

7-1-1987

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Recommended Citation

Smith, P. K., & Saltz, M. (1987). Teachers' Reactions to the Basal Reading Series Approach. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 27 (4). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol27/iss4/3

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TEACHERS' REACTIONS TO THE BASAL READING SERIES APPROACH

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Since the advent of the McGuffey Readers, published between 1836 and 1844, basal reading series have increased in popularity, becoming the predominant approach to reading instruction. Chall (1967), Aukerman (1981), along with other educators, reported that 80 to 95% of classroom teachers used one or more basal series for reading instruction. A recent nationwide study by Smith/Saltz (1985) showed an increasing number of teachers, 95.4%, were using one or more basal series in their classrooms.

As a follow-up to the 1985 study, the authors asked classroom teachers who participated in the original survey to answer four brief background questions and then respond to an open-ended statement concerning appropriate comments regarding their use of basal readers, grouping, supplementary materials, and related items. Open-ended statements were requested since surveys which require forced-choice answers frequently restrict respondents who may feel that the items which are presented do not accurately reflect a total situation. Oftentimes, the respondents feel a need to modify or qualify the answers which are listed, or because statements may not pertain to a specific situation, the item is not answered. In order to avoid this, the authors required a minimal amount of background to be furnished by teachers and chose to provide an opportunity for the teachers to comment on their particular beliefs and/or attitudes. One hundred and thirteen teachers from forty-seven states provided background information and general comments.

Background of Teachers

Background information provided a framework from which teachers' responses evolved. Responding teachers were classified according to their years of experience:

beginning teachers, 1 to 2 years; teachers in the critical years, 3 to 7 years (during this time many teachers decide to pursue another career); experienced teachers, 8 to 19 years; experienced plus teachers, 20 to 30 years; and, veteran teachers, 31 or more years.

Twelve of the teachers reported their school location as urban, twenty-six represented suburban areas, and sixty-nine represented rural areas. "Small city" was cited by four of the respondents while two teachers did not provide their school setting. Schools were classified for this study according to the number of classrooms which comprised their school building or complex. The information received indicated (1) six schools contained 1 to 7 classrooms, (2) thirty-four contained 8 to 19 classrooms, (3) forty-two contained 14 to 21, and (4) thirty schools had 22 or more classrooms.

The number of pupils were categorized to reflect the enrollment in each classroom. Responses indicated that three teachers had 10 or less students, twenty-eight had 11 to 20 students, seventy-four teachers had 21 to 30 students, while seven reported 31 or more students. One teacher did not give the classroom enrollment.

Although seventeen basal reading series were used by 113 responding teachers, seven publishers appeared at the top of the ranking as being consistently used. The highest ranking publishers were: Houghton Mifflin Co.; Ginn and Co.; Scott, Foresman & Co.; Economy Co.; Holt, Rinehart & Winston Co.; Macmillan Publishing Co.; and, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

OPEN-ENDED STATEMENTS ON AREAS OF CONCERN

Teachers' responses to open-ended statements were numerous and diversified. Seven areas of concern were mentioned repeatedly. These areas were the use of the current basal series, the basal series incorporated with other approaches to reading instruction, satisfactions with the basal series, dissatisfaction with the basal series, grouping within the classroom/school, supplementary materials, and teachers' abilities.

Areas of Concern

Use of the current basal series. In most instances,

teachers reacted favorably to their basal series. They felt the children had "phenomenal success" and were scoring in the above average range on standardized tests. They were pleased with the number of supplementary activities and the many instructional strategies provided in their basal series. Teachers believed they had flexibility within their reading programs and stated they did not feel pressured to closely follow a basal series. They also believed that their specific basal effectively met the students' needs. Most teachers felt there was a good balance between the teaching of skills and the amount of reading practice provided. Most schools chose their textbooks according to the needs of their children, i.e., they selected phonics-oriented readers, linguistic readers, whole word approach readers, or language experienced-based programs.

Some teachers reacted unfavorably, not to the concept of basal series, but to the use of specific basals. Considering the children's needs, some teachers stated that a specific basal reader within the classroom was "too difficult for the slower reading students," or "a second series, more difficult, is needed for the top group," or children "who are developmentally unready to differentiate sounds are not successful with an auditorily-based approach."

Other teachers indicated that their series were lacking in phonic skills, language skills, or comprehension skills relating to study skills. Beginning teachers considered a basal series with an "exceptional" manual as mandatory in order to "grow, expand, experiment and create." Experienced teachers considered a basal series a necessity because "it is a base from which to teach," and "teachers cannot reinvent the wheel every night to prepare for each day." However, as one teacher so aptly stated, "After ten years of experience...I have yet to find a consummate basal program to meet all the needs of the children I teach. The individual teacher must still bring to her teaching additional elements, such as language experience, recreational reading, literature and dramatic expression for a high-interest, well-rounded program."

Teachers were continuously searching for new basal series to use in their schools, but at times the same series, updated and improved, was selected. At other times new series were introduced to help satisfy the needs of children within the schools. In many instances the new series were

adopted, but not purchased because of funding.

Basal series incorporated with other approaches. "I feel the basal reader approach is a good foundation especially for beginning reading teachers, but I think it should not be the total reading method in the classroom. A good teacher will use the basal and integrate many different methods to make reading fun and read individual students' needs." This reaction from an experienced teacher was reflected in many responses. Other teachers stated, "The basal series has been good for building our program, but it is in no way responsible for all the success in our reading program;" "Reading instruction must involve a variety of methods and be monitored individually, as closely as possible."

Several teachers reported that the reading program is supplemented with a structured writing program. "Process writing is an integral part of our reading program since the children write many of their own books which, in turn, motivates reading." "No series, no matter how well chosen, can be used by itself as the only means of teaching reading" "No basal series ever supplies all that is demanded or required for effective teaching of any subject."

Satisfaction with the basal series. In varying degrees teachers expressed satisfaction with their basal series. Some comments from the responding teachers included: "I like the reading series we are now using as it has more than enough supplementary materials to build on each individual's needs," "We've been very satisfied with our basal series. . . the majority of our students are reading far above their grade level," "I really like the basal series I am using. . . I feel it covers all the necessary skills needed for my grade level." Another teacher commented, "I am pleased to be using the basal. It is an excellent program and lends itself to many different instructional methods. We take pride in our reading program and all work toward a common goal. This is what makes it successful."

Other teachers stated: "A wide variety of activities are presented as supplementary work in the basal. This includes various types of experience stories and other language arts involvement. Therefore, the basal can be viewed as a varied total approach," "Using a basal throughout our school has given reading instruction a consistency and sequence. Our grade level has shown marked improvement in reading skills

since the basal was adopted," "I think the basal series provides a backbone for a continuous reading program," and finally, "This particular series has delightful stories with attractive illustrations."

Dissatisfaction with the basal series. Teachers' dissatisfaction was expressed in many ways. One teacher said, ". . . I feel a little resentful that publishing companies are essentially dictating our programs. It is extremely difficult to choose a really good series that is equally strong at all grade levels. I also feel that a good share of the materials take more time to present than they are worth."

Other comments included: "Basal series are better now than a few years ago, but still not satisfying. They are too restricted. . . . They are very difficult for low readers," "I would like to teach reading without a basal reader. There is something about a reading book which evokes an 'ugh' response from students. I feel student interest in reading would be increased with different types of material," "Most series don't get into the meat of reading fast enough for first graders," "I do not feel that the reading series helps my students with critical and more difficult reading done in Social Studies and Science. I would like to try teaching reading through the content subjects and supplementing it with more enjoyable stories and books. Our series is supposed to be a complete language arts series, but falls way short of succeeding."

Additional comments were: "Generally, I am satisfied . . . more specifically, I would like to see more emphasis placed on content comprehension. I would also like to see a reading series that incorporates a fair amount of language-oriented material and sufficient practice to accompany that material," "Most basal readers are very narrow in their vocabulary selections," "I feel that more comprehension material should come with the basal series. Also, more written work is needed--I think there is a direct correlation between what is written and what is learned." One teacher summarized the feelings of most teachers when she stated, "No basal series ever supplies all that is demanded or required for effective teaching of any subject."

Grouping within the classroom/school. Comments from teachers indicated that ability grouping was the predominant method for assigning children to groups either in or outside

their classrooms. Some teachers voiced their concerns about the suitability of basal readers regarding low-level or above-level students in self-contained rooms. For example, "I enjoy teaching reading. The problem comes with the wide range of reading abilities within a class. I, therefore, have five reading groups daily. This makes it very difficult if not impossible to do all the various strands of instruction that are mentioned in the Teacher's Guide." A second comment was, "When I taught slow readers, I found the basal series not nearly so useful. Those readers could not function well under a basal system. They need more individualized work."

Teachers expressed satisfaction with cross-grade grouping where teachers have equal numbers of groups and "the majority of children were reading above their grade levels." In many situations, provisions for grouping outside the classroom dealt mainly with gifted, EMR, learning disabled, behavioral disordered, physically handicapped, Chapter I, and remedial reading students.

Supplementary materials. Although the majority of teachers praised basal readers, many teachers reported they use materials which are either provided with their series, or outside the basal, to supplement their reading program. Some of the comments included: "I like the reading series we are now using as it has more than enough supplementary materials to build on each individual's needs," "I feel that the basal reader along with the use of supplementary materials constitutes an effective reading program," "(The basal series) provides extra or supplementary materials that are very helpful," and finally, "To individualize instruction we . . . use other materials to supplement and/or enrich the program."

Some teachers believed that more materials should be readily available for class use. For example, one teacher said, "We have a variety of reading materials, along with our own media center, whereby a teacher may check out materials to fill the needs of each student." Another teacher said, "I feel I do not have enough supplementary materials in my classroom (magazines, kits, etc.). These are available in the learning center, but I would prefer more materials in the classroom. A lack of funds makes many types of materials unavailable."

Teachers' abilities. Several teachers believed that the

success of a basal reading program was only as effective as the classroom teacher. One teacher stated, ". . . to have a good reading program you also need good teaching . . . they complement each other." Another said ". . . we have an excellent reading series--our teachers work very hard teaching reading in our school." A third teacher remarked, "The quality of reading instruction depends on the quality of teacher training in reading. I believe teachers of elementary children should have at least nine to twelve hours of reading classes required for certification." Another teacher wrote, "I feel too many individualized programs/language experience, etc., are geared to the teacher's ability. . . a teacher simply does not have time to deal with each student individually at all times."

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Because basal readers are used almost universally in public schools, open-ended statements were requested from the sources who could provide the necessary information, i.e., elementary teachers in self-contained classrooms. The following reactions were expressed:

- Teachers acclaimed the concept of basal series but felt that specific series did not satisfy children's individual needs, i.e., some series were more readily accepted by above-average readers, other series by slower readers. Children's needs determined the type of basal reader adopted for each school.
- Basal series served as the core of reading instruction which was enriched through other approaches. Teachers felt that most basal series are integrated very easily with other approaches to teaching reading.
- Most teachers believed there was a balance between the teaching of skills and the amount of practice reading within basal series. They further believed that higher level critical skills, content comprehension skills, and study skills needed more emphasis in basal series.
- Higher standardized test scores appeared to result from the use of developmental, structured basal readers.
- Ability grouping was the predominant method of assigning children to reading groups. Grouping outside the classroom was prevalent for special students.

- Teachers preferred to have more supplementary materials housed within their classrooms rather than in a media or learning center.
- Although basal series have improved during past years and are continuing to improve, the success of a basal reader was considered to be only as effective as the classroom teacher.

The information provided by teachers has specific implications for the possible improvement of basal series. For example, teachers felt they should have more input in the revisions of basal readers, and should be more involved in the writing of accompanying workbooks. Several teachers thought that higher level skills, such as content comprehension and critical reading skills, must be incorporated in basal readers and workbooks. They also felt that more writing assignments needed to be included in activities in the teachers' guides as well as workbooks.

Teachers who implement basal series have strong opinions and reactions. Because of this, a logical consideration for publishers would be greater teacher involvement in text revision and revitalization.

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