthia Dee Buchanan, *Programmed Prereading*, San Francisco: McGraw-Hill, 1963.