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# READ FIRST, TEST LATER: MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE 'OVERSKILLED' READER

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Is there really a problem with overskilled readers in our schools? Yes, but not necessarily with the kind of skill that suggests proficiency in reading. Instead, there is a problem when students are routinely subjected to a myriad of isolated, ordered skills all in the name of reading instruction. Workbooks and ditto sheets are common purveyors of "overskill." But the real culprit is an over-reliance on basal assessment tests for progress and placement; particularly those which sacrifice comprehension in favor of decoding, structural analysis and reference skills to name a few. What actually occurs in the classroom to perpetuate "overskill?"

## A Typical Classroom Scenario

At the start of the school year and usually in the first grade, students are assessed with the commercially prepared basal inventory to determine their starting level in the series. Often this test is administered individually and consists of a word list, a series of paragraphs and a list of questions. In some instances, first grade students are automatically placed in the first grade basal without benefit of prior assessment. Once placed in a basal, the students encounter unit lessons which typically involve the following steps: (1) reading and discussion, (2) skills instruction, and (3) skills assessment.

Each basal reader is divided into sections (usually three or four) and at the end of each section is a review test designed to assess mastery of all the skills taught therein. It is conceivable that a teacher who relies rigidly on the guidebook will also pre-and post-test each individual skill that falls between these sections or unit tests. Thus, if a student does not pass these tests, the teacher can provide additional practice on the skills missed, and then retest to determine if mastery was achieved. If a student passes the unit test, she/he can move up to the next section.

An understanding of these skills, it must be noted, has no direct bearing on the students' ability to read and comprehend the basal literature selections. Although it would seem logical that students would receive instruction in these skills and would be asked to directly apply them in the context of the stories, this is often not the case. Instead, the skills portion of the basal and the literature portion of the basal function largely as dichotomous entities bound in a single teaching manual.

And so it goes, throughout each successive basal--reading and skills practice followed by intermittent skills assessment. Basal placement and progress, then, is determined by how accurately and rapidly a student can master certain skills, not by how well he can read--in the true sense of the word.

Observe what occurs when individual students are placed within this framework. Take the case of Roger, who is in the fifth grade and has an IQ of 111 and a total reading percentile of 74--neither of which is a particularly eye-catching score. He was assessed in the first grade with the basal reading inventory which, at that time, placed him in the grade level basal. Since then he has proceeded along book by book with the others in his group, reading all the stories, completing every practice page in each accompanying workbook and passing every unit test. When he reached the fifth grade his teacher administered a teacher-made inventory to the class and found that Roger could read and comprehend with 90% accuracy material two levels above his current placement. Yet, a number of questions remained in the teacher's mind: "If I move him up the two levels, what basal reader will his sixth grade teacher use? and more importantly, what about all the skills instruction he will miss?"

A similar situation has occurred when Lisa, a new second grade student, arrived at mid-year from a neighboring state. The reading card in Lisa's cumulative folder indicated that she had been placed in the second book of ABC Basal Reading Series--a different series from the one used in the new school system. Seeing her placement level stated on the reading card, the second grade teacher administered the unit skills test and found that Lisa was deficient in certain skills such as recognizing diphthongs, variants, and syllabication. Consequently, she was placed in the second basal reader to ensure that she "catch up" on her basic skills before moving on. Lisa's parents, concerned over her seemingly slow progress, enlist the aid of a reading specialist who determines that Lisa's reading instructional level is third grade.

Both Roger and Lisa have much in common in this situation. Both are entrapped by their initial basal placement such that any reading gains made through the years go virtually unnoticed.

In Lisa's case, the skills test revealed many so-called deficiencies. However, given that she had started in a different basal with a different scope and sequence, she may not have been taught those particular skills as yet. Indeed, given her reading ability, it is evident that she hardly needs those skills to read and comprehend successfully in the first place.

Yet Roger and Lisa represent a number of "overskilled" readers who should probably fly to their next destination rather than take a train which stops intermittently along the way. Such is the plight of readers who are "tracked" through a series of skills whether they need them or not. In fact, the very issue of the existence of reading subskills remains a controversial topic in the literature.

#### Do Reading Subskills Really Exist?

The nature and complexity of the scope and sequence charts

which accompany many commercial reading series would seem to suggest that an actual hierarchy of reading skills does indeed exist. Yet no reading programs to date have provided sound empirical evidence to validate either the specific skills advocated or the sequence of their instruction (Stennett, Smythe & Hardy, 1975).

Rosenshine (1980) addressed a similar issue by exploring the data from various sources including factor analytic studies, elementary textbooks, authoritative lists of comprehension skills and commercially prepared reading series. His investigations failed to find support for the existence of either distinct reading skills or a hierarchy of reading skills.

A study by McNeill (1974) suggested that proficient readers may have acquired certain subskills after or during the process of learning to read rather than as a prerequisite to reading. Consequently, the question whether specific subskills are a cause or an effect of a high level reading skill remains unanswered.

Farr (1969) reviewed studies involving the measurement of reading subskills and found more negative than positive evidence to support current measures of reading subskills. Still, standardized tests and commercially developed informal assessment tests typically divide reading into a number of separate subskill areas. Farr commented that "in every instance this division is arbitrary since there is almost no research evidence supporting it" (p.33). He further states that "no one seems to know whether subskills of reading can be measured" (p. 71).

Downing (1982) views reading as a skill, the major feature of which is the integration of those complex behaviors which comprise the total pattern. Integration, he maintains, involves practice, and practice means performing the whole skill rather than simply rehearsing its parts. Or more precisely stated, "one learns to fish by fishing, one learns to play chess by playing chess, and one learns to read by reading" (p. 537).

A recent article by Bussis (1982) outlines several ingredients which combine to make an "incongruous" reading program. Among these ingredients are 1) children who can read books but cannot correctly answer skills test items, and 2) teaching/testing programs that focus solely on skills. While her concern was largely with classroom management systems which break reading into hundreds of discrete skills, her message applies to any programs in which the classroom emphasis on reading skills is paramount to actual reading.

Yet from the practitioner's perspective, many teachers are accountable to administrators and parents for providing objective data from these skills tests to monitor student progress and achievement. And it is true that the basal program does represent a structured "road map" which gives teachers direction and guidance along the way. However, it is the contention of this article that teachers need to feel free to take alternate routes when they deem it necessary, to linger awhile longer at certain locations and to choose not to cover an entire area when they have been there before. For these reasons, this article proposes that a

read (from the basal) first, test (for skills) later philosophy be followed.

#### What Is Meant by a "Read First, Test Later" Philosophy?

A read first, test later philosophy simply means that the students' reading ability is to be utilized for basal placement rather than their ability to master isolated skills. In this way, talented readers are not "held back" because of a deficiency in specific skill areas, i.e., short vowels, consonant blends, or "ly" endings. Testing for skills development follows rather than precedes comprehension and is not the major determiner of basal placement and progress. And, since literature selections and skills instruction are the two primary components of the basal reader, it seems logical that assessment should be conducted in both of these areas. To achieve this end, a combination of two conventional, teacher-developed diagnostic procedures is advocated. One assessment device consists of a series of graded passages and accompanying questions to be used in the initial placement.

Another device is an informal skills pretest to determine at the outset which skills to stress and which to eliminate, in view of the abilities of a given group of students. While the former diagnostic device has been in existence since 1946 (Betts), the procedures to be described are unique. The modifications make this assessment instrument somewhere between an informal reading inventory administered orally and individually, and graded passages administered silently to an entire class.

Also inherent in a read first, test later philosophy is an emphasis on the teacher as decision-maker. Instead of depending upon a predetermined sequence of instructional events, which may or may not be appropriate for all of the students, the teacher uses data from various sources to determine the direction and goals for the reading class.

#### Read (from the basal) First - Graded Passages

Since it is a well-established fact that there is much intra-text variation in terms of the readability levels of basal readers (Bradley & Ames, 1977), the first concern in developing a series of graded passages is in choosing passages which actually represent each basal reader to be used. To obtain representative passages, Fuchs, Fuchs and Deno (1982) recommend that a mean readability score be calculated using five (or more) 100-word passages from each basal level. From these five passages, two are chosen which most nearly represent the mean level of the basal under consideration. These two passages then can be excerpted from each level in the basal series beginning, for example, with the preprimer level and ending with grade eight.

Next, the teacher develops five questions determining knowledge of both literal and inferential comprehension. Three to five vocabulary terms from each passage can be underlined to be defined on paper by the students (especially appropriate for intermediate level pupils) as a rough index of their vocabulary and concept knowledge. To expedite the preparation, teachers in a school can cooperatively develop these passages at each grade level. Being

certain that each grade has its own series of passages will ensure that the inventory the students are exposed to every year has not been encountered before.

In a traditional informal inventory, these passages are presented to students individually to determine the quantity of oral reading errors. However, as teachers know, this procedure is a time-consuming one and often poses a threat to classroom management. Instead, the teacher divides the class into groups according to the basal level completed last year. Then, in groups, students begin at the next level reading and answering questions until they reach their perceived frustration level. Encouraging "mumble reading" (Cunningham, 1978), wherein students read aloud "to themselves," ensures that no one student is singled out to read and be heard by the others in the group. This procedure allows the teacher to move through the group listening to students' reading, attending to their errors, asking about their knowledge of particular word meanings, and requiring that they retell portions of what they have read. During this listening and circulation period, any notable observations are recorded in order to make a comparison with the students' performance on the question-answer portion of the inventory (see Figure 1).

Another subjective element involves asking students to record next to their answers to each passage, an X if the passage is too difficult, a Y if it is just right, or a Z if it is too easy. Students' perceptions of their reading abilities can be quite revealing and, in some cases, very accurate.

When students first reach a set of passages on which they fall below 80% comprehension, in general, it is advisable to place them in the level at which they scored 80% or better. However, these objective, numerical figures must be interpreted in conjunction with the observational and self-reporting data mentioned previously. Basals of varied levels should be available for the purpose of either confirming or refuting the initial placement data. Should a question arise about a student's performance, have him/her read orally from other stories in the basal and ask for a retelling of what was just read. In this way, the teacher can re-examine students whose scores seem out of line with other available objective and subjective data.

#### Test (for skills) Later - The Informal Skills Pretest

Once placement in the basal is determined, the next phase consists of finding out if the students in the group really need all the skills instruction contained in that particular book. To do this, an informal skills pretest is developed which assesses, in one sitting, some of the major skills of each book or unit.

First, the teacher analyzes the unit (or book) to determine the skills emphasized. For example, the skills of a third grade basal might include punctuation, dictionary usage, syllabication, structural analysis, context usage and comprehension skills. Then, the teacher develops approximately 5 to 10 test items for each area deemed necessary. (An alternative is to use or draw from the basal assessment tests which are readily available and which accompany each unit in the series.) This pretest is administered

Figure 1

Student \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
 Basal last used \_\_\_\_\_ Class \_\_\_\_\_

INDIVIDUAL

STUDENT PLACEMENT PROFILE

Questions

Basal Levels	Literal		Inferential			Total	Student Rating	Observations
	1	2	3	4	5			

Overall Comments:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

to the students and scored using an 80 percent criterion for mastery, 70 percent for needs review, and 60 percent or below for non-mastery. The information is charted on a group profile form (see figure 2) which depicts the group's strengths and weaknesses and provides instructional directions for the teacher. In this instance, the teacher has decided not to pretest for comprehension skills since both standardized test data and professional judgment have pointed to schoolwide and classwide weaknesses in comprehension. Consequently, all lessons involving comprehension will be stressed.

The profile shown indicates the group has an understanding of syllabication and dictionary usage, but needs additional work in the remaining three areas. The practice book or workbook, too, is used only in conjunction with the profiled needs instead of being used from cover to cover. Individual students who show a weakness in a particular area (i.e. Allison, dictionary usage) can be given additional instruction by the teacher or a peer until an understanding is reached. With this information the teacher can selectively choose the skills instruction to be emphasized, eliminate what is unnecessary and accord more time to the literature selections, their comprehension and appreciation.

It is important that these diagnostic procedures, or something similar, be integrated into each teacher's beginning of the year activities. Then each student is given a renewed opportunity to start the year without the stigma of "basal labeling" and the prospect of "basal tracking."

Figure 2

Subject: Reading

Date: August 31

Book Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade Level \_\_\_\_\_

GROUP PROFILE

Name	Syllabication	Punctuation	Struct. Analysis	Context	Dictionary
Roger	+	+	-	+	+
Ellis	+	R	-	-	+
Lisa	+	+	-	-	+
Helene	+	-	-	R	+
Mark	+	-	R	-	+
David	+	-	-	R	+
Allison	+	R	R	-	R

80% or above + Mastery      70% = R (Needs Review)  
 60% or below — NonMastery (-)

Summary

While the assessment procedures advocated in this article are not entirely new, research has shown that the problems to which they were initially addressed still persist in our schools



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