

Report Card on Basal Readers

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Preface

The American people, more than any other people in the world, have a deeply ingrained belief that technology, in and of itself, can solve human problems. In education this technology is not yet machine-based. It is a technology of texts and tests. Both the public and the educational profession have come to accept tests and textbooks as an infallible technology, the product of the best that science has to offer. In no other aspect of education does this total trust in technology reach the level that it does in reading instruction. And this is no accident, since the technology of reading lessons is embodied in a huge brightly illustrated package, the basal reader, which makes an attractive promise to all concerned with reading instruction in America. Basal publishers have convinced most reading experts and many school officials that basal programs are sequential all-inclusive sets of instructional materials which can teach all children to read, *if* teachers will follow the di-

rections in the basal teachers' manual. The promise is that, when used faithfully, the basal technology will solve the problem of developing universal literacy for all Americans. Few have been able to resist the promise and the sparkling packaging of basal readers.

Basals are now so dominant that they have become the reading curriculum in nearly all schools. So strong is the trust in the basal technology that both teachers' and students' performance are judged by the basal manuals and their objective referenced tests. When children fail to learn to read easily and well through basal instruction the blame goes either to the teacher for not following the basal carefully or to the children as disabled learners. Teachers who have carefully followed the detailed manuals of the basals are told that the fault if learners fail is in the learners. Another technology, the technology of reading disability, is then evoked to remediate these defective learners. In many American schools promotion from one grade to another is largely based on success or failure in the basals. Rarely are lesson content and instructions examined for their possible contribution to the students' problems. Both teachers and pupils become dependent on the basal materials during reading lessons (*see* Shannon, 1988 for an extended discussion).

It is the absolute dominance of basal readers that led the Commission on Reading of the National Council of Teachers of English to initiate this study into basal reading programs. This is a report to the profession and the general public. The concern of the Commission is with the promotion of literacy in the United States. Toward that end *Report Card on Basal Readers* takes an advocate's position in favor of students and teachers as we seek to answer many questions: Why do teachers and students find themselves in a position of powerlessness during reading instruction? Who benefits and

who suffers from the present reading programs? What are the consequences of perpetuating the status quo? How possible is change toward greater freedom for teachers in control of their teaching and for students in control of their learning and literacy.

This report examines the nature of the modern basal, its economics and use. First, a history is provided showing how the confluence of business principles, positivistic science and behavioral psychology led to the transformation of reading textbooks into basal readers. Next, the report examines objective and subjective factors which maintain the dominance in American reading instruction of a small number of very large publishers through their basal readers. The economics and ethics of marketing basals are also examined. Then, the process of producing basals is described, drawing on investigative reporting. That leads to a thorough examination of contemporary basals using a descriptive instrument. Finally, we offer our recommendations for progress in reading instruction within and without the basals. While we have tried to be fair in this report we have not tried to be neutral. We are concerned for what is good or bad for learners and the teachers trying to help them become literate. For too long, professional criticism of basal readers has been muted and restrained. In this *Report Card* we have opened them up for all to see.

January, 1988

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—K.S.G.
P.S.
Y.F
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Contents

Preface	iii
1. THE CENTRAL PREMISE OF THE BASAL READER	1
2. PUTTING THE BASAL IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT	3
Reading Instruction Before Basal Reading Materials	3
Reasons for Developing Basal Reading Materials	10
Scientific Management	13
Growth of Basal Reading Materials	19
3. THE STATUS OF BASAL READING MATERIALS	27
Objective Factors	28
Expert Opinion	28

State Intervention	32
District Administrative Policy	35
Publishers' Marketing	36
Subjective Factors	40
4. THE ECONOMICS OF BASAL READERS	45
Moral Issues in Making and Marketing Basals	48
5. THE MAKING OF THE BASAL READER	51
How are Basals Produced?	52
The Role of the Authors	55
Who Are the Editors?	57
Finalizing the Plan	58
Selecting Content	59
Art and Physical Aspects	61
Summary: The Making of the Basals	62
6. THE NATURE OF THE CONTEMPORARY BASAL	65
Using Words and Skills as Sequencable Components	65
Reading as Identifying Words Controlled Vocabulary	66
Skills and Habits in the Scope and Sequence	70
Separable Strands	70
Lesson Sequences	72
Components	73
Fitting Literature into the Sequence	73
Focus on Learning Words	74
Comprehension as Skills	76
Reading Comprehension Follows and Is Separable from Identifying Words	76

Comprehension as Product, not Process	80
Fracturing and Narrowing Language	82
Increasing Word Focus	83
Adapted and Synthetic Texts	85
Fractured Language	88
What's Tested	89
The Poor Get Poorer	93
Where Is Meaning?	93
Isolating Language from Its Use	95
Controlling Learning	97
Building on the Laws of Learning	98
Passive, Controlled Learners	99
Controlling Teaching	100
Teachers as Scripted Technicians in the Basal Program	102
Pedagogical Approach	104
The Basal Tests	104
Test Components	106
Reductionism and Reification	108
Amount of Testing	109
Stated Purposes	109
Classifying Basal Tests	110
Conformity to Psychometric Standards	110
Scoring	112
Execution—A Validity Related Issue	114
Science in the Tests	121
Design and Execution in the Basal Program	122
Spanish-Language Basal Readers	122
So What About the Basals?	124
 7. ALTERNATIVES WITHIN AND WITHOUT THE BASALS	 133
Reconsidering the Premises	133
Today's Professionals	134
Reading Materials	135
Science and Business	136

Alternatives to Basals	137
Can Kids Learn to Read Without Basals?	137
Can Teachers Teach Reading Without Basals?	138
Changing the Basals	140
Signs of Progress for Basals	140
Canadian Basals	140
The New Zealand Program	142
Literature-Based Reading Schemes in England and Australia	143
Supplementary American Programs	143
 8. WHO CAN PRODUCE CHANGE?	 145
 9. RECOMMENDATIONS	 147
Teachers	147
Administrators	148
Teacher Educators	148
Professional Associations	149
Researchers	149
Authors of Basals	150
Editors	150
Publishers	151
Policy Makers	152
Immediate Recommendations	153
 REFERENCES	 155
 LIST OF BASAL SERIES	 162
 INDEXES	 163

1

THE CENTRAL PREMISE OF THE BASAL READER

The central premise of the basal reader is that a sequential, all-inclusive set of instructional materials can teach all children to read *regardless of teacher competence* and *regardless of learner differences*. It is all-inclusive in the sense that basals claim to include *everything* that any learner needs to learn to read (the *scope* of the basal). It presents this all inclusive program organized around a hierarchy of skills and a tightly controlled vocabulary (the *sequence* of the basal). A promise is made to administrators that the basal eliminates teacher competence as a factor in successful reading development, provided that teachers follow the manual exactly.

Implicit in this premise is that the basal is indispensable to reading instruction, that without it children would either not learn to read at all or would be severely handicapped. More explicit is the claim that everything that is in the program is there, in the specific place in the sequence it is found, for scientific reasons. Many teachers and administrators have come to believe that skipping a single page or exercise could harm pupils in some potentially permanent way.

2

PUTTING THE BASAL IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Three generations have read from basals while attending school.

Walk into any elementary classroom and there is a 90 percent chance that you will see students and teachers working with basal readers, workbooks, or teachers' manuals. Although not everyone supports this practice, it has been a fact of American education, and three generations have read from basals while attending school. It may be understandable then that these materials are generally seen today as a necessary part of reading instruction. Few teachers, administrators, or parents have experienced reading instruction without them. How basal materials were developed, rose to their present place of prominence, and what this means for teachers are the main questions addressed in this chapter.

Readering Instruction Before Basal Reading Materials

It's not an easy job to describe reading instruction before the advent of the basal readers in the 1920s because most analyses of reading instruction of that pe-

riod consider only materials (e.g., Smith, 1965), expert opinion (e.g., Mathews, 1966) or policy (e.g., Cubberly, 1934). As we have recently learned, activity and change at these levels do not always translate into change in the day-to-day interactions among teachers and students—or masters and scholars as they were often called then (Cuban, 1984). Although we run the risk of misrepresenting the actual activities of reading instruction, we only have descriptions of materials and policy for the very early period of American reading instruction.

As early as 1647 the Massachusetts Colony passed a bill (“the Old Deluder, Satan Law”) which required townships of over fifty households to appoint a teacher of reading and writing so that children might learn to resist temptation by reading *Bible* verses. Prior to that time, and in other colonies, reading instruction was largely a private, religious matter, and many Americans did not become literate. For example, illiteracy rates in New England in the seventeenth century ranged from 20 to 60 percent according to census data (Soltow & Stevens, 1981). Until the middle of the eighteenth century there were few books for children (Huck, 1976), and the instructional materials for reading of the time included hornbooks (paddles which contained the alphabet [in two scripts], a syllabarium, and the Lord’s Prayer all on a 3" x 5" inch surface), psalters (books of spelling lessons, lists of syllables and words, and Bible verses) and textbooks such as *The New England Primer* which began “A—In Adam’s fall we sinned all.” As best can be determined, memorization of Bible verses was the ultimate goal for most students and teaching methods followed two forms: student’s independent practice of lessons following recitation before an overseeing master or the master leading students in choral drills of the lessons.

With John Newbery’s *A Little Pretty Pocketbook* in 1744, the publishing of children’s books began in earnest. Some of these books were published in North

America during the Revolutionary War. Their contents demonstrated a change in child rearing philosophies from instilling a fear of God to developing a positive moral character within children. Although there is little evidence that this literature was used widely in schools, the instructional materials of the times reflected a similar change in tone. The lessons in Noah Webster's *Blue Backed Speller* were patriotic and morally didactic, and the 1800 edition of *The New England Primer* began "A was an angler who fished with a hook." The goals for education were also modified as suggested in Thomas Jefferson's words: "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and will never be" (Jefferson, 1893, p. 221). Jefferson proposed universal schooling for all citizens in literacy, arithmetic, and history "at common expense to all" as the primary protection against tyranny.

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Perhaps the best source of information of teacher and student interactions in the nineteenth century is Barbara Finkelstein's (1970) *Governing the Young: Teacher's Behavior in American Primary Schools, 1820-1880*, in which she synthesizes almost 1,000 first-hand accounts of teaching practices from students, teachers, and observers. During this period reading instruction emphasized word identification over meaning; required oral reading rather than discussion; and was largely directed by the available textbooks, most of which were developed more according to their author's whim than according to pedagogical principles. Finkelstein concludes: "the descriptive literature suggests that most teachers of reading confined their activities to those of the overseer and drillmaster" (p. 26).

The spelling method predominated in reading instruction; students learned the names of letters (lower case, capital, and italic), spelled them, pronounced lists of two- and three-letter nonsense syllables, and then spelled and pronounced lists of words of various lengths before they began to read sentences orally. In