

## A NATIONAL SURVEY ON THE USE OF BASAL READERS

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The first reading series published in the United States, written by William H. McGuffey, appeared between the years 1836 and 1844 (Smith, 1965). Since that time basal reading series have been used consistently in elementary schools throughout the country. In 1981 Aukerman indicated that 80 to 90 percent of schools used a basal reading series in one form or another as the primary source of reading instruction. Concern about teachers' use and perceived value of basal readers led to the development of a questionnaire by two West Virginia University Reading faculty members. The questionnaire was designed to obtain information from elementary teachers about their perceptions and reactions to the use of basal readers within their classrooms and schools.

The questionnaire was sent to twenty randomly selected elementary schools in each of the fifty states. This random selection came from a computer tape of public schools located throughout the United States (Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1977-78). Three hundred and ninety-one schools (39.1%), representing all fifty states, replied to the questionnaire. A cover letter addressed to each principal explained that his/her school had been selected to participate and provide information for this national survey. The principal was asked to give the questionnaire to a teacher, who taught in grades one through six, in a self-contained classroom. If the school organization was other than self-contained, the questionnaire was to be given to any elementary teacher who was then requested to indicate, as a general comment, how the school was organized. Participants in the survey were assured that their identity would remain anonymous and their responses confidential. The questionnaire solicited: (1) background information, (2) current method of reading instruction, (3) use of a basal reader, (4) perceptions of a total reading program, (5) grouping and evaluation practices and (6) general comments applicable to the questionnaire.

### Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this research was to determine on national and local levels how and to what extent basal readers were being used by elementary grade teachers. Specific information requested included: (1) the current method of reading instruction, (2) the role of the basal reader in a total reading program, (3) the series and copyright dates of basal readers being used by teachers in grades one through six, (4) the extent to which the teacher's manual was used, (5) the relative use/nonuse of supplementary reading materials, (6) the extent to which grouping was used, (7) the methods used to evaluate student progress in reading and (8) the level of teacher satisfaction with the use of a basal reading series as a primary means of instruction and with the basal series currently in use.

## METHOD

A questionnaire was designed, with the assistance of Dr. Kathleen Bissonnette, Associate Director of Institutional Research at West Virginia University, to provide the information indicated in the Statement of Purpose. The three page questionnaire, twenty-eight items, was mailed to a national randomly selected sample of public schools (twenty per state) with a request to the principal to distribute the questionnaire to an elementary classroom teacher in his/her school.

In the questionnaire teachers were asked first to provide background information concerning their sex, years of teaching experience, the grade or grades they were currently teaching, setting of their schools, the number of classrooms and grades within their schools, and the number of students assigned to their classroom. Secondly, the teachers identified their methods of reading instruction and their perceptions concerning a total reading program. The process for selection of basal readers, as well as satisfaction/dissatisfaction regarding the procedure, was indicated. Other questions included the use of teachers' manuals, supplementary materials, grouping and evaluation of students in addition to satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the basal readers and the total reading program. At the conclusion of the questionnaire, teachers were given the opportunity to add general comments which they deemed relevant to the study. The completed questionnaires were returned to the researchers in self-addressed, postage paid envelopes and prepared for computer analysis with the assistance of Steven Rinehart, a doctoral student in Reading at West Virginia University. Results of this study were based upon the total number of responses to individual questions rather than the total number of questionnaires which were returned.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Background Information

Of the 391 respondents who returned the questionnaire, 318 (82.2%) were females and 69 (17.8%) were males. Four did not respond to this item. The years of teaching experience ranged from one to fifty-five years with the mean being eighteen years. For the purpose of this study, the years of teaching experience were divided into four categories: the beginning teacher (1-2 years), the critical years for the teacher (3-7 years), the experienced teacher (8-31 years) and the experienced "plus" teacher (33-55 years). Six respondents did not answer this item. Eight teachers (2.08%) were beginning teachers and sixty (15.58%) reported they had taught between three to seven years, years which the researchers termed "critical" because some teachers choose to leave teaching during this period to enter another field or profession. Three hundred and ten teachers (80.52%) were identified as experienced (8-31 years). Seven (1.82%) had taught beyond thirty-one years.

The majority of the respondents indicated the grade or grades they were currently teaching. Three hundred and seventy-eight reported a range from first through sixth grade with some teachers reporting combinations of two or three grades, dependent upon the school's organization. The responses to the number of students per classroom were as follows: (1) one to ten students in seven rooms, (2) eleven to twenty in ninety-five rooms, (3) twenty-one to thirty in 262

rooms and (4) thirty-one plus in twenty-one rooms. Six participants did not respond to this item.

School location was requested in this survey and the settings were identified as urban, suburban, rural and "other." Forty respondents (10.34%) reported their locations as urban, ninety-five (24.55%) as suburban, 236 (60.98%) as rural and sixteen (4.13%) as "other." Four participants provided no setting. School size ranged from small, one to seven classrooms (10.10%), to large, more than twenty-two classrooms (24.87%). The average school size was between fourteen to twenty-one rooms (37.05%).

### Reading Instruction

Of the 391 respondents, 371 (95.37%) reported they used basal readers as their major means of reading instruction. Eighteen participants (4.6%) provided a variety of responses which included individualized instruction, language experience approach, use of multiple basals, phonics and/or comprehension programs, content area integration and programmed instruction. Ninety-three (25%) of the participants who used basal readers as their primary means of instruction indicated they perceived the basal reading series as the total reading program.

### Basal Reading Series: Selection and Reactions

According to the population represented in this study, basal series were selected at state, regional, county, city/town, school and teacher levels. Respondents indicated that teachers and schools play an important role in the selection of basal series. However, approximately one-third of teacher and school selections were dependent upon prior city/town, county, and/or state decisions. Regional areas played a relatively small role (.06%) in the selection of basal series. Three hundred and forty-two (93.19%) of the respondents reported they believed that their method of selection was appropriate. Only twenty-five (6.81%) indicated that the method for selection was inappropriate.

Respondents were asked to submit the name(s) and copyright date(s) of the basal series adopted for their schools. A total of twenty-one basal series were mentioned. Some respondents indicated more than one series approved for their schools from which they could select a basal reader for their classroom. Although some respondents listed multiple basals, they did not, or could not, prioritize the series approved for their schools. Consequently, the separate listings were collapsed by the researchers into one list. Coincidentally, of the twenty-one basals which were listed, five publishing companies appeared at the top of each listing. The series most frequently mentioned were those published by Houghton Mifflin Co.; Ginn and Co.; The MacMillan Publishing Co.; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.; and Scott, Foresman and Co. The next two companies mentioned were the Economy Co. and Holt, Rinehart and Winston. Over sixty percent of the basal series which were mentioned for school approval had copyright dates of 1979 or later.

Respondents were then asked to indicate the name and copyright date of the basal reader currently being used in their classrooms. Most teachers reported one basal series but mentioned a second series which, in some instances, was used as a supplementary basal. Of the twenty-one series listed for

school approval, four publishing companies appeared at the top of the classroom listing: Houghton Mifflin Co.; Ginn and Co.; The MacMillan Publishing Co. and Scott, Foresman and Co. The next three companies listed were Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., Holt, Rinehart and Winston, and The Economy Co. Approximately fifty percent of the basal readers used in the classroom had a copyright date of 1980 or later.

Teachers' reactions relative to satisfaction/dissatisfaction of basal reading series were requested. Eighty-eight percent of 375 respondents reported "very satisfied" or "satisfied," 4.8% were "uncertain" and 7.2% indicated "dissatisfied." A second question regarding satisfaction/dissatisfaction of the use of a basal reading series as a primary means of reading instruction was requested. Eighty-nine percent of 373 respondents were "very satisfied" or "satisfied," 7.2% were "uncertain" and 4% were "dissatisfied." No respondent indicated "very dissatisfied" with the basal reader as a primary means of instruction.

### Teachers' Manuals and Supplementary Materials

Only one of 374 respondents reported that he/she was not provided with a teacher's manual. Thirty-one percent of 356 respondents indicated they were *expected* to follow the manual "very closely," sixty-two percent indicated "somewhat closely," while only 6.74% reported they were not expected to "closely follow" the manual. When asked how closely they thought the manual *should* be followed, ninety-six (25.74%) of 373 respondents replied "very closely," 263 (70.51%) indicated "somewhat closely," while fourteen (3.75%) reported they did not think it was necessary to "closely follow" the manual.

When asked, "Does your school provide supplementary materials published as part of the basal series?", 363 participants replied *yes*, twelve replied *no* and sixteen, no reply. Those respondents who indicated *yes* to this question reported that basal series workbooks were the predominant type of supplementary material being provided. Library type books, audio-visual materials and "other" were reported to a lesser degree. "Other" included materials such as wall charts, duplicating masters, bonus books and kits.

### Total Reading Program

Respondents were requested to provide information concerning the components they perceived as being important to a total reading program. Three hundred eighty-five respondents viewed basic instruction as important, 383 considered content reading skills as important and 381 regarded recreational/library reading as important. Ninety-one of 383 respondents suggested "other" components they considered important. Some of the "other" components mentioned were remediation materials, functional literary skills, study skills, research and listening skills.

*Supplementary Materials* — A previous question requested the teachers to indicate whether or not supplementary materials were provided as part of the basal series. A second question requested information concerning general supplementary materials used in the classroom. In descending order the general supplementary materials included comprehension materials (368 respondents), phonics materials (329), kit materials (295), magazines (236), newspapers (223) and

"other" (138). "Other" materials mentioned included comic books, filmstrips, old basal readers and library books.

**Grouping** — Grouping was another consideration within a total reading program. Three items on the questionnaire dealt with grouping. Within their classrooms, 322 (83.20%) respondents reported grouping. Within grade levels, 231 respondents (59.59%) used grouping; within the school, 161 (41.60%) used grouping; while fifteen (3.91%) respondents indicated other combinations.

Respondents were asked whether provisions were made *in* the classroom for children who have above average ability. Three hundred sixty-eight respondents (95.34%) reported *yes* while eighteen (4.66%) reported *no*. When questioned about provisions made *outside* the classroom for children with above average ability, 256 (65.98%) reported *yes* and 132 (34.02%) indicated *no*. Respondents were also asked about provisions for the below average student *within* the classroom. Three hundred seventy-five (97.15%) reported *yes* while eleven (2.85%) indicated *no*. Provisions for the below average student *outside* the classroom were reported by 367 respondents (94.59%) as *yes* and twenty (5.41%) as *no*.

**Evaluation** — A third consideration within a total reading program involved evaluation of students. Methods used by teachers for evaluation included, in descending order; observation, 378 respondents (97.42%); basal reader tests, 349 (90.18%); standardized tests, 324 (83.5%); and workbook tests, 303 (78.50%). "Other" evaluations, such as oral tests, writing activities, state competency tests and teacher-made tests, were indicated by 130 (33.77%) respondents.

**Satisfaction** — The final item requested the relative satisfaction of each respondent regarding his/her major means of reading instruction with the total reading program. Three hundred sixty-one (93.28%) respondents were very satisfied/satisfied, fifteen (3.88%) were uncertain and eleven (2.84%) were dissatisfied/very dissatisfied.

### General Comments

At the conclusion of the questionnaire, participants were given an opportunity to submit general comments which they felt were important or appropriate to the study. Many of the comments were extensions or clarifications of answers previously indicated. The researchers organized the comments into three main categories with subheadings. A sampling of comments follows:

## I. BASAL READERS and . . .

### A. Total Reading Program

- We feel very satisfied with our reading program. This is due in part to our basal reading program, but also to the fact we place a great deal of emphasis on reading. We have daily silent sustained reading throughout the elementary school, take part in RIF, and do many activities which emphasize reading skills in our own classroom and with other classrooms. The basal series has been a good foundation on which to build our program, but it is in no way responsible for all the success in our reading program.
- Basal readers seem very important to use in the first couple of years of reading. The controlled vocabulary is very important. The upper elementary grades do not need to depend as much on a basal reader. An excellent reading program could

be built around library books with many different areas of subject matter.

- Sorry, I couldn't help you to evaluate the basal series, but I haven't used one for ten years. I emphasize reading aloud to the class on a daily basis, daily creative and practical writing activities, cooperation activities, and plenty of silent reading for fun.

### B. Supplementary Materials

- I like the reading series that we are now using because it has more than enough supplementary materials to build on each individual's needs.
- We also have a variety of reading materials, along with our own media center whereby a teacher may check out materials to fit the needs of each student.
- I feel I do not have enough supplementary materials, such as magazines, kits, etc., in my classroom. These are available in the learning center; however, I would prefer more materials in the classroom. A lack of funds makes many types of materials unavailable.

### C. Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction

- Our children have had phenomenal success learning to read with a phonic/linguistic approach.
- I feel we have a very satisfactory reading program. I also believe a good reading program needs good instruction.
- Our basal reading series is a sight vocabulary series. Phonics is not stressed. I found a need to add more phonics to the program for those who are not as quick with sight vocabulary. I prefer a reading series that incorporates language skills and spelling as part of the whole reading experience.

## II. MULTIPLE BASALS

- In our school we teach reading in a language arts block. The children are grouped according to reading ability. We use 2 basal readers, one for the top 10-15% and another for the other students. A weakness of our overall program is teaching study skills.
- In the near future our school system hopes to go on a bi-basal reading program (intended for high group, above average ability).

## III. GROUPING

- 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.
- Students are placed in basals on the level of their achievements. Basals are not the only approach.
- We have a non-graded approach to reading and the students are sent to the level on which they are reading rather than a self-contained classroom situation. In the classrooms the basal readers are used almost exclusively as a means of reading instruction.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Although much research has been conducted concerning the use of basal readers, this particular study was directed to elementary teachers to determine teachers' use and perceived

value of basal readers. Additional information concerning the teacher's background and experience, reading instruction in general, grouping and evaluation of students was provided by the participants. Responses were received from teachers in each of the fifty states with a return rate of 39.1% reflecting national trends and practices. All grades, kindergarten through sixth, were represented in this study. Nearly seventy percent of the classrooms had twenty-one to thirty students while only five percent had above thirty-one. Less than two percent had ten or fewer students. Over eighty-five percent of the school locations were identified as rural or suburban.

The major conclusions of this study were:

- (1) Basal readers remain the predominant approach to reading instruction in the United States.
- (2) One fourth of the respondents viewed the basal reader as a total reading program.
- (3) The majority of schools used a committee of teachers and administrators to select their basal readers. Many of these selections were dependent upon prior city, county or state decisions.
- (4) Although twenty-one basal reading series were mentioned, only five major series were predominantly used within the schools. Four of these five series were consistently used within the classrooms.
- (5) Almost all teachers were provided with the manuals which accompany their basal reading series.
- (6) The majority of teachers used supplementary materials which were either part of the basal reading series and/or general supplementary materials.
- (7) Most teachers utilized grouping within their classrooms.
- (8) Observation and basal reader tests were the most popular means of evaluation.
- (9) Over eighty percent of the teachers indicated satisfaction with their basal reading series as the primary means of reading instruction.
- (10) Over ninety-three percent of the respondents indicated they were satisfied with their total reading program.

The data reported in this study involved a compilation and synthesis of the information provided by the respondents. Because basal readers continue to be the major approach to reading instruction in the United States, additional expanded research needs to be conducted. The data from this survey will be reexamined and manipulated to determine the correlation between the use of basal readers and (1) teachers' experience, (2) grade levels taught, (3) pupil enrollment and (4) school size and location. Further research may involve the use of basal instruction with supplementary materials, other reading approaches and grouping. Because reading success appears to be dependent upon the skills presented in basal readers, educators must continue to reevaluate how and to what extent basal reading series are perceived and used by classroom teachers.

## REFERENCES

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