The Place of Basal Reading Programs in Teaching Reading Comprehension

Joanne Case

Manchester College

May 6, 2011

Abstract

Educators continue to search out the best methods of reading instruction. Historically, reading teachers have emphasized either the traditional approach grounded in behaviorism, or the holistic approach grounded in constructivist learning: basal programs versus literature-based teaching. Standardized testing has pushed classrooms toward skill-based basal programs, but most studies show that students comprehend better when they learn to apply integrated approaches to authentic literature. Researchers agree that students benefit most from a balance between the two extremes. Since a majority of schools use basals in some form, basals hold significant potential to improve students' performance, especially if publishers quickly implement top reading research into their basal programs. Therefore, teachers should maximize basals' effectiveness by identifying and compensating for weaknesses in basals.

The Place of Basal Programs in Teaching Reading Comprehension

Oh, Jane.

Look and see.

See Baby go.

(Graves, Juel, & Graves, 2007, p.44)

Where do basal readers belong is 21st century reading instruction? Basal readers have changed significantly since the heyday of the infamous Dick and Jane series. A school's reading curriculum may consist of a comprehensive basal series, carefully chosen literature, or some combination of the two. A literature based curriculum relies on well known quality books. Teachers find or develop their own activities to teach state standards using the power of quality, authentic language and ideas in trade books. In contrast, a basal reader curriculum uses a commercially produced textbook that contains stories written to develop specific skills. Basal readers are often interdisciplinary, and the publishers match their activities with core standards. Which kind of curriculum develops students who comprehend what they read? A look at the history of reading instruction shows the virtues and limit of basals and how basals have shaped children's learning. Experts agree that students of all abilities and backgrounds stand to gain the most from a balanced, research based approach to reading comprehension (Blair-Larsen & Williams, 1999). However, not all experts agree that this balance should include a basal program, but there are enough practical and pedagogical reasons to support basals that the education community should invest in improving and integrating them into their proper place in the early to middle elementary school curriculum.

History

Educators have long debated the best method of reading instruction. The debate only intensified since researchers began to apply the field of psychology to the process of learning to read (Moats, 2006). Most methods gravitate toward one of two extremes: the traditional approach or the holistic approach. The traditional approach is teacher centered, direct instruction guided by a commercially produced basal reading series. The program usually includes a teacher guide, workbooks, a textbook, and sets of leveled books that address a long list of discrete literacy skills. Thanks to a script in the teacher guide, teachers know exactly what to say and assess in their language arts classes. In contrast, a holistic or whole language approach is more student centered. A holistic approach assumes that students construct meaning in the interplay between themselves and the text, so teachers following this philosophy use authentic literature to tie together speaking, listening, writing, reading. In holistic-leaning classrooms, one would find literature focus units, literature circles, and reading and writing workshops. A deeper look at the extremes reveals a crucial fundamental difference: basals are grounded in behaviorism, whereas holistic approaches assume more constructivism in learning (Tompkins, 2010).

After exhausting the excesses of both approaches, reading scholars moved for a "relentless enlightened balance" which integrated aspects of both holistic and traditional programs (Adams, 1990) and the International Reading Association (IRA)'s adoption of seven principles of balanced instruction (Blair-Larsen & Williams, 1999). The IRA promoted a balance of nearly every research-based aspect of reading, such as mixing student- and teacher-centered activities, maximizing literature in a diverse classroom, linking assessment with instruction, and using various strategies for developing vocabulary and comprehension. Since the No Child Left Behind act of 2002 emphasized high stakes standardized, norm-referenced tests, classrooms have

trended toward streamlined teacher centered direct instruction (Thames, Reeves, Kazelskis, York, Boling, Newell, & Wang, 2008). The balanced approach fell off balance again. These pendulum swings beg the question: what is the proper place for basal reading programs?

Basals: An easy target

Proponents of literature based curriculum say that basals separate reading into unnatural components and endless subskills, making learning to read more difficult. Some educators criticize the stories in basals as stilted or shallow. If teachers believe in modeling, they should model the *best* available literature—literature with rich characters and plot lines and relevant, natural language. Critics also wonder how children learn to read when basals require students to spend so much time doing activities other than reading (Graves, Juel, & Graves, 2007).

A good deal of research in the past 10 years favored holistic teaching over basals. For example, one study showed that children who received integrated individualized instruction comprehended better than children using the district-mandated basal program (Thames, Reeves, York, Boling, Newell, & Wang, 2008). Another study compared students using a basal with students using a multi-pronged literacy approach (the "Four Blocks" approach). Again, students in the integrated program outperformed the students using the basal (Popplewell & Doty, 2001).

Finding studies like these requires almost no effort. They seem to share a few self-serving attributes. First, the assessment ties so closely with the instruction that the treatment group is virtually guaranteed to outperform the control group. For example, in the Four Blocks study (Popplewell & Doty, 2001), the researchers admit that the students in the treatment group scored higher in retelling because, unlike the basal program which focuses on written work and answering questions, the Four Blocks framework requires students to practice retelling! Second,

a new, interesting, integrated program with its own testing tool may beat out the basal simply because students find it new and interesting for the duration of the study. Last, few studies track long term effects of basals versus holistic approaches.

Improving Basals

Instead of denigrating basals, the studies should drive basals to greater heights. In fact, a big reason why today's basals do not resemble the excerpt at the beginning of this paper is that instead of ceding the argument, basal developers have responded to research based criticisms and have improved their products accordingly (Graves, Juel, & Graves, 2007). For example, the Houghton Mifflin 1993 basal textbook features made-to-order stories, but the more recent MacMillan 2008 basal features a book from professional writer Ellen Stoll Walsh's award winning *Dot and Jabber* series. Maybe this explains why basals linger in schools and the debate persists: basals keep improving, but they will never stand alone.

How teachers use basals

Basals are closely aligned with state standards and state standardized tests, a boon for overworked teachers. Unfortunately, teachers may allow the basal to think for them. Teachers may not feel responsibility for their teaching, and they may not feel motivated to develop expertise in teaching the strategies that the basals do not cover well (Shannon, 1989). In short, basals have a reputation for "deskilling" teachers.

A survey of teachers contradicts this reputation, however. Most teachers claimed that basals actually empower them by offering a variety of teaching ideas. Far from simply following the script, 77% of respondents considered themselves "eclectics" and drew from many methods

and materials. This attitude figured in the comments section of the study; for example, "I control the basal; it doesn't control me" (Baumann & Heubach, 1996).

Third grade teachers at Manchester Elementary School agreed. These teachers are not stuck in the 80s either: Two have been teaching fewer than five years; the other three have between six and twenty years of teaching experience. They all fought for a comprehensive basal program (Rigby) specifically for the sake of the one-third of their students who are still emergent readers. They claim it is easier to build "up" from a basal than to build "down" from free standing literature. All students begin with the "anchor book," and proceed to either leveled basal readers or literature, depending on their readiness. The teachers confidently differentiate for all student abilities by adding literature to the curriculum (personal communication, March 16, 2011). Everyone, not just fans of whole language, agrees that the curriculum ought to focus on students' needs. Any "preset curriculum" may indeed be "suspect" (Graves, Juel, & Graves, 2007), but a basal only enslaves a teacher if he or she surrenders judgment to the basal. Most teachers rely on basals less as they gain more experience (personal communication, March 16, 2011).

Comprehension in basals

Comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading. Research on classroom and instruction and basals in the 1980s and 1990s showed that comprehension was being tested but not taught. Teachers assumed that reading and comprehension practice would indirectly turn students into comprehending readers (Pilonieta, 2010). During this period of the 20th century, conclusive research was available, but it has been slow to appear in the classroom. The best research in comprehension centers on roughly 12 strategies: predicting, setting purpose, imagery, clarifying,

monitoring comprehension, QAR, making inferences, GIST, summarizing, story grammar, graphic organizers, and reciprocal teaching. As for how to best teach the strategies, the best research suggests that teachers first *instruct* students about the strategies, ask the students to *apply* the strategies, and teach them *when* to apply which strategies in a coordinated fashion rather than one at a time (Tompkins, 2010; Grave, Juel, & Graves, 2007).

A study analyzing five basal reading programs found that today's five most popular basals (Harcourt, Houghton Mifflin, Macmillan, Open Court, and Scott Foresman) cover only two-thirds of the research based comprehension strategies listed above. All other strategies found in the basals had little basis in research. As for how the basals present the strategies, unfortunately, the study found almost no instruction about the strategies themselves, and no guidance on when they might be used or combined; the basals simply directed teachers to ask students to apply the strategies (Pilonieta, 2010). This finding shows that basals have improved over the past decade, but still lack a robust comprehension component. Perhaps this pattern explains why 20% of poor readers in 4th grade can decode and read fairly fluently (examples of subskills that are emphasized in basals), but still cannot comprehend text very well (Catts & Hogan, 2002).

Why bother with basals?

If basals have failed to build comprehension, should they be deemphasized, or should they be improved? If schools reject the whole idea of quality basals because of some weaknesses, they miss out on a strong support system, especially for new teachers. There is much to gain in continuing the pursuit of developing the Great American Basal. Pilonieta (2010) argues that "the nature of basals, the fact that they cover all areas of the language arts curriculum, their ubiquity

in elementary schools, and their use over the course of several years, makes them an idea medium for strategy instruction" (p.168). Improving one good basal program can impact more students than *only* flooding the internet with literature focus unit ideas, or *only* requiring preservice teachers to better understand how to teach comprehension (e.g., through think alouds). To this end, the entire community of stakeholders in education should take *joint* responsibility for *improving* and *supplementing* basal programs. Publishers should work more closely with university teacher education programs. Schools should only adopt basals that address a thorough treatment of all research based comprehension strategies. Preservice teachers should learn to identify weaknesses in published basal programs and supplement them with effective techniques. Schools should focus professional development opportunities in areas that their adopted basal readers lack.

Conclusion

Rather than rejecting basals for their perceived and real historical and current weaknesses in comprehension instruction, educators should harness the advantages of basal programs. Basals do not teach; the teacher teaches. Therefore, teachers, teacher education programs, and publishers must jointly strengthen and customize, even transform this valuable and ubiquitous tool. A language arts curriculum that balances a user friendly, time saving, standards-linked, research based basal, with holistic literature components achieves Adams' elusive "relentless enlightened balance" (1990). Realizing this balance requires a relentless, enlightened effort, but in the words of Dick and Jane, "Look and see!" The effort pays off.

References

Adams, M. J. (1990). *Beginning to read: Thinking and learning about print*. Boston, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Baumann, J. F., & Heubach, K. M. (1996). Do basal readers deskill teachers? A national survey of educators' use and opinions of basals. *Elementary School Journal*, 96 (5), 511–527.

Blair-Larsen, S.M. & Williams, K.A. (1999). The balanced reading program: Helping all students achieve success. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Catts, H.W., & Hogan, T.P. (2002). Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for the Study of Reading: *The fourth grade slump: Late emerging poor readers*. Chicago, IL: Erlbaum.

Graves, M.F., Juel, C., & Graves, B.B. (2007). *Teaching reading in the 21st century* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.

Moats, L. (2006). *Speech to print: Language essentials for teachers*. Rensselaer, NY: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

Pilonieta, P. (2010). Instruction of research-based comprehension strategies in basal reading programs. *Reading Psychology*, 31 (2), 150–175.

Popplewell, S. R., & Doty, D. E. (2001). Classroom instruction and reading comprehension: A comparison of one basal reader approach and the Four-Blocks Framework. *Reading Psychology*, 22 (2), 83–94.

Shannon, P. (1980). *Broken promises: Reading instruction in twentieth-century America*. Granby, MA: Bergin & Garvey.

Thames, D. G., Reeves, C., Kazelskis, R., York, K., Boling, C., Newell, K., & Wang, Y. (2008). Reading comprehension: Effects of individualized, integrated language arts as a reading approach with struggling readers. *Reading Psychology,* 29 (1), 86–115.

Tompkins, G. (2010). *Literacy for the 21st century: A balanced approach*. Boston, MA: Pearson, Inc.