

LITERATURE, INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS, AND TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMPREHENSION SKILLS: A RESEARCH REPORT

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Over the nation, basal readers are widely used as an important part of developmental reading instruction in the overwhelming majority of classrooms through grade six—and, to a lesser extent, in grades seven and eight. It is estimated that 80 to 90 percent of elementary school classrooms use basal reader series in some form (Aukerman, 1981).

Starting at second grade level—if not earlier—most of the selections in the pupil texts are excerpts or adaptations from children's books or periodicals. The teacher's manual suggests an instructional program in which *initial* instruction in the development of most skills is based upon selections in the pupils' texts.

The selections in the pupils' texts include a variety of types of literature—and often are selections written by well-known and talented writers of children's books. But no basal text was ever intended to be a total reading program. Teachers are encouraged to use selections in basals as springboards for further reading. An excerpt from E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web* is a clue for the teacher to have several copies of the book available at the completion of instruction involving the excerpt. Consequently, teachers are generally expected to maintain a current awareness of children's literature and to incorporate an emphasis on library books to reinforce skills, understandings, and appreciations that have previously been taught.

The purpose of this investigation was: 1) to determine instructional staff perceptions of comprehension skill development, 2) to analyze the comprehension skill development of selected elementary school basal reading materials, and 3) to analyze and recommend children's literature selections and teaching strategies to support skill development in comprehension.

In an effort to accomplish the first of these objectives, the following 12-point rating scale was employed.

RATING SCALE: USING CHILDREN'S BOOKS TO ENHANCE COMPREHENSION AND ENJOYMENT
(Ira E. Aaron, University of Georgia)

Directions: The practices listed below are often recommended as guides when using children's literature in enhancing comprehension and enjoyment. Though basal readers depend heavily upon children's literature as the vehicle for teaching reading skills, the emphasis here is on using library books for children to reinforce some skill/understanding that has previously been taught and to encourage students to read for enjoyment. Indicate by drawing a line around the appropriate number the extent to which the practice is being following in your class (or classes). Use the following scale:

- | | |
|--------------------|-------------------|
| 1—Almost always | 4—Seldom or never |
| 2—Most of the time | 5—Undecided |
| 3—Sometimes | 6—Not applicable |

- | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Decoding and comprehension skills are taught systematically to students in order to assure that they can read for understanding, enjoyment and appreciation. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 2. Skills that cannot be taught (or taught well) through use of children's literature are developed in other ways. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 3. The teacher keeps in mind that often the only purpose for reading children's literature is for enjoyment and appreciation. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 4. The teacher avoids asking too many questions | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |

about a book children have read (or have had read to them), recognizing that overanalysis of a selection can interfere with enjoyment and appreciation.

- | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5. The teacher emphasizes enjoyment and appreciation when poetry is used in instruction. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 6. The teacher reads regularly to students. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 7. A wide variety of recreational/informational books on a wide range of reading levels is accessible to students. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 8. The daily/weekly schedule includes time reserved for students to read on their own, without too much teacher supervision. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 9. Students often share what they read, and time for sharing is provided in the school day/week. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 10. The teacher keeps up-to-date on new children's books and other reading materials. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 11. The teacher and the school librarian maintain a good working relationship that fosters improved reading instruction through use of children's literature. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 12. The teacher enjoys reading and that enjoyment is obvious to students. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |

These 12 practices are often recommended as guides for using children's literature in enhancing comprehension and enjoyment. Although statements on the rating scale were not taken directly from any source, elements of all except item 2 are supported by current reading methodology texts (Harris and Sipay, 1980; Smith and Robinson, 1980; Burns and Roe, 1980; Kennedy, 1981; Olson and Dillner, 1982). Based on teaching experience and elementary school staff development, item 2 was added in order to assess teacher perceptions of the feasibility of the use of literature and its alternatives for teaching comprehension skills.

The rating scale was administered to 27 inservice teachers, 26 preservice teachers and 28 paraprofessionals—all of whom were currently assigned to elementary classrooms in grades kindergarten through six. The results are reported in Table 1.

TABLE 1
RESPONSES OF INSERVICE TEACHERS, PRESERVICE TEACHERS, AND PARAPROFESSIONALS TO RATING SCALE ON USE OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN TEACHING COMPREHENSION, IN PERCENTAGES

Items*	1 and 2**			3 and 4**			5 and 6**		
	Inservice Teachers	Preservice Teachers	Paraprofessionals	Inservice Teachers	Preservice Teachers	Paraprofessionals	Inservice Teachers	Preservice Teachers	Paraprofessionals
1	78	57	61	22	31	0	0	12	39
2	70	61	43	19	27	18	11	12	39
3	78	58	43	22	27	22	0	15	35
4	63	46	32	33	19	18	4	35	50
5	52	35	39	29	23	25	19	42	36
6	89	50	50	11	38	22	0	12	28
7	89	81	43	11	19	7	0	0	50
8	74	61	36	26	27	32	0	12	32
9	37	46	25	60	31	29	3	23	46
10	44	38	25	56	31	36	0	31	39
11	78	50	29	18	15	32	4	35	39
12	85	50	61	15	27	7	0	23	32
	N= 27	N= 26	N= 28	N= 27	N= 26	N= 28	N= 27	N= 26	N= 28

*Items 1-12 in Rating Scale: Using Children's Books to Enhance Comprehension and Appreciation/Enjoyment.

**Responses 1 (almost always) and 2 (most of the time) were combined. Responses 3 (sometimes) and 4 (seldom or never) were combined. Responses 5 (undecided) and 6 (not applicable) were combined for ease of reporting and interpretation.

The discrepancy between perceptions of staff members is apparent in the percentage responses related in Table 1. Item 9 (opportunity for students to share what they read) and item 10 (teacher awareness or currency in children's reading material) were given positive ratings by less than 50 percent of all respondents. The responses to item 10 are consistent with previous research which states that teachers do not maintain up-to-date awareness of children's literature (Russell, 1949; Carter, 1976; Wendelin, Zinck and Carter, 1981). Item 5 (enjoyment and emphasis on poetry in instruction) received the next lowest number of positive responses.

By comparison to these negative perceptions, only three items were given positive ratings by 50 percent or more of the respondents. These were item 1 (systematic teaching of decoding and comprehension skills), item 6 (regular reading to students by teachers) and item 12 (teacher enjoyment of reading). Inservice teachers consistently expressed a more positive perception of their own performance than did preservice teachers

or paraprofessionals as they observed teacher performance.

The analysis of comprehension skill development as presented in selected elementary school basals was the second objective in this investigation. A large number of basal reading series at varied grade levels were reviewed. Basal series' currency and use were the factors which determined selection. Only basal reading series published between 1975 and 1981 were included. Sales reports (Sigel, 1981; Hjalmarson, 1981) and the estimated number of school system adoptions (interviews with basal reading text publishers' representatives; Aukerman, 1981) were used to determine five of the most widely used series from the longer list of current series.

Using the scope and sequence charts prepared by these five basal reading series, the time of introduction and testing of comprehension skill development was determined. The skills sampled were those often included in the categories: relationships, characterization, story problem/solution and critical reading as well as main idea, predicting outcomes and drawing conclusions.

TABLE 2
LEVELS AT WHICH SELECTED COMPREHENSION SKILLS ARE FIRST INTRODUCED AND TESTED IN FIVE WIDELY USED BASAL READING SERIES

Skills	Series 1		Series 2		Series 3		Series 4		Series 5	
	I*	T*	I*	T*	I*	T*	I*	T*	I*	T*
<i>Relationships</i>										
class	PP				PP		PP		K	R
opposites	2/1	2/1			PP				K	P
sequence	PP	PP	PP	PP	PP		P	P	K	R
cause/effect	F	F	PP	F	PP		F	F	P	F
place	4		3/1		3/2		K	—	P	2/2
time	4		F	3/2	3/2		K	—	F	3/2
analogous	F	F	2/1	—	3/2		—	—	3/2	3/2
<i>Characterization</i>	F	2/2	PP		3/2		P	P	1/2	2/1
<i>Story Problem/Solution</i>	PP		P		4				1/2	2/1
<i>Main Idea</i>	PP	PP	PP	PP	PP		PP	PP	F	F
<i>Predicting Outcomes</i>	PP	P	PP	F	PP		F	F		
<i>Drawing Conclusions</i>	PP		PP	PP	PP		F	F	2/2	2/2
<i>Critical Reading</i>										
making judgments			2/1	3/1	PP				P	2/1
distinguishing genre	F		F		3/2		3/1	3/1	4	4
folk tale	F		F		3/2				4	4
historical fiction	3/2		4		4				5	5
fantasy/fact	P	P	F				2/2	2/2	2/1	2/1
<i>Reference/Source</i>										
location	4		4	5	4		2/1		5	5
<i>Author</i>										
expertise										
purpose			3/2	3/2	4		2/1		5	
bias/opinion	4								5	5
<i>Evaluation of</i>										
Character actions	2/2	2/2				2/2	2/2	2/2	3/1	3/1
<i>Fact vs. Opinion</i>			3/1	3/1	5		4	4		

*I = Introduced *T = Tested

The grade level at which selected skills are introduced and tested varies from series to series as shown in Table 2. There is variation also in the labels which are given to specific skill one development. For example, one series may label an activity as "predicting outcomes" while others will categorize similar pupil material under the broad label of drawing conclusions. The grade level at which skills are introduced are sometimes dramatically different from one series to another. As families and school children move about the country from one school system to another and often from one basal reading series to another, it is apparent that developmental sequencing of instruction may be difficult.

Specificity in scope and sequence charts vary from publisher to publisher. In selecting instructional materials, a teacher must look carefully at the components of a program as well as the author and/or publisher's interpretation of the program in a scope and sequence chart.

An emphasis on comparison of published materials, (labels, levels of skill introduction and testing, levels of reinforcement or maintenance of skills) should direct attention to the philosophy or basis upon which such decisions are made. Such an analysis strengthens the construction and the selection of materials.

The third objective in this project focused on children's literature selections as a part of skill development in comprehension. Based on the reading of contemporary children's books, a number of titles were selected to demonstrate how specific books might be used to develop comprehension skills that have previously been introduced. These are categorized under four skill headings.

TABLE 3

SKILL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH USE OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: SOME SAMPLES

Relationships

1. Study the pictures in *Noah's Ark*. Is the story set in modern times or a long time ago? How can you tell? Identify as many pairs of wild animals as you can. Do the same for farm animals. (Illustrated by Peter Spier, Doubleday, 1977.)
2. Why did the Herdman children go to the meeting where parts for the Christmas Pageant were being assigned? (Barbara Robinson, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. Harper and Row, 1972.)
3. In Doris Buchanan Smith's *Last Was Lloyd*, why did Lloyd want his classmates to think he could not hit a ball? (Viking, 1981.)

Characterization (Traits/Actions/Feelings)

4. How did Ramona feel about her mother's relationship with her and her sister Beezus? Do you think she was justified in her beliefs? Why or why not? (Beverly Cleary, *Ramona and Her Mother*. William Morrow, 1979.) Compare Ramona's feelings toward her father in *Ramona and Her Father* (William Morrow, 1977) with those she had for him in *Ramona and Her Mother*.
5. In *Ramona Quimby, Age 8*, Ramona now is a "big girl." How does she now feel about her mother? her father? "Yard Ape"? Beezua? Mrs. Whaley? Willa Jean? (*Ramona Quimby, Age 8*. William Morrow, 1981.)
6. In Betsy Byars' *The Cybil War*, which character do you like best—Simon, Cybil, or Tony? Why? Would you want a friend like Tony? Why or why not? (Viking, 1981.)
7. In Delores Beckman's *My Own Private Sky*, how did Arnold and the other children feel about Pilgrim? How did Pilgrim's age influence their feelings about him? (E. P. Dutton, 1980.) (International Reading Association Award.)

Story Problem/Solution

8. What was the story problem in Bill Peet's *Big Bad Bruce*? How was it solved? (Houghton Mifflin, 1977.)
9. What was the story problem in Madeleine L'Engle's *Dragons in the Water*? How was it solved? Was the solution a realistic one? Why do you answer as you do? (Farrar Straus Girous, 1976.)
10. In *Miss Nelson is Missing!*, what is the story problem? How was it solved? Could this story really have happened? Why or why not? (Harry Allard and James Marshall. Houghton Mifflin, 1977.)

Critical Reading

11. We have read three books of Maurice Sendak—*Where the Wild Things Are*, *In the Night Kitchen*, and *Outside Over There*. Some people say these are "scary" books. Do you think so? Why or why not?

- Which did you like best? Why? The illustrations in the three books are quite different. Which ones do you like best? Why? Could any one of these stories really happen? Why? (Harper and Row, 1963, 1970, 1981.)
12. In *Kevin's Grandma*, by Barbara Williams (writer) and Kay Choroa (illustrator), which boy—the narrator or Kevin—do you believe? Or do you believe both boys? Why? (E. P. Dutton, 1975.)
 13. Is the setting in Lloyd Alexander's *Westmark* historically accurate, or is it fantasy? Explain your answer. (E. P. Dutton, 1981.)
 14. Mrs. Bly, in Robert Newton Peck's *Justice Lion*, was an unusual person. Which of Mrs. Bly's traits did you like? Which did you dislike? Why? (Little, Brown, 1981.)

The samples listed illustrate what might be done where a book has been read by an individual or several children or the teacher has read a book—chapter by chapter over as many days as there are chapters—to the children.

Teachers and their instructional materials, particularly basal reading series, have received in the past and do presently receive considerable criticism. Such criticisms are not always based on careful analysis of current practices and materials. The criticism should not be eliminated. On the contrary criticism is vital to improvement in designing, selecting and using teaching strategies and materials. However, criticism *should* be based on careful evaluation. The current 1) study of teacher perceptions of practices, 2) analysis of reading materials and 3) suggestions for the use of materials is one effort in such an evaluation process.

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