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Arne E. Sippola
Eastern Washington University

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Holistic Analysis of Basal Readers: An Assessment Tool

Arne E. Sippola

Authors of contemporary basal readers make many claims as to the whole language-like nature of their programs. Their advertising literature contains assertions such as "full spectrum of the language arts," "literature based," and "integrated, whole language approach." Indeed many recent basals contain components that could be considered holistic in nature. The inclusion of authentic children's literature featuring many well-known children's authors using the real language of literature is undeniably more whole language-like than the old basal stories featuring fractured basal-ese. A number of the newer basals also focus less upon a strict hierarchy of skills and attempt to teach strategies to children. Their publishers' efforts are to be applauded. However, if one makes careful analyses past the advertising literature, it is evident that some basal programs are considerably more whole language-like than others. One series I have scrutinized appeared to be a bottom-up theoretician's delight, yet their advertising would lead one to conclude that they were state of the art whole language-friendly.

This discrepancy between advertising and actuality and differences between basal reading series led me to develop an assessment tool intended to appraise the degree to which particular basal programs adhere to the characteristics of whole

language. Although some have argued that speaking of basal readers and whole language in the same breath is antithetical (Goodman, 1986; Goodman, Shannon, Freeman, and Murphy, 1988), it can be argued that a good many basal series contain elements that seem quite like whole language (Wiseman, 1992).

Whole language is a philosophy — a set of beliefs about children, teaching, learning and literacy. Characteristics of programs and materials can only be whole language-like (or conversely, not whole language-like). Programs and materials cannot be whole language. Teachers make programs and materials either whole language or not. Thus, I have taken care to suggest only that particular elements of basal programs may be "whole language-like."

In order to develop criteria to be used in the assessment tool, a review of relevant literature written by whole language proponents was conducted. This review revealed a considerable number of characteristics of materials, programs, and practices that could be considered to be whole language-like. The following section will provide a brief synopsis of whole language characteristics that could be germane to analyses of basal programs.

Integrated language arts. One characteristic of whole language programs is the attempt to integrate the four language arts (Goodman, 1986; Reutzel and Cooter, 1992; Vacca and Rasinski, 1992). It has been argued that reading, writing, speaking and listening should be seen by children as related forms of communication. All contribute to the sharing of thought. Particular attention has been focused on the importance of writing in an integrated language arts curriculum (Goodman, 1986; Harp, 1987; Holbrook, 1987; Vogt, 1991).

Writing and reading in combination is thought to lead to greater achievement in reading (Shanahan, 1988).

Basal programs attempting to use whole language would include materials and uncontrived suggestions as to how to integrate the language arts. Additionally, the basal series would contribute suggestions for using writing to reinforce reading, and reading to reinforce writing.

Integration with content areas. Curricular integration goes beyond the language arts. It has also been thought that many of the content areas can and should be integrated with the language arts program (Pappas, Kiefer, and Levstik, 1990; Routman, 1991; Sebesta, 1992). A main vehicle by which teachers can integrate throughout the curriculum is the thematic unit (Goodman, 1986; Pappas, Kiefer, and Levstik, 1990; Vogt, 1991; Vacca and Rasinski, 1992). A thematic unit, as it is broadly used, usually does not deal with a literary theme, but rather a central focus of study (Sippola, 1993). For example, in the case of integrating language arts and the content area of social studies where American pioneers are of central focus, a teacher would plan and structure many language activities dealing with the pioneers. Beyond this, the teacher could also integrate math, science, health and art activities into the study of pioneers.

A basal program attempting to provide for integration of the different content areas into its reading/language curriculum cannot, in all likelihood, provide all of the materials, and should provide suggested activities and resources available to teachers to foster such integration. Providing workbook/worksheet activities is, in my estimation, not a productive way of providing for integration.

Use of children's literature. A whole language-like program would feature authentic children's literature (Goodman, 1986; Weaver, 1990). Stories presented to children should be of interest (Hittleman, 1988; Vogt, 1991) and unabridged (Huck, 1992). It would be reasonable for teachers to engage children in the reading of award-winning books and works by notable authors (Pillar, 1992; Wiseman, 1992).

Children would not only read children's literature, but have related children's books read aloud to them (Vogt, 1991; Cullinan, 1992). For primary children, the sharing of books would include the use of Big Books for shared book experiences (Goodman, 1986; Holdaway, 1982; Routman, 1991). Predictable books would also be presented to children for sharing or reading (Goodman, 1986; Huck, 1992).

A number of whole language theoreticians have advocated that children be exposed to a variety of genres of literature (Cullinan, 1992; Hittleman, 1988; Vogt, 1991; Wiseman, 1992). The study of genres might be thought to foster metaliterary awareness — the ability to think about the different categories of literature.

A basal program attempting to use the whole language characteristics of children's literature would provide a wide variety of interesting, authentic, non-abridged stories written by notable children's authors. The story collection would include many award-winning stories. The basal program would also suggest and/or provide children's books related to the story of focus which could be read aloud by the teacher. The basal program would provide big books at the early primary level to facilitate shared reading. The collection would also include stories that are predictable. Care should have been taken to ensure that a wide variety of genres of literature were included in the literature collection.

Phonics. A common misconception about whole language advocates is that they are vehemently opposed to phonics. It is less an opposition to phonics than to the way in which it is taught. Overemphasizing the use of a legion of phonic rules taught in isolation is not considered to be in the best interest of the reader (Goodman, 1986; Weaver, 1991). Rather, phonic skills are better taught in the context of real stories (Newman and Church, 1990; Trachtenburg, 1990; Vogt, 1991) and through writing (Goodman, 1986; Weaver, 1990).

A basal program teaching phonics in a whole-language manner would, first of all, not teach phonic skills in isolation. Rather, phonic skills would be taught within the context of real stories containing those phonic patterns. The basal program would not attempt to teach children a multitude of phonic skills. Instead, high utility and high frequency phonic skills would be taught. The basal manual should suggest a variety of writing activities so that children might use their knowledge of phoneme-grapheme relationships.

Skill sequences. Rejecting behavioral psychology, whole language advocates have asserted that the skill sequences delineated by many basal programs are quite arbitrary (Goodman, 1986; Goodman, et al., 1988). It has been further contended that skill sequencing exists not because children learn to read in a linear sequence, but to facilitate the offering of a series of lessons in a sequential fashion (Commission on Reading, 1988). Skills instruction is not ignored, however. Skills are taught within the context of real literature and as needs arise (Weaver, 1991).

A basal program adhering to such precepts would not, as is done traditionally, organize a hierarchy for the teaching of

skills. Rather, skills would be taught as facilitated within the context of the literature.

Workbooks/worksheets. Whole language advocates have little use for workbooks and worksheets. Succinctly, Goodman (1986, p. 33) has called them inappropriate for whole language programs. Workbook and worksheet pages have traditionally been used to reinforce specific and often isolated skills (Routman, 1991), which is contrary to whole language beliefs.

A basal program adhering to such beliefs would either not provide or pare to the minimum the number of workbook and worksheet pages available for use. Alternatives to seatwork would be suggested in the basal manual.

Extension activities. In lieu of workbooks and worksheets, whole language advocates have suggested that students engage in meaningful extension activities (Johnson and Louis, 1987; Routman, 1988; Yopp and Yopp, 1992). Devices such as literature response logs and activities like story mapping would replace traditional seatwork. These activities are thought to give students "unlimited options to integrate skills in a meaningful context and have fun while doing so" (Routman, 1988, p. 70).

A basal program which integrates whole language would provide suggestions, if not materials, that extend literature in an open-ended, creative and thought provoking manner. The extension activities would also take into consideration the interest of the children.

Assessment

Rebelling against traditional specific skills and standardized testing, whole language advocates have suggested that

assessment of literacy be more open-ended (Anthony, Johnson, Mickelson, and Preece, 1991; Johnson and Louis, 1990; Johnston, 1992). It has been argued that children's responses to literature are more ecologically valid than specific skills testing (Au, Scheu, Kawakami, and Herman, 1990; Goodman, 1986; May, 1990; Vogt, 1991). Additionally, portfolio assessment is thought to represent a child's learning better than traditional assessment measures (Anthony, 1991; Au, et al., 1990; Goodman, 1986; Johnston, 1992; Pils, 1991; Vogt, 1991). Basal programs adhering to such assessment beliefs would diminish the importance of end-of-section skills tests and rely more upon children's responses to literature and portfolio assessment. Children's authentic work would be considered at least as valid as formal tests.

The assessment tool. An assessment tool, the *Holistic Analysis of Basal Readers* (see Appendix), was developed to assist teachers, administrators, and curriculum adoption teams in evaluating the degree to which commercial basal reader programs adhere to whole language characteristics. The assessment tool was tested and critiqued by classroom teachers. Revisions based upon their feedback were made accordingly.

The assessment tool is best used to contrast basal series by comparing the scores derived from their analyses. This should especially assist a school district in their adoption considerations should it be interested in adopting a basal series possessing whole language qualities.

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Arne E. Sippola is a faculty member in the Department of Education at Eastern Washington University, in Cheney Washington.

APPENDIX
Holistic Analysis of Basal Readers
Arne E. Sippola, 1993

SCALE — *High degree = 2 points; Moderate degree = 1 point; To some degree/not applicable = 0 points; Few/not many = -1 point; Not at all/none = -2 points*

Integrated language arts

1. Are suggestions made as to how a teacher might extend the literary selection into the other language arts?

2 1 0 -1 -2

2. Do the suggestions seem authentic rather than contrived?

2 1 0 -1 -2

3. Are suggestions made regarding how to incorporate writing activities with the reading activities?

2 1 0 -1 -2

Integration with content areas

4. Are suggestions made as to how a teacher can integrate reading materials with content areas?

2 1 0 -1 -2

5. Do the suggestions seem authentic rather than contrived?

2 1 0 -1 -2

Children's literature

6. Are the majority of stories contained in the basal series written by children's authors (versus in-house writers)?

2 1 0 -1 -2

7. Do you believe that the majority of the stories in this basal series would be of interest to children?

2 1 0 -1 -2

8. Are the stories presented in an unabridged form?

2 1 0 -1 -2

9. Are the stories in the basal series written by notable children's authors?

2 1 0 -1 -2

10. Does the basal series contain numerous award-winning books?

2 1 0 -1 -2

How many award winners? -----

11. Are a substantial number of correlated read-aloud books suggested for the teacher?

2 1 0 -1 -2

12. Are a substantial number of correlated read-aloud books provided for the teacher?

2 1 0 -1 -2

13. Are Big Books provided for use in the early primary grades?

2 1 0 -1 -2

14. Are a substantial number of stories presented to early primary students predictable in nature?

2 1 0 -1 -2

15. Are a variety of genres of literature presented in the basal series?

2 1 0 -1 -2

Phonic instruction

16. Are phonics taught within the context of real stories?

2 1 0 -1 -2

17. Are the phonic skills selected for teaching possessing high utility and high frequency?

2 1 0 -1 -2

Skill sequences

18. Are specific skills taught within the context of real stories rather than in isolation?

2 1 0 -1 -2

Workbooks/worksheets

19. Does the basal series "pare to the minimum" the use of workbooks and worksheets?

2 1 0 -1 -2

Extension activities

20. Does the basal series provide suggestions that extend literature in an open-ended, creative, and thought provoking manner?

2 1 0 -1 -2

21. Are materials provided that extend literature in an open-ended, creative, and thought provoking manner?

2 1 0 -1 -2

22. Do you believe that the extension activities would be of interest to children?

2 1 0 -1 -2

Assessment

23. Are open-ended assessment procedures (e.g., open-ended writing activities; discussion questions requiring critical, creative, appreciative, and inferential thought) suggested for the teacher to use?

2 1 0 -1 -2

24. Are suggestions made as to how portfolio assessment can be used with the basal series?

2 1 0 -1 -2

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The 1994 themed issue of *Reading Horizons* will be devoted to efforts that promote literacy through university-school collaboration. Guest editors are Janet Dynak and Ronald Crowell of Western Michigan University. Contributions in the form of research reports, commentaries, case studies, and articles discussing the area of literacy relating to university-school collaboration are welcomed. Preference will be given to manuscripts co-authored by classroom teachers and university faculty. Manuscripts should be submitted following *Reading Horizons* guidelines appearing on the inside cover of this journal. Manuscripts intended for the themed issue must have a March 1994 postmark. Address all manuscripts to Dr. Jeanne M. Jacobson, Editor, *Reading Horizons*, WMU, Kalamazoo MI 49008.