Underestimating Capable Readers

Martha Combs
University of Nevada

Jimmie S. Russell
Oklahoma Baptist University

Maureen Siera
Northeastern State University

Dorothy Douglas
Monmouth College

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Capable and gifted readers are often held back in grade level basal reading texts, regardless of their reading ability, for fear that essential skills may be missed (Allen and Swearingen, 1987; Carr, 1984). The abilities of these students are often underestimated (Bennett and Desforges, 1988).

Basal reading series, which are so widely utilized in this country, continue to present comprehension skill development as a series of separate skills, arranged in a hierarchical fashion, suggesting a definitive order to skill acquisition and mastery. However, research does not clearly support the identification of any one set of comprehension skills (Davis, 1968; Downing, 1982; McNeil, 1976; Spearitt, 1972; Thurstone, 1956).

In classroom instruction, unfortunately, basal series skill hierarchies seem to have been accepted as a list of essential skills and therefore students are held accountable for mastery of these skills at each level (Allen and Swearingen, 1987). Placement test manuals for at least two basal reading series further complicate instruction for capable students by cautioning teachers against initially placing students above grade level and against skipping subsequent levels for fear that essential skills may be missed (Aaron, Jackson, Riggs,

Smith and Tierney, 1981; Fay, Balow and Arnold, 1986). A review of the literature in comprehension skill development reveals that it is not clear whether all, or even any, of the comprehension skill exercises which students are asked to perform are essential (Rosenshine, 1980).

Do we, indeed, underestimate the skills of capable readers when we require them to progress systematically through basal reading programs? By examining the comprehension skill development of capable readers in two basal reading series it was our intention to understand more fully how these prescribed basal skill hierarchies might impact upon such students and their teachers.

Both basal reading series selected for this study cautioned teachers against initially placing students above grade level or skipping levels for fear that they might "miss the important reading related skills that are introduced at each level of the program" (Fay, et al., 1986). In addition, the manner in which skills had been carefully sequenced within each series was stressed, serving as a second caution against moving students ahead (Aaron, et al., 1981).

Identifying capable readers

The students in this study were 46 second and 49 third graders who met the following criteria: (1) scored at the 50th percentile or above on the Metropolitan Achievement Test (1986), (2) scored above grade level on either or both of the placement tests, a measure of silent reading comprehension, for two basal reading series, and (3) had not received instruction in reading above grade level.

Students scoring above grade level on either or both of the placement tests were then given the end-of-book mastery

tests in comprehension for their current grade placement and for the next three grade levels. These tests would typically be utilized by classroom teachers following the completion of a text to identify levels of skill proficiency before progression to the next text level, according to the identified hierarchy for a particular series. The criterion for mastery of individual skills which had been established by both of the series under examination was 80%.

Describing capable readers

The capable second and third grade readers in this study were aware of, and had mastered, a large number of the comprehension skills tested in the two basal reading series examined. Without benefit of instruction, students demonstrated mastery of skills as much as three years above their present grade placements. The percentage of second and third grade students mastering individual skills at each level tested can be seen in Tables 1 and 2. We were impressed by what these students already knew or were able to figure out.

As the level of difficulty of text increased, the percentage of capable readers who could apply the skill sometimes decreased but seldom did the percentage drop completely to zero. Levels of skill usage and mastery did not consistently decrease as reading material became more difficult. It appeared that these readers may have been able to draw upon other known skills or thinking processes when faced with a difficult task, one for which they had not received direct instruction. They seemed to be exhibiting the flexibility that is characteristic of good readers (Anderson and Pearson, 1984; Mason, 1984; Paris, Lipson and Wixson, 1983).

Overall, third grade readers were more accurate than second graders in their responses, particularly in series B

Table 1
Percentage of Capable <u>Second Grade</u> Readers Mastering Comprehension Skills

	Series A (N=46)					Series B (N=44)				
Level	2²	3¹	3²	4	5	2²	3¹	3²	4	5
Skill										
Main Idea	89	—	76	41	—	—	20	—	—	18
Details	65	—	28	20	—	—	68	—	—	—
Sequence	91	—	30	—	—	—	36	64	59	27
Draw'g C'ncl's'ns	87	—	—	—	74	—	—	—	—	—
Pr'd'ct'g Outc'm's	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	77	—
CauseEffect	—	83	—	—		—	70	68	64	34
at level 5: Cause=39; Effect=24								83		
Fact	—	—	—	—	52	—	—		30	—
Opinion	—	—	—	—	52	—	—	—	45	—
W'd Referents	—	83	—	—	—	—	—	—	50	—
Compare/Contrast	—	—	—	—	—	84	—	—	—	—
Sensory Lang.	—	—	—	—	—	—	48	—	—	—
Figurative Lang.	—	93	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	5
Elements of Style	—	—	—	59	80	—	—	—	—	—
Bias	—	—	—	—	9	—	—	—	—	—
Foreshadowing	—	—	—	—	17	—	—	—	—	—
Plot	—	65	43	—	35	100	—	—	—	39
Theme	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	9	50	—
Setting	—	—	76	61	57	86	—	—	—	—
Characters	83	63	65	74	67	—	36	36	23	25
Conflict/Resolut'n	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	66	59	39
Story Problem	83	57	—	78	—	—	—	—	—	—
Story Solution	76	89	—	72	—	—	—	—	—	—
Literature	—		—	57	11	—	—	—	—	—
at level 3¹: Fiction=57; Nonfiction=74										
at level 3²: Fantasy=98; Reality=98										
Vocab. (Isolation)	100	—	—	—	—	80	36	9	16	0
Context Clues	—	—	—	80	—	82	—	—	—	23
Analogy	—	—	83	61	—	—	—	—	—	—
Antonym	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	14	—
Idioms		—	—	57	—	—	—	—	—	32

— = not tested

Table 2
Percentage of Capable Third Grade Readers
Mastering Comprehension Skills

Skill	Series A (N=49)				Series B (N=44)			
Level	3²	4	5	6	3²	4	5	6
Main Idea	94	59	—	29	—	—	64	—
Details	61	53	—	29	—	—	—	—
Sequence	67	—	—	71	82	87	45	—
Time Relat'nships	—	—	—	73	—	—	—	—
Draw'g Conclus'ns	—	—	96	—	—	—	—	—
Pred'ct'g Outc'mes	—	—	—	—	—	98	75	—
Cause/Effect	—			—	93	86	82	84
at level 5: Cause=71; Effect=61								
Fact	—	—	92	—	84	—	—	—
Opinion	—	—	90	—	91	—	—	—
Word Referents	—	—	—	—	77	—	—	—
Figurative Lang.	—	—	—	—	—	—	25	—
Elements of Style	—	82	96	80	—	—	—	—
Bias	—	—	27	—	—	—	—	—
Foreshadowing	—	—	45	—	—	—	—	—
Author's Purpose	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	39
Mood	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	23
Personification	—	—	—	82	—	—	—	—
Plot	80	—	78	69	—	—	—	80
Theme	—	—	—	—	59	91	—	50
Setting	94	76	53	47	—	—	—	48
Characters	90	86	96	72	68	43	59	73
Conflict/Resolut'n	—	—	—	—	93	93	77	—
Story Problem	—	90	—	—	—	—	—	—
Story Solution	—	84	—	—	—	—	—	—
Literature		73	47	35	—	—	—	—
at level 3²: Fantasy=100;Reality=98								
Vocab. (Isolation)	—	—	—	—	73	61	16	5
Context Clues	—	96	—	88	—	—	43	14
Analogy	96	94	—	—	—	—	—	—
Antonym	—	—	—	—	—	82	—	—
Idioms	—	78	—	76	—	—	70	—
Connotat'n of W'ds	—	—	—	96	—	—	—	—

— = not tested

where the format assessed several types of comprehension skills through one piece of text. We wondered whether the third graders' longer experience with reading (increasing the potential for flexibility and fluency) and the shifting focus of instruction in third grade (moving from an emphasis on word identification skills toward an emphasis on comprehension) might account for the grade level differences we observed. These differences suggested support for the conception of stages of reading development and the shift in reading ability that appears during second and third grade (Duffy and Roehler, 1986; Gray, 1937).

What we learned

By receiving instruction in grade level reading materials, the capable readers in this study were, indeed, being under-estimated as suggested by Bennett and Desforges (1988). These second and third grade students possessed knowl-edge of many aspects of the reading process that might be virtually untapped during grade level reading instruction.

Placement of capable readers and instructional decisions made for them, which assumed a lack of knowledge of skills at and above the assigned level and, consequently, moved students through virtually all skills in the assigned level, resulted in underestimating students. This underestimation was potentially holding them at an independent, rather than instructional, reading level. Powell (1984) suggests that this practice may retard potential reading growth.

The inconsistent sequences of skills between the two basal reading series in this study and the pattern of student performance across reading levels confirmed our uncertainty about the existence of a true hierarchy of comprehension skills. If such a hierarchy existed, it could not possibly be the

basis for the skill sequence in both reading series because there was too much variation between them. Therefore, it would seem that at least one of the basal reading series under examination was based upon a hierarchy that was not valid.

When the two basal series were compared, it was also evident that the format of assessments impacted upon student performance. Students performed better when applying a skill for understanding was the object of the assessment, rather than identifying the term for the skill. For example, students would read and respond with understanding to the meaning of a simile but were not as successful at identifying which statement was a simile.

Second grade students also performed better when the format of the test was fairly consistent with the format of their daily classroom instruction, i.e., skills practiced separately. This suggested that students' reading performance was responding to more than the skills being assessed. Type of test, topic of text, perceived purpose of task, and type of thinking process being assessed were among other factors that could have been impacting on reading performance, as present definitions of reading suggest (Anderson and Pearson, 1984; Duffy and Roehler, 1986).

What can be done

Capable readers who are being instructed in a basal reading series must be allowed to move beyond the grade level text. Capable readers do generalize from their reading experiences, both personal and instructional, and inappropriate placement may retard future growth.

Since the hierarchies upon which basal series are built are questionable, merely moving capable readers through each

reading level faster, but still requiring the completion of most tasks, is time wasted, according to the results of this study. We must adapt basals to the skill development of capable readers as we often do for less capable readers.

If capable readers remain in basal reading materials, we suggest that the basal program be approached as two separate components: a literature strand and a skills strand. We suggest this because, in reality, there is often little match between story demands and skills placement in the basal readers that capable readers are using.

The basal reader selections, at the appropriate levels for capable readers, should be reviewed and selected for use only if they represent quality literature, either fiction or non-fiction. These quality selections should then be studied to determine the thinking processes and skills required by the reader to comprehend and appreciate the text. The thinking processes and skills required by the basal texts should then be matched to the needs of the capable readers.

The skills which capable readers already possess should be assessed, at the very least by using the end-of-unit and end-of-book assessments provided by the publishers as a pretest rather than a posttest. Teachers should feel free to include other types of assessments, however. Skills which remain to be mastered should be clustered by similarity for instruction since these students have the ability to generalize from previous instruction and experience. The clustered skills should then be matched to basal texts which make use of those specific skills or thought processes. Supportive instructional materials, such as workbook pages and duplicating masters, should be rearranged to accommodate the skill clusters derived from the assessment process.

The organization of the directed or guided reading activities should also be reexamined. Because skills have been clustered together and matched to stories which utilize those skills, the reading lesson should begin with a study of the skill or thinking process and proceed to application in the text, moving into the text in a natural manner as proficient readers usually do for themselves. Instructional time will be most beneficial if application of skills in authentic text is the focal point of the lesson. Vocabulary study, in the context of the story, will also be more meaningful.

Capable readers, such as those described in this study, deserve appropriate instruction especially if they remain in basal reading materials. Teachers should follow a three-faceted procedure: selection of reading material which has value as literature, assessment of readers' skills so that they are not required to study what they have already mastered, and analysis of reading selections to insure a match between the selection and the skills which are taught. We cannot let our management systems limit our students' growth as readers.

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Martha Combs is a faculty member in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Nevada at Reno, Nevada. Jimmie S. Russell is a faculty member at Oklahoma Baptist University in Shawnee, Oklahoma; Maureen Siera is a faculty member in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Northeastern State University, in Tahlequah, Oklahoma; and Dorothy Douglas is a faculty member in the Department of Education at Monmouth College, in Monmouth, Illinois. Address correspondence to Dr. Martha Combs, 208 Education Building, University of Nevada, Reno, NV 89557-0029; requests for further information should be accompanied by a SASE.