

4-1-1987

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Elene S. Demos
Texas Christian University

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Recommended Citation

Demos, E. S. (1987). School-Based Reading Programs. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 27 (3). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol27/iss3/5

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SCHOOL-BASED READING PROGRAMS

ELENE S. DEMOS

TEXAS CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
FORT WORTH, TEXAS

(Note: This is one in a series of four articles developed for parents, to help explain the reading process, school reading programs, reading tests, and reading resources for parents. This series is designed for use and distribution by teachers and administrators to provide a knowledge base for reading. This series is based on the premise that literate, knowledgeable parents can help their children, support the teacher and more adequately monitor their child's reading progress while in school.)

Some of the more common approaches to reading are presented in this article. Without a full understanding of a child's reading program, it becomes difficult to monitor how well your child is doing in reading.

There are three basic types of reading programs that your child is likely to encounter; they include the basal reading approach, the language experience approach and the individualized reading approach. The major components, strengths and weaknesses of each approach are presented in Figure 1 at the end of the article. The basal reader approach is used in the majority of elementary classrooms.

What Is a Basal Reader?

Many adults are familiar with basal readers and learned how to read with Dick and Jane. Even though Dick and Jane are no longer the central characters in those books, the books are still with us and your child is probably learning to read with them.

There are several components to a basal reading approach (BRA). Some are exclusively for the teacher, while others are primarily for the child. Each child has a basal reader textbook and typically is assigned a workbook. In addition, children are frequently assigned "dittoed" sheets and reading tests and may use other supplemental material such as filmstrips, cassette tapes, flip charts, and

flashcards. Each teacher has a manual that gives explicit directions for conducting the daily lesson.

A basal reading approach is a very systematic approach to teaching reading. The structure is built into all of the areas (students' text, teacher's manual, tests, etc.). The vocabulary of the reader is controlled in that only a few new words are presented in each story and each story builds upon the next. The materials are leveled so they proceed from easy to complex. Thus a first grade text would have shorter stories, fewer words and a more limited vocabulary than the second and third grade reader. Usually several books are part of each grade level. Some series use number levels, such as one to seventeen to identify their books; other publishers identify their books as 3 and 3; which means the first book of grade three (3) and the second book of grade 3 (3). Each basal reading series is based upon a "scope and sequence." This simply means that each book is built upon a framework of skills. Examples of skills include beginning consonant sounds, ending consonant sounds and vowel sounds. Here again, the skills proceed from simple to complex. Skills are often introduced at one level, reinforced at another level and expanded at yet another level.

Teaching a BRA lesson involves several steps for the teacher. The first step in the process is preparing and motivating students for the story. To do this, teachers will introduce new vocabulary words to the students, will help establish a purpose for reading the story and will try to make the story relevant to the students. For example, if the basal story centers upon children going to the zoo, the teacher will ask the students questions and conduct a brief discussion on their individual experiences at the zoo.

Once this motivation and readiness phase is complete, the teacher asks the pupils to read the story silently. Silent reading should occur before children are asked to read parts of a story orally. While the pupils are reading silently, they are searching for answers to questions that were presented in the first stage.

The third step, comprehension, involves a focused discussion that allows students to clarify their ideas and answer the questions that were presented during the readiness step. Those questions become a central part of this step.

The fourth phase involves having the children read orally.

During oral reading, the teacher will closely observe the manner in which the child reads. If the pupil stumbles on unknown words, the teacher will note if the child tries to sound out a word (a phonics approach) or tries to use the words that precede or follow the word (a context clues approach) or tries to identify a word by examining root words and endings (structural analysis). This gives the teacher important information to help plan the child's reading program.

The fifth phase of a basal reading lesson includes skill development. Though reading is more than acquiring separate skills, students need skills to learn to read. At this point, the teacher will provide instruction to children in a certain skill area. For example, students will need to learn how to identify the main idea of a paragraph or a story. A teacher will give students the information they need for this, will model this activity for them by showing them how to find the main idea and then will supervise them as they find the main idea. Once the teacher feels certain students have the necessary information, she will allow the children to go to their basal workbook or ditto sheet and practice this skill.

The final phase involves evaluation. In evaluating the student, the teacher may observe how the child is reading orally, may use the worksheet to check on the students' progress or may use a test that she has made or that was provided by the reading series.

Because the basal reading series is so widely used in this country, (authorities estimate that between 85-95% of all teachers use this approach) it is important that parents become familiar with basals. You may be asked to help or to check your child's homework. If the ditto sheet or workbook is sent home with your child, that means that your child has been instructed in that skill and that the teacher feels your child is proficient enough to work on their own to practice (reinforce) what was taught at school.

If you observe that your child is struggling with that worksheet, jot a note to the teacher to indicate your observation. Your written message provides the teacher with needed information that perhaps your child needs additional help with that skill.

What is the Language Experience Approach?

Another popular, though less frequently used, approach

is the language experience approach (LEA). This approach uses the child's natural language. All children come to school with a larger speaking vocabulary than reading vocabulary. The LEA builds upon the child's language and helps the child to use language to develop their own stories. The philosophy of this approach is built upon the theory that children can think, children can speak, and children can read what they write. This approach builds upon the child's past experiences and allows the child to discuss topics of interest. Emphasis is placed upon the child's natural language and expression.

LEA does not include the formal materials and structure of the basal reading program. In fact, only a chalkboard and chalk or paper and pencil need to be included in the list of materials for this program.

The children must first be prepared to share their experiences. Teachers frequently ask students to draw pictures or bring in pictures about specific events or things as "story starters". These pictures, drawings, etc., then serve to draw on the child's past experiences and serve as a motivation technique for the children. The concepts are then developed through class or group discussion. This gives all children an opportunity to learn and share information.

The children then move into step two which involves preparing the story draft. This can be done on the chalkboard or on a large flipchart. During this step, the teacher helps the students clarify the points and provides a cohesive, logical story. The teacher then serves as the recording secretary for the children and writes out the story as dictated by the children.

Once the story is complete, the teacher reads the story with the children. During this step, the teacher points to each word as she reads the story.

Steps four and five require the students to read the story to the teacher and to write the story on their own paper. This provides a permanent record for the students who have been observed reading and re-reading their stories.

Step six involves story illustration. The students will frequently draw pictures that illustrate their stories.

Step seven takes up skill development activities. Even though this approach is less systematic in skill development

than the BRA, students will be directed in a skill or skills for each story. No matter what approach children are introduced to reading, pupils still need to develop their reading skills. The words that children have difficulty with are frequently placed on word cards which may serve to develop children's sight vocabulary. General skills such as using phonic rules, structural analysis and context clues may be incorporated into this approach also.

What Is the Individualized Reading Approach?

The last approach to reading is the Individualized Reading Approach (IRA). This approach is based on each child's individual need in reading. This approach allows a child or group children to read material of their own selection and at their own rate. Grade-level standards are not strictly adhered to using this approach and little formalized grouping occurs. Children are taught the needed skills as needed and useful for their needs.

This method requires much more preparation and organization by the teacher. Accurate records must be kept on each child and many reading materials, such as trade books, magazines, articles, and instructional materials must be identified for each child.

Diagnosis, conferences and self-selection are central to this approach. The diagnosis (testing) phase is on-going throughout the year, but initially each child must be tested to identify the proper reading level for the child. Much work must be done by the teacher prior to the diagnostic phase. Teachers must identify the skills they or their school district believe are important. This is frequently done through reading checklists or district curriculum guides. After general and specific tests are selected that match these skills, the teachers then assess and place each child with the appropriate materials.

The second step of this program, the conference, is central to the IRA. Frequent, intensive conferences are held with students to determine their reading needs and progress. This phase allows the teacher to focus on the individual child and is not shared with others. At this time, the children share what they have read with the teacher, the teacher checks on oral and silent reading and spends much time skillfully questioning the student. This conference period

also allows the teacher to update and review each child's reading records. At this time, the teacher may also prescribe reading skill work as needed. Though less emphasis is given to skills in the IRA, children are presented skills as needed. Additional reading skill packages may be needed for the children.

The third step is self-selection. Students are allowed to select stories, literature that they enjoy reading. If children enjoy mystery stories or science-fiction stories, for example, the teacher recommends particular books and additional materials for the child. Thus, the teacher must be well-versed in all areas of children's literature. Teachers who use an IRA generally have extensive classroom libraries that contain a variety of reading materials to deal with diverse interests and levels. They also frequently include newspapers and magazines in their collections. Frequent use of the library is made by children using an IRA.

Children read at their own pace. Slow learners and gifted children can be more easily accommodated using an approach that focuses on the individual child. Children are encouraged to read what is pleasurable and satisfying to them and to move at their own pace; thus there may be less pressure placed on some children who may have learning problems or who may read at a slower pace than others.

Summary

The approaches to teaching reading, therefore, are varied, complex, and require much from teachers, children, and parents. Each system has advantages and disadvantages, requires different skill level on the part of the teacher and the child, and requires different materials for implementation. Though the focus of this article has been to present the differences among the three major approaches, the author wishes to stress that these programs are not mutually exclusive. In other words, because a teacher is using a basal reading approach as the primary tool for teaching reading, this does not imply that the teacher cannot use a language experience approach with children, or encourage students to read in supplemental books that interest children.

In fact, children would profit from the experiences provided in each approach. If we as parents and educators are interested in helping children achieve their reading

potential, enjoy reading and become literate, productive members of society, we should strive to become more knowledgeable in each approach and work to discover what works best for each child. Some children will respond positively to the freedom and independence they may encounter in the individualized reading approach, while other children may not be self-directing or motivated to pursue learning in a more independent fashion.

Your knowledge of your child, coupled with your knowledge of these approaches may help the teacher initially determine what might work best with your child.

Figure 1
Overview of School-Based Reading Programs

1. Basal Reading Approach

Components--

- Student reader
- Teacher's manual
- Student workbook
- Student dittoes (practice sheets)
- Word cards
- Filmstrips
- Audio cassette tapes
- Tests

Strengths--

- Highly structured
- Many approaches--(phonics, structural analysis, context clues, etc.)
- Scope and Sequence of skills
- Stories may not be realistic

Weaknesses--

- May be too structured
- Students may get bored with the routine
- Language frequently artificial
- Expensive to purchase all components

Figure 1 continued on next page

2. Language Experience Approach

Components--

- Flipcharts
- Chalkboard
- Paper and pencil

Strengths--

- Uses child's natural language
- Students learn from each other and share experiences
- Integrates reading, writing, thinking, speaking and listening
- Encourages creativity

Weaknesses--

- Not enough planned skill development activity
- Children may become bored
- More difficult to evaluate child's progress

3. Individualized Reading Approach

Components--

- Many reading materials at varied levels and covering many different interests
- Skill charts and management materials
- Diagnostic (testing materials)

Strengths--

- Children work at their own level
- Children work at their own pace
- Program is flexible and can be adapted to any group of children

Weaknesses--

- Time consuming for the teacher
- Requires high degree of organization
- Much record-keeping
- Conferences can become cumbersome
- Limited emphasis on skill development
- No scope and sequence
- May not work well with very young children