

BASAL READERS:

The Lost Opportunity To Build the Knowledge that Propels Comprehension

By Kate Walsh

Elementary reading textbooks are big business. Publishers will spend tens of millions of dollars to produce a reading program—and for good reason. The nation’s school districts invest over a billion dollars in reading textbooks *every year*.

As they compete for sales, these programs have taken on many similar characteristics. They display a lot of artwork to help children engage visually as they learn to draw meaning from spoken and written words, and they offer multiple teachers’ guides with detailed lesson plans, classroom and homework activities, and related readings for faster and slower children. Though some programs take different approaches to teaching decoding, with regard to their pedagogy of comprehension, they are almost indistinguishable. Some use more stories or poems than others; some call for teacher read-alouds more often—but they all have the same basic components.

Unfortunately, a review of the five most widely used basal reading programs reveals that none even attempts the kind of sustained building of word and

domain knowledge that is essential for increased reading comprehension—and for averting the fourth-grade slump. In order to make the transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” described by Jeanne Chall, children must have a foundation of broad vocabulary and world knowledge that includes important domains and is built up over time. Without this knowledge, children may be able to sound out the words in their textbooks, but will not be able to extract adequate meaning from the text. Children from mid- to high-income homes pick up much of this word and world knowledge at home. But children from low-income homes depend on their schools—and, ultimately, on the reading series that their schools decide to use. Beginning to emphasize word and world knowledge in upper elementary school is simply too late for these children.

In the photos and discussion over the next three pages, three specific examples are provided to explain how these programs miss opportunities to build word and world knowledge: (1) they don’t focus on systematically building essential knowledge and vocabulary during teacher read-alouds and discussions aimed at building background knowledge; (2) they waste time by including many more lessons on formal reading comprehension skills than researchers have found are needed; and (3) by offering mostly incoherent, banal themes, they miss opportunities to develop word and world knowledge by offering and exploiting content-rich themes.

Kate Walsh is the former director of Language Arts for the Core Knowledge Foundation. She has spent the past few years reviewing and critiquing reading textbook series. For this article, Walsh examined reading programs from five of the most widely used basal series: Harcourt Trophies, Houghton Mifflin Reading, Macmillan McGraw-Hill Reading, Open Court Reading, and Scott Foresman Reading. Her review was limited to the K-3 portions of these programs and focused on those components related to increasing language and reading comprehension.

Basals Acknowledge the Need for Background Knowledge, But Do Little To Build It

In the early grades, the heart of a reading basal is a collection of simple stories with which children can practice their emerging decoding skills. In general, these stories don't impart much word or domain knowledge—partly because it is important not to interfere with practicing decoding skills. There are a few fabulous examples of how such simple stories can introduce tremendous world knowledge (for example, Open Court's story titled *Homes Across the World* introduces children to the world's diverse geography and cultures with houses on stilts, houses with thatch roofs, and much more)—but such stories are rare.

Therefore, a critical way to build vocabulary and world knowledge is through stories that teachers read aloud and through the discussions that follow. Most of the basals seem to recognize this and suggest devoting time to read-alouds. But the provided read-alouds rarely introduce interesting vocabulary or content; and, by second grade, they are typically not part of the daily (or even weekly) schedule. (Harcourt Trophies is a notable exception, providing almost daily teacher-read-alouds with interesting vocabulary.) In addition, teacher editions instruct teachers to "build background knowledge" about story content before reading the stories (whether basal or read-aloud stories). But most of the stories' content deals with slight topics grounded in the domestic world of the modern American child, making it unlikely that students' horizons will be broadened.

To increase students' word and world knowledge, students must be exposed to more rigorous content: Teacher read-alouds should be roughly two grade levels above the students, and students' basal stories should ideally develop the same bodies of knowledge that have been introduced in the teacher read-alouds. Moreover, significant chunks of time—say 20 minutes daily—should be devoted to discussion after each read-aloud. This allows time to ensure that all students comprehend the high-level read-alouds, explain new vocabulary, and start using the new vocabulary and new ideas and concepts.


In one typical five-week unit from a 2nd-grade basal, the teacher read-alouds were all short poems or several-paragraph stories like those above, containing very ordinary vocabulary. Only one story departed from the simple world of family and friends and themes of sharing, playing, and family celebrations. Across several 1st- and 2nd-grade basals, some topics on which teachers were asked to build background knowledge were: what teddy bears look like; what makes grandmothers special; and what could happen if everyone brought their pets to school.

Puppy for Sale!

"I'm sitting in the window of Pat's Pet Shop. It could be worse. At least I have my friend Blackie with me. Blackie has been at Pat's for a couple of months. I've been here only a couple of weeks. I miss the warmth of my mother and my three sisters and four brothers. But I try not to think about it. At least here in the window I can watch the people go by."

"There he is, that little boy who was here this afternoon with his mother. It was really nice when he held me in his arms. He smelled like that fluffy blue blanket in my old home. And he had soft hands. He knew exactly how to hold me as he put me back in the box by the window."

"Of course, Pat tried to interest him in Blackie. She told his mother that he is friendly, that he is good with children, that he's almost paper trained. But you can't blame Pat—Blackie does need a home."



Build Background
Read Aloud: Poem Share this poem with the children and ask them to think of ways that they can be a good friend.

Friends


Crystal Bowman

A friend is someone who listens,
 A friend is someone who cares.
 A friend is someone who understands,
 A friend is someone who shares.

It's nice to have a special friend
 To tell all your secrets to.
 It's nice to know that someone you like,
 Is someone who really likes you.

A friend is someone you call on the phone
 To talk about nothing at all.
 A friend is someone who cheers you up
 And makes you feel ten feet tall.

Everyone would like to have
 A special friend, it's true.
 But if you want a special friend,
 You need to be one, too.



Toaster Time

Eve Meriam

Tick tick tick tick tick tick tick
 Toast up a sandwich quick quick quick
 Hamwich
 Or jamwich
 Lick lick lick!

Tick tick tick tick tick tick — stop!
 POP!



Scott Foresman, Grade 2, 2000


Build Background
Read Aloud: Poem Share this poem with the children. Ask them what their favorite things are to put on toast.

BEFORE READING

Build Background Have children tell you what they know about teddy bears. Ask: Does anyone have a teddy bear? What does it look like?

BEFORE READING

Build Background Ask children what they think might happen if every child brought his or her pet to school on the same day. Have children describe a few possible funny things that could happen.



Harcourt Trophies, Grade 2, 2003

Excessive Time Is Devoted to Acquiring Formal Comprehension Skills Such as “Sequencing”

Current reading programs, without exception, view the teaching of reading comprehension largely as a set of formal skills to be taught and practiced. None of the programs acknowledge the importance of building broad, general student knowledge as the primary means by which to improve reading comprehension. Instead, beginning in kindergarten, students are asked to rehearse skills such as sequencing, classifying, inferring, or finding the main idea. Here are three typical Scope and Sequence charts from basal teaching guides (right). You can easily see that the same skills are practiced year in and year out. For example, students in these programs, and most others as well, practice the skill of sequencing from kindergarten through grade 6 (or even 8).

Although this illustration doesn't show how other topics are addressed, it is critical to note that these and other reading programs allocate as much or more actual time to rehearsing comprehension skills than they allocate to teaching any other element in their language-arts program. It's not that time isn't spent in an effort to strengthen comprehension, but that the time is spent strictly on formal comprehension skills.

In reality, when children experience problems comprehending text, it is more likely due to the child's lack of knowledge of the subject matter. For example, a child can make inferences about dinosaurs because he happens to know a lot about dinosaurs. The same child will exhibit almost no such reasoning about the Big Bang theory because he lacks knowledge about it. The notion that we can teach students a set of skills that they will be able to apply to new and unfamiliar texts or situations is a process that cognitive psychologists call “skills transference.” This is regarded as an *inordinately* difficult task for our brains to pull off and, therefore, is not a practical educational goal. But it is a goal set forward by every major reading program on the market.

Comprehension and Analysis of Text
Ask/prove questions
Author's purpose
Author's perspective
Hypothesize

Background knowledge: prior knowledge and experiences
Cause-effect
Compare/contrast
Details
Directions: one-, two-, multi-step
Draw conclusions
Fact-fiction
Fact-opinion
Higher order thinking
Analyze, critique and evaluate, synthesize, and visualize text and information
Interpret information from graphic aids
Locate information
Book parts
Text features
Alphabetical order
Main idea and supporting details
Make generalizations
Make inferences
Make judgments
Make predictions/predict outcomes
Monitor comprehension
Apply reading rate, create mental images, read, readjust purpose, reorganization, summarize, use graphic aids, text features, and text aids
Preview
Purpose for reading
Organize information
Alphabetical order
Narrative systems/outlines
Graphic organizers
References
Retell stories and ideas
Sequence
Summarize
Text structure
Narrative text
Informational text (compare and contrast, cause-effect, proposition and support, problem and solution)

THINKING SKILLS AND STRATEGIES

	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Classifying	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Drawing Conclusions, Making Inferences	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Solving Problems	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Clustering	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Distinguishing Fact from Opinion	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Predicting Outcomes	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Summarizing	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Sequencing	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Comparing and Contrasting	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Brainstorming	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Making Analogies	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Identifying Cause and Effects	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Recognizing Propaganda	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Making Generalizations	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Distinguishing Fact from Fantasy	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Imagining	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Recalling	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Observing	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Analyzing, Evaluating, Making Judgments	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Detecting Overgeneralization	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Creative Thinking	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Critical Thinking (See also Distinguishing Fact from Opinion, Recognizing Propaganda, Drawing Conclusions)	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●

Reading (continued)

	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Comprehension Strategies	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Comprehension Skills	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●

Boxes with a tint and/or mark indicate grades in which the skill is taught.

COMPREHENSION
Introduce **Make Predictions**

Guiding Comprehension
pp. 276-279
Cause and Effect/Inferential
What did Elephant do when he heard the melon talk? Why?
He jumped. He didn't know melons could talk.

Sequencing/Literal
What three things happened after Anansi ate the melon? Find the pages in the story that give the answer.
Children may say that first on page 276-277, Elephant talked to the melon. Then on page 278, Elephant ran down the road with the melon, next on page 279, Elephant talked to 3 lizards.

Predicting/Inferential
What do you think will happen next? Children will probably predict that Anansi will talk and the lizards will think that the melon can talk.

Main Idea
The most important idea of a selection is called the main idea. Other sentences tell more about the main idea.
Read this paragraph.
On Friday afternoon, five second-grade classes did a new job of cleaning the playground. Some children picked up trash. Other classes swept the sidewalks. The principal said that the playground looks like new!
To find the main idea, think about what the paragraph is mostly about.
Now think back to "Helping Out." What was the main idea? What were some of the details? Look for the main idea and details in other selections that you read.

The Themes Around which Basals Are Organized Are Typically Contrived and Trite—and Do Little To Build Knowledge

Developing knowledge in a particular domain and becoming comfortable using its specialized vocabulary depend on devoting time to selected topics—time in which new ideas and concepts can be built and contemplated; time to progress from introductory to more detailed texts; time to discuss new information and concepts; and time to repeatedly hear and practice using the vocabulary of the domain in a variety of contexts. Teachers, who have long organized academic content into units of study, knew this even before cognitive scientists began their studies of learning, memory, and expertise.

All the popular basal series are organized around themes, but unfortunately, problems abound. Many of the themes are little more than catch-all labels for stories that hardly relate. Many themes address only utterly ordinary day-to-day knowledge and thus introduce only a minimal amount of academic content and vocabulary that is new to students. Here are some actual themes for grades one and two pulled from three widely used basal series: “Together Is Better,” “Being Me,” “Express Yourself,” “Imagine That!” and “Keep Trying.” Themes like these will do little to enhance students’ domain knowledge, vocabulary, and comprehension.

It is a rare theme that offers carefully selected and sequenced readings that build from basic information to detailed discussion while systematically adding new vocabulary and repeating recently introduced vocabulary. In fact, none of the basals have such a well-constructed theme in their kindergarten or first-grade programs.



A Better Way To Build a Theme

One of the best examples of a well-constructed theme is Open Court’s “Fossils” (Grade 2, Unit 4). Based on the theme overview in this photo, you can see that students are going to learn a good bit about fossils, dinosaurs, and dinosaur fossils. By being focused, the theme allows students to explore the two main, interrelated topics in-depth and builds many opportunities to repeat related vocabulary in class. In addition to fossil and dinosaur, words such as scientist, paleontologist, imprint, extinct, bones, and skeleton appear frequently in the selected readings. The concept of prehistory is also well introduced, as the readings state that dinosaurs lived millions and millions of year ago several times before the word prehistoric is used. But, unfortunately, only one of the selections is a teacher read-aloud, meaning that the language is not as advanced as it could be if the readings did not have to be at the second grade level.

