

INSTITUTE OCCASIONAL PAPER #3
THE READING PROBLEM: SOME SENSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Something is amiss in the area of reading. Too many students are reading poorly; too many students flounder when confronted with higher-level comprehension questions; too many students hate to read.

Such concerns about reading were the focus of a group of researchers from the Center for the Study of Reading (CSR) at the University of Illinois. Their work so far, based on direct classroom observation and analysis of textbooks, pinpoints causes and suggest solutions. The purpose of this Occasional Paper, the third in the Institute's series, is to summarize the CSR research and list its implications for teachers at all levels of the Boston schools.

Textbooks leave a lot to be desired

The first major conclusion from the CSR research is that basal reading textbooks for the primary grades are not doing the job of preparing children for the kinds of reading they will encounter in the upper grades. What's more, the CSR studies found, basal readers are turning many children off the whole idea of reading, making the job of higher-grade teachers even more difficult. Where do the textbooks' deficiencies lie? According to CSR:

1. Stories in basal readers are unnaturally lacking in conflict compared to what children experience in their everyday lives and see on television. Pressure from special interest groups, especially those in Texas and California, has bleached the anger, fear, oppression, and some of the love out of most basal readers for the early grades. It is little wonder that many children find them pale, boring, and somewhat incredible.
2. The stories in most textbooks don't give enough insight into what characters are thinking or feeling; they just present what characters say and do. Because of this, children who depend on these textbooks for their early reading instruction don't get enough practice in the important interpretive and evaluative reading skills that will be so important in the upper grades. Students are led to take far too literal an approach to stories and other reading matter.
3. The author's voice is usually hidden. Many basals are written by committees, and the personality of the individual writer, so important to a child's getting involved in a story, is not there. As a result, many stories in basal readers have an eerie impersonality that makes them more difficult for children to understand. This is vivid contrast to the great stories of children's literature, where the author speaks directly to children on every page.
4. The stories have been "readabilitized" - written with an eye to readability formulas to make the textbooks sell better in school systems that watch Dale/Chall like the Dow Jones. Because all readability formulas are based on sentence and word length and/or the frequency of "common" words, readabilitizing results in the following:
-choppy sentences without the connectors (like so and because) that

give children a sense of the logical flow

- short sentences without main and subordinate clauses, which deprive children of important clues as to what the author thinks is more or less important
 - an avoidance of complex sentences in which a thought or opinion is attributed to someone (John said that...); this deprives students of practice in understanding fact and opinion
 - an avoidance of "hard" words, even if they are words that most children know, because such words raise the readability number; instead, authors substitute meaningless words like "thing" and "one"
- The result is that books which are supposed to be easier for children to read are in fact harder - especially for children who have difficulty with reading in the first place.

5. The stories in many textbooks are often poorly written. This introduces children to an advanced reading skill at far too tender an age - the skill of making sense of bad writing.

Such material, the new research says, produces many fourth graders who have few of the skills they need to understand more complex prose, and who in many cases find reading a form of drudgery to be avoided at all costs.

The Illinois research echoes the opinion of many teachers, parents, and textbook writers over the years. Bruno Bettelheim and Karen Zelan, in their recent book, On Learning to Read, gave voice to these views when they wrote that the material children read in school must be more real and more challenging. The new research goes a long way toward building a convincing case against the sanitized textbooks of the last fifteen years. It also indicates that teachers who have been using good children's books, magazines, newspapers, plays, and poems into their classrooms, and relying less on basal readers, have been on the right track.

CSR researchers say there is strong evidence that young children are quite capable of handling more sophisticated reading material than they're getting now - so long as the vocabulary and syntax are similar to what they speak and hear; so long as the material is well written; and so long as it contains emotions, conflict, insight into what characters are thinking and feeling, and a sense of the author's perspective - all of which are necessary if the material is to ring true to life and capture students' interest and imagination.

Teachers should focus on comprehension

The second major conclusion of the CSR group - that there isn't enough real teaching of reading comprehension going on in American classrooms - arose from the researchers' observation that many teachers have become exclusively askers of low-level questions and correctors of memory-type tests. The new research says that teachers who are effective in teaching comprehension teach it directly, actively coaching children in comprehension strategies. Here are some findings based on observing teachers who get the best results:

1. Students need fewer literal comprehension questions (What color was Mary's coat?) and more inferential questions (Why was Mary wearing a coat?). Students who are not used to being asked higher-level questions find them difficult at first, but a teacher who is persistent in

asking such questions will produce far better readers in a matter of weeks.

2. Students have to realize that they can trust their native intelligence and apply their own prior knowledge and experience to what they are reading (as one student in a study said, "I never knew it was O.K. to use my head before.").
3. Students need to be alerted to the different kinds of questions they are likely to encounter: sometimes the answer is right there in the story; sometimes you have to do some thinking about information in the text; and sometimes you have to answer the question based good sense and personal experience.
4. Students need help in developing and using strategies for attacking reading passages. One such strategy consists of paraphrasing the main idea of a paragraph, grouping the classifying information, predicting questions that could be asked about material, and thinking about problems and sources of confusion in the material.
5. With students who are having trouble understanding what they read, one-on-one coaching sessions are essential, whether the tutor is the child's teacher, an aide or volunteer, or another student. One CSR study found that having students switch roles with the student tutor and take turns asking questions was particularly effective. While this was difficult for slow readers at first, several weeks of prompting produce dramatic improvements in reading ability.
6. Reading shouldn't be fragmented into a series of subskills to be hurdled one at a time. Rather, children should begin reading connected text as early as possible and deal with comprehension questions as they read. As Bettelheim and Zelan wrote in the book cited earlier, "Decoding deteriorates into empty rote learning when it does not lead directly to the reading of meaningful content... From the very beginning, the child must be convinced that skills are only a means to achieve a goal, and that the only goal of importance is that he [or she] become literate - that is, come to enjoy literature and benefit from what it has to offer."
7. Questions on a reading passage should follow the story line or argument - the "story grammar" - rather than being grouped by type (main idea, detail, sequence, inference, etc.). This helps students reconstruct the story or essay and get a better sense of its overall purpose. Although reading comprehension skills are broken down by type in the new Boston Reading/Language Arts objectives, this does not mean teachers should ask questions in that sequence. Rather, the flow and sequence of the passage should dictate the order of questions.
8. Reading should not be isolated from listening, speaking, and writing. Rather, these four facets of language arts should be taught as an integrated whole. It is especially important that students are read to regularly, and write on a variety of topics in a variety of forms (see the Variety of Writing section in the curriculum guide).

9. The material students read must be well-written and interesting. If students are going to become better readers, they should always be presented with the best literature and constantly challenged to read more difficult and complex prose, poetry, drama, and procedural writing (directions, applications, etc.). This means avoiding many textbooks currently on the market, and bringing livelier, deeper, more interesting material into the classroom (such as the books listed at each level of the Reading/Language Arts curriculum).
10. Finally, the tests which students take must measure reading comprehension rather than the subskills that lead to reading comprehension. The Degrees of Reading Power test (DRP) is a promising step in this direction. By measuring only whether students can read connected text with good comprehension, this test puts the premium on the best teaching of reading.

Our challenge

Starting around the fourth grade, inequalities in reading achievement between advantaged and disadvantaged students widen sharply in most of our schools. Those who are already doing well in reading surge ahead, and those who are having trouble fall further and further behind. Why does this process begin in the fourth grade? The Illinois research suggests that this is the age at which students are given more complex material in reading, social studies, and science classes and asked higher-level comprehension questions. The emphasis on learning to read shifts to reading to learn. Reading is increasingly a tool that children need to be able to use in every subject area.

The contention of the new research is that the seeds of failure in the upper grades are sown in the primary grades, and that they are sown by two things: textbooks that are poorly written and not challenging enough to students; and an incomplete approach to teaching reading comprehension. The research suggests that too many students - especially the least advantaged - come out of the primary grades without the skills they need to cope with more difficult material, and without much enthusiasm for reading anything.

Is this a case of academic research stating what many have known all along? Perhaps, but now the voice of reason has additional volume, and there is a better chance that it will be heeded by textbook publishers and school boards across the nation. Our new curriculum in Reading/Language Arts is built on research like that of the Illinois group, and clearly points in the direction of better reading material for students, a more integrated approach to reading comprehension, and an blending of reading, writing, listening, speaking, and critical thinking. If the research is correct, the coming years should bring marked improvements in students' achievement on standardized tests, ability to read more complex materials in the upper grades, and enjoyment of reading for its own sake.

- Kim Marshall

This paper appeared in somewhat different form in the April/May issue of Learning Magazine. Those interested in a bibliography for further reading should contact the Institute for Professional Development (726-6200 ext.565\$).