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## Basal Reader Alteration: A Creative Way To Put Schema Theory Into Classroom Practice

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# **Basal Reader Alteration: A Creative Way To Put Schema Theory Into Classroom Practice**

**Sandra K. Moser  
Samuel A. Perez**

Alteration of the typical basal lesson format is an outgrowth of research on schema theory. Reutzel (1985) has suggested that while most basals emphasize post-reading assessment, "schema theory punctuates the importance of the prereading stage of the reading lesson" (p. 194). One reason for the alteration of the traditional basal format is that basal instruction often fails to compensate for inadequate student background knowledge. In a study of three elementary basal series, Afflerbach and Walker (1990) found that in 407 instructional units assessed, over half assumed that students possessed the prior knowledge necessary to understand the text. This finding may be linked to the contention that teachers frequently eliminate background knowledge-building activities from the prereading phase of instruction (Mason, 1983; Durkin, 1984). If basal publishers overestimate the adequacy of student background knowledge, it seems reasonable that teachers might also assume that students have adequate schema for understanding text selections. An honest assessment of what students already know or do not know about a topic before reading should give the teacher the impetus needed for altering the instructional format presented in the basal manual.

## **Reluctance to alter the basal lesson format**

The tendency among teachers to adhere to the basal format has been the focus of research into the master developer phenomenon (Duffy, Roehler, and Putnam, 1987). Because the basal text has been authored, promoted and implemented by largely invisible policymakers, teachers often do not regard alteration of the basal format as an option. Teachers often feel pressured to comply with demands for accountability; as a result, instruction is geared to testing, and teachers find it difficult to make independent decisions about lesson content or sequence. The issue of teacher adherence to the basal manual is one that complicates decision-making and at the same time makes it desirable. If teachers can overcome their reluctance to challenge the traditional format, they may be better able to serve the needs of students.

## **Why should teachers alter the basal lesson?**

Mason (1983) recommends reorganization of the basal lesson, with new emphasis on text-specific prereading work that activates or builds prior knowledge. Osborn, Jones, and Stein (1985) cite the importance of background knowledge as a necessary consideration in the organization of basal readers. They believe basal manuals should include more instruction relevant to current findings about schema theory and metacognition. This, they contend, will help students activate background knowledge prior to reading, and become more aware of how their prior knowledge aids in understanding. Despite the findings and recommendations of researchers, basal publishers have not been guided as much by the study of schematic and other comprehension processes as by concerns for teachers' accountability and assessment (Durkin, 1987). The result is less instructional time on prereading work than on postreading assessment.

The rationale for altering basal lesson plans might be summed up in this way: Student background knowledge necessary for understanding text is often inadequate. The traditional basal format typically does not provide for this lack of background, and teachers, feeling the pressure of accountability, do not often challenge the test-dominated basal program. The results of a creative alteration of the basal format could be improved decision-making skills on the part of teachers, as well as more effective preparation of children for reading.

### **How have basal lessons been altered?**

One approach to basal alteration is to shift emphasis from postreading assessment to prereading preparation (Reutzel, 1985; Prince and Mancus, 1987). Basal lesson structure can be altered to put postreading enrichment suggestions into the prereading phase. Among the "Curriculum Connections" suggested after reading *Mitchell is Moving* (Sharmat, 1989) is a math activity that, if taught before the introduction of the story, would enable students to grasp the important time-distance element of the selection. For *Animals that Migrate* (Arnold, 1989), the teacher's manual suggested a postreading language arts activity in which students make world maps, tracing the routes of migratory animals. Students are also invited to log observations made during neighborhood birdwatches. Both activities, if done as a part of prereading instruction, could increase the students' involvement in and comprehension of this selection.

A second approach to basal lesson alteration is to emphasize central story elements in prereading instruction, rather than extraneous details about character or plot (Beck, Omanson, and McKeown, 1982). *Oxcart Man* (Hall, 1989) tells the story of an early American farmer who sells

the year's crafts and produce in town. The basal emphasizes the folktale nature of the selection and includes activities and discussion questions along that line. The teacher might shift attention to the actual content of the selection which contains a wealth of information about early American rural life. Activities and discussion about weaving, candle making, woodcarving, and bartering could acquaint students with the central ideas of this story.

Another way in which the basal lesson can be altered is to pare the list of phonics, structural and study skills suggested by the basal teacher's manual, to determine the few relevant textual skills in that list and to introduce them before reading the selection (Spiegel and Fitzgerald, 1986; Reutzell, 1986). For the basal selection *How My Parents Learned to Eat* (Friedman, 1989), five phonics skills and one comprehension skill are suggested for teaching either before or after reading. One of the skills, learning the sounds *ou* and *ow*, is represented by several examples in the story. This skill, as well as the comprehension skill suggested (cause and effect), should receive the instructional emphasis. Determining the most useful skill in a list of several is only the first step; to make that skill work for readers, the teacher must often move it from the postreading extending skills section into the prereading phase. Thus, long word decoding, the most relevant of five phonics skills suggested for *Soccer Sam* (Marzollo, 1989), would be a logical part of prereading instruction rather than postreading skill extension, where it is found in the basal format.

Finally, the use of concrete experience, related to story content and presented before the reading, can provide the schema necessary for the student to comprehend and connect emotionally with the text. *Oxcart Man* (Hall, 1989)

exemplifies the potential for the use of hands-on activity in conjunction with children's literature. The basal lesson introducing the story suggested that students discuss and name things that they have made by hand. Using a concrete experience approach, the teacher would extend the discussion into activity, inviting students to make many of the things mentioned in the story (candles, weavings, carvings) and to role-play trading their crafts in a make-believe country store. Before teaching *Soccer Sam* (Marzollo, 1989), the class could be divided into small groups, with each group attempting to teach a new game to another group. Both of these examples point to the need to determine the central story concept and plan concrete experiences that will make that concept come alive for students.

### **Benefits of basal alteration**

For students, the activation of prior knowledge and the development of new schema can help in overcoming the cultural and socioeconomic differences that might have made the understanding of a basal selection difficult (Prince and Mancus, 1987). Diverse student backgrounds necessitate the presentation of experiences that will give the reader the prior knowledge to assimilate important concepts, and accommodate new and possibly incongruous information.

For teachers, a benefit of basal alteration has been discussed by Duffy and his colleagues (1987). Teachers can become instructional decision-makers, with one possible outcome being the eventual modification of the basals themselves by publishers. Teacher demand has the potential to force basal writers and publishers to revise the script-like and assessment-oriented nature of basal readers. These instructional tools can be changed to reflect current study on schema theory, and the classroom teacher has an important role in effecting that change.

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