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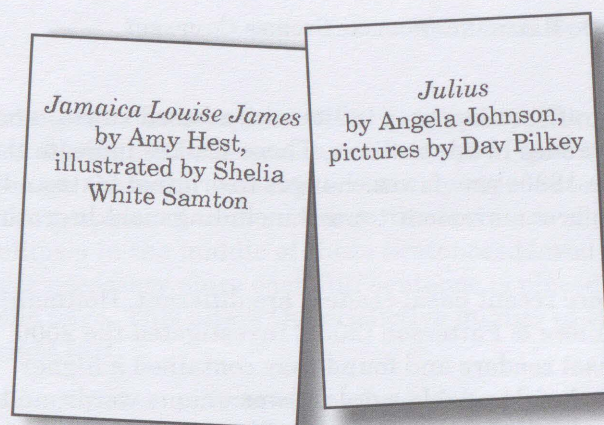
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# How Do Basal and Original Stories Compare?

## Primary Grade Students Take a Closer Look



BY KAREN FEATHERS & JACQUELYN BOCHENEK

**W**hen you see titles, authors, and illustrators complete with a “meet the author and illustrator” page in a basal reader, you might assume that the texts your students are going to read are the original stories. That is not always the case. When we compared basal stories with their original versions in a graduate course we discovered that basals may be “adaptations of original children’s books, condensations of classic children’s literature, or original stories” (Pirofski, 2003, para. 2). This led Jacquelyn, the second author and a grade 2-3 teacher, to wonder whether the stories in her basal readers were adaptations and how that might affect her students. Here we share our exploration of the literature in her basal readers and describe how students reacted to these texts.

### Why Is This Issue Important?

It is important to address this issue as basal readers are used extensively either as the only source of material for instruction or in conjunction with trade books (Baumann & Heubach, 1996; Canney and Neufeldt, 1993; Hoffman, McCarthy, Elliott, Bayles, Price, Ferree & Abbott, 1998; Lehman, Freeman & Allen 1994). One reason teachers use basal readers is that they believe the basals cover essential skills and ensure that no skills will be missed (Caney & Neuenfeldt, 1993). Additionally, and relevant to this investigation, teachers believe that basals offer the best of both worlds because they contain both trade books and skill coverage. Thus they have everything that is needed for effective instruction (Altieri, 1998).

Given these beliefs and the wide use of basals—“the vast majority of school systems, schools, classrooms, and teachers remain largely dependent upon basal reader programs as their anchor resource for providing early reading instruction” (Fawson & Reutzell,

2000 p. 88)—it is important to consider whether there are differences between the original stories and their basal versions.

### How Do Basals Compare With Original Texts?

Several researchers have compared original texts with basal versions. Because there were major changes made to basal readers of the 1990s, several studies compared these “newer” readers to those from the 1980s. For example, Hoffman, McCarthy, Abbot, Christian, Corman, Dressman, et al. (1994) compared the “new” basal readers with those from 1986-87 and found that the new basals appeared to control vocabulary less and included more selections from published literature that had more complex plots and were more predictable. When Anderson (1995) compared the 1987 and 1993 editions of first-grade readers in four basal series, she found a

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significant increase in literature-based stories and a decrease in adaptations. These studies indicate that the 1990s saw fewer changes to original texts and a general movement toward including more literature in basals.

More recent basal readers are different. Hoffman, Sailors & Patterson (2002) investigated the 2000 basal readers and found they contained a higher level of decodable words, fewer unique words, and were less dense and less predictable than earlier basals. Hoffman et al. suggested that these features “deprived beginning readers of other crucial factors that support the psychological and social aspects of reading” (p. 290) and that the focus on decodability “had a negative impact on other aspects of texts for beginners” (p. 288).

What are the specific changes made to original texts when they become part of a basal reader? The adaptations that Anderson (1995) noted included changes in sentence, vocabulary and arrangement on a page. Reutzel and Larson (1995) analyzed 10% of the authentic stories at each of three grade levels (1, 3, 5) in five major basal readers and found that all of the stories were adapted in some way where 35% of the adaptations affected the text and 63% affected the illustrations. All of the stories exhibited changes in placement of the print in relation to the illustrations (print to picture format), cropping, shrinking, enlarging, reversing and changing the colors of the illustrations.

While some may consider changes to illustrations insignificant, these researchers concluded that these changes were important. Kucan suggests that changes to illustrations are important because they compromise “the experience of reading the original picture book” (Kucan, 1994. p. 222). Galda also points out that illustrations are important because the story is “expressed through visual elements as well as through words” (Galda, 1991, p. 406).

Given the studies that suggest original texts are frequently adapted for use in basals, we decided to examine the specific basal stories that Jacquelyn used for supplemental instruction in her classroom. We compared basal stories with their authentic versions by looking at both formats side-by-side. We focused on *Fix-It!* by David McPhail (1984) appearing as a first-grade Houghton Mifflin story (1991) and *The Wolf’s Chicken Stew* by Keiko Kasza (1987) appearing as a second-grade Houghton Mifflin story (1991).

Comparing the Stories

*Fix-It!* is a story of a little bear whose television is not working because it is not plugged in. *The Wolf’s Chicken Stew* tells the story of a wolf who plans to eat a chicken and attempts to fatten her up by leaving her treats. Table 1 shows how both original stories were condensed in the basal readers. The basal version of *Fix-It!* was reduced from 25 pages in the original to 10 pages in the basal (including a cover page) and *The Wolf’s Chicken Stew* was reduced from 33 pages in the original to 11 pages in the basal (including a cover page). Four total pages were deleted from the original *Fix-It* text, and 9 pages from *Chicken Stew*. Only 12% of the pages in *Chicken Stew* and 4% in *Fix-It* were the same in both versions. All other pages were adapted including omitting and reducing illustrations, changing arrangement of wording and print/picture format, and condensing multiple pages into a single page.

Table 1  
Changes to Original Texts

Alterations	<i>Fix-It</i>	<i>Chi. Stew</i>
Page Omitted	16.7%	27.3%
Page Condensed	70.8%	30.3%
Illustration Omitted	16.7%	33.3%
Illustration Reduced	75.0%	18.2%
Line Format Changed	8.3%	39.4%
Paragraph Format Changed	33.3%	24.3%
Print/Picture Format Changed	50.0%	42.4%
Location on Page Changed	70.9%	48.5%

Significant illustrations were deleted from both stories. For example, the first three illustrations in *Fix-It* on the title, dedication, and copyright pages were eliminated. These illustrations picture a cat chasing a mouse behind a television set and build the reader’s knowledge by showing that the television is unplugged and how it became unplugged. In *The Wolf’s Chicken Stew*, the last line of text spoken by the wolf reads, “Maybe tomorrow I’ll bake the little critters a hundred scrumptious cookies.” This text is accompanied by an illustration of baby chicks eating a basket of cookies. Omitted in the basal version, readers are left wondering whether the wolf prepared cookies for the chicks or not. The omission



of these illustrations limits the reader's opportunities to construct the same story as that expressed in the original texts; it creates what Kucan (1994) and Galda (1991) suggest are incomplete stories.

Another difference in the basal version involves the physical arrangement of sentences on the page. For example, in the original form of *Fix-It*, there are not more than three sentences on each page whereas the basal version contains four pages with more than three sentences each. In *The Wolf's Chicken Stew*, sentences from multiple pages were condensed into one paragraph on a single page.

Still other changes involved placement of illustrations and wording in relation to one another. For instance, *The Wolf's Chicken Stew* begins with an illustration on one page with coordinating text on the facing page. The basal moved the text above the illustration. In *Fix-It*, a sentence is placed *below* the illustration instead of above as in the original.

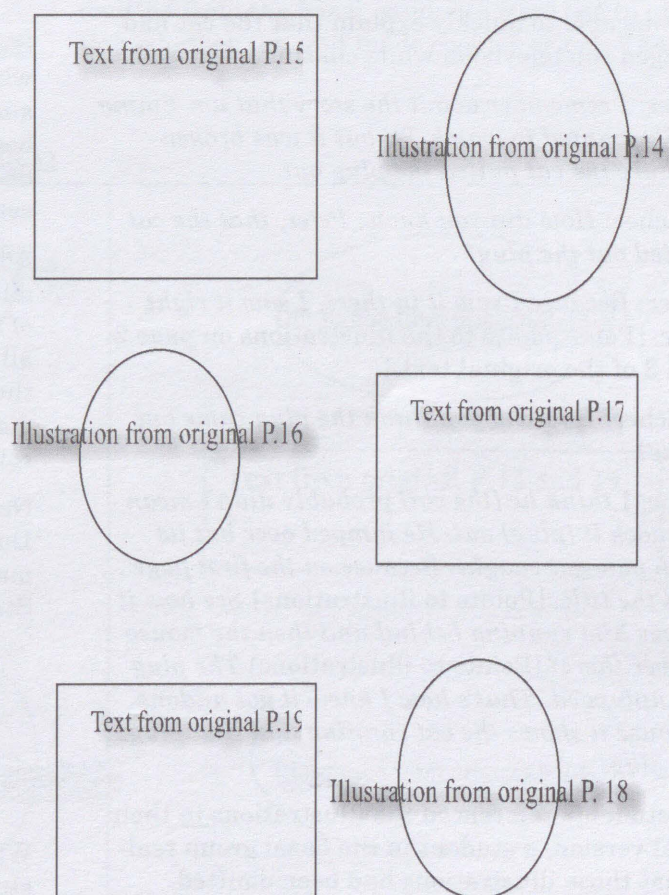
Numerous changes to illustrations and wording can be found. When several pages of text were condensed to a single page in the basal, illustrations were reduced in size, wording was rearranged, and print/picture format was altered. In *The Wolf's Chicken Stew* pages 14 through 19 are condensed to one page. This is accomplished by the omission of three illustrations and the reduction of three others. The three reduced illustrations are placed at the upper right, left center and bottom right of the page. Text that was below omitted illustrations in the original version is now placed to the left and right of the remaining reduced illustrations in the basal version (see Figure 1).

Rearrangement of text and illustrations poses other confusing configurations. For example, using an ellipsis (...) at the end of a line signals the reader that the sentence will be continued on the next page. The symbol helps to build reader excitement as the page is turned to discover what happens next. Both basal versions retained the ellipsis but continued the sentence on the same page. For example, in *Fix-It*, "Her father blew up a balloon. ..." appears on one page and continues on the next page with "until it popped." (p. 15) This sentence is reconstructed in the

basal on one line complete with the ellipsis, "Her father blew up a balloon ... until it popped" (p. 52). Although the basal versions accurately reproduce all the graphics of each sentence, the inclusion of an ellipsis in the middle of those sentences is no longer necessary since each full sentence is placed on one page. This alters the predictive quality of the original text.

Our next questions focused on whether students would notice differences between the original and basal versions of the stories and what impact these differences would have on students, if any.

Figure 1  
Condensation in *Wolf's Chicken Stew* Basal Page 85





## Exploring Different Text Versions in the Classroom

Jacquelyn worked with eight second-grade students (2 Caucasian males and 6 Caucasian females) by incorporating basal stories and their original versions into daily reading in her second- and third-grade blended classroom. Initially, four students read the basal form of *Fix It!* while the other four read the original version. All students then regrouped to discuss the story, and their conversations were audio taped. Since the basal story omitted the first three illustrations that showed how the television became unplugged, those readers hypothesized how that might have occurred. (All names are pseudonyms.)

Teacher: *What did you think happened to the TV?*

Jim: *We thought it just came unplugged.*

Helen: *We thought the plug was just loose and fell out.*

Having the benefit of illustrations, the original text group was able to quickly explain that the cat had unplugged the television while chasing a mouse.

Peter: *I remember about the story that um Emma really wanted to watch TV but it was broken because the cat pulled the plug out.*

Teacher: *How did you know, Peter, that the cat pulled out the plug?*

Peter: *Because I saw it in there. I saw it right here.* [Peter points to the illustrations on page 2 and 3 of the original text.]

Teacher: *How did you think the plug came out Anne?*

Anne: *I think he [the cat] probably didn't mean to knock it [plug] out. He jumped over but its back paw got caught. Because on the first page ... and the title.* [Points to illustrations] *See how it shows him running behind and then the mouse is over there?* [Points to illustrations] *The plug is unplugged. That's how I knew it got undone because it shows the cat running and it unplugs the plug.*

When students referenced the illustrations in their original version, a student in the basal group realized that those illustrations had been omitted.

Helen: *Our book didn't show the cat.*

After the discussion, the groups switched books, read them, and then met again. This time, both groups understood that the basal version omitted the first three illustrations from the original text. Both groups turned the pages of the original and basal story side by side to consider how the stories were different. They were learning how basals make changes to original literature and how those changes impact understanding.

The students were asked why they thought the stories were different. Responses were as simple as:

Kathy: *Um, well, the school book, it didn't show the cat because in the book there are other stories too and it didn't show it.*

Other responses showed the impact of the changes on their reading.

Anne: *I like the library book [original version] better because I have trouble with my eyes, and when so many pictures were on one page in the school book, it was hard for me to figure out what to look at.*

Students can have difficulty maintaining focus when more than one original page is placed on a single basal page as shown in Figure 2 (page 13) because pages become cluttered. Attempting to decipher which illustration coordinates with which sentence(s), can be overwhelming.

Additional work with *The Wolf's Chicken Stew* offered further evidence of the children's awareness of the interplay between text and illustration. First, all eight students were read the basal version as they followed along with their own copy. Then we discussed the story and all students were able to retell the main points of the story.

Next, the students were read the original version. During the reading, the children quickly noticed how many more illustrations were in the original text. Students made comments such as:

Megan: *The library book [original text] shows you more stuff. More pictures.*

Kate: *The pictures were the same in the school book [basal] but this book [original version] has more.*

When we reached the last page of the original story, students were asked which book they liked better, the school book (basal) or the library book (original)



and why. Their responses indicated a preference for the original story.

Kayla: *I liked the library book [original] better because it showed you more things, more pages, and it was longer.*

Jim: *Well, the library book showed the wolf creeping up on the chicken and the school book didn't.*

After our discussion about the two versions, students were asked how the story ended in the basal. They all remembered that the wolf was thinking about making cookies for the little chicks. Then we turned to the last page of their basal story and reread: "Uncle Wolf didn't have chicken stew that night but Mrs. Chicken fixed him a nice dinner anyway. 'Aw, shucks,' he thought, as he walked home, 'maybe tomorrow I'll bake the little critters [chicks] a hundred scrumptious cookies!'" (Kasza, 1991, p.90). The accompanying illustration in the basal shows the wolf standing amidst the chicks with the chicks climbing on him. Then, we looked at this same line in the original. The illustration shows the wolf walking home. The next page shows a basket full of cookies and the chicks eating the cookies. As soon as the last

page was turned, the students, in unison, all said, "Ohhhhhh!" and quickly started talking at once.

Kate: *I like it [original book] better because he [wolf] made the cookies and on the last page the chicks are coming over there to eat them.* [points to the last page of the original version].

Peter: *In the library book [original] we found out he did make cookies.*

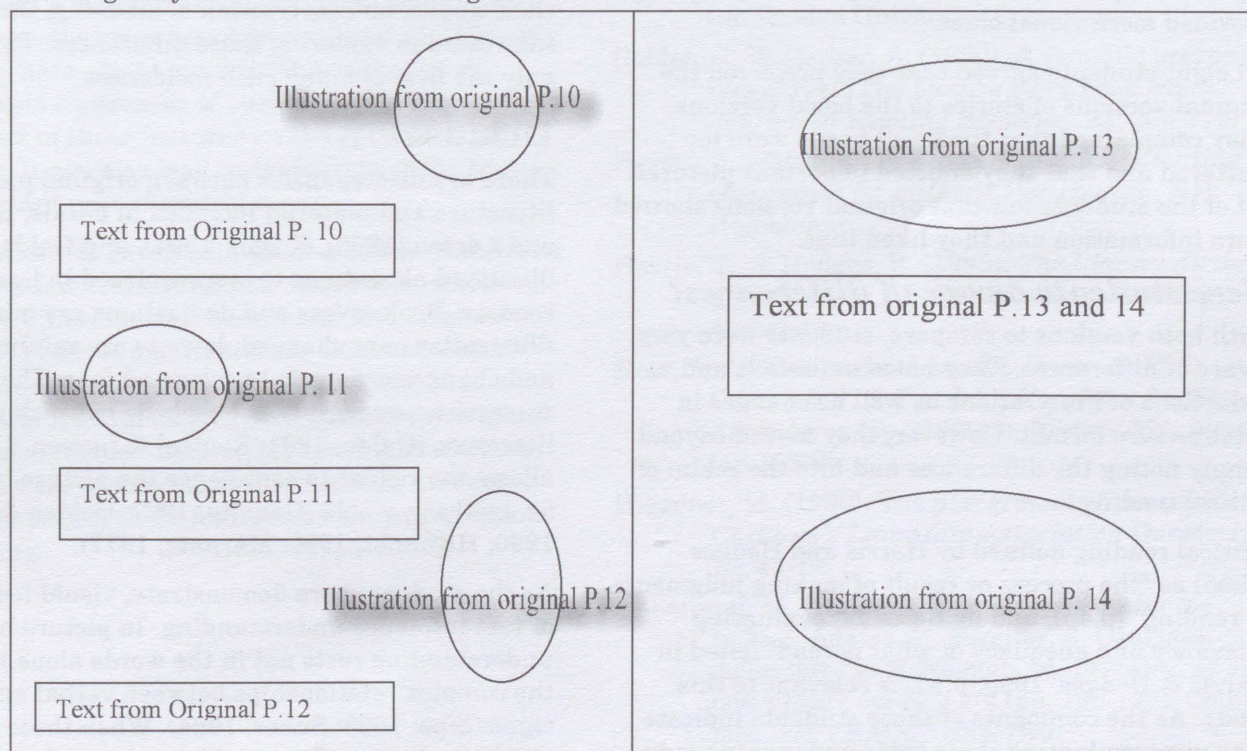
Kathy: *Well, I kind of liked the library book a little bit better because it told you more information than in the schoolbook and there were a lot more pictures and it showed you that the chicks got those cookies!*

Megan: *The library book has a lot more details.*

Helen: *On the last page of the library book [original] it shows you the cookies and in the schoolbook [basal] it doesn't.*

Students were excited that the last page of the original story showed that the wolf baked cookies for the chicks. With the last original illustration omitted from the basal, students were left to question whether the wolf made cookies or not. These

Figure 2  
Two Page Layout for *Fix-It* Basal Pages 50-51





students' reactions demonstrate how meaningful and powerful illustrations can be.

## Impact on Students

What about our questions as to whether or not students would notice the differences and the potential impact of those differences?

### *Did the differences in the versions of the stories affect students' understanding?*

We found that students' understanding of the two versions of the stories did vary. After reading both of the basal stories, they were left with questions unanswered. They wanted to know if the wolf ever baked the cookies for the chicks like he thought he might. They wanted to know how the television became unplugged in *Fix-It*. There were no picture clues to help answer these questions. Instead they were left to guess what they thought occurred in both stories without a way to confirm their hypotheses.

In contrast, as the students read the original forms of the two stories, they found that they were able to use both illustrations and print to answer their questions as well as confirm and refute their predictions. They had a better understanding of the story and a greater appreciation for the original version that provided more visual clues.

All eight students agreed that they preferred the original versions of stories to the basal versions. They complained that the basal pages were too cluttered and that they omitted important pictures. All of the students felt that original versions showed more information and they liked that.

### *Were students aware of differences?*

With both versions to compare, students were very aware of differences. They noted omissions and reductions of illustrations as well as changes in print/picture format. However, they moved beyond simply noting the differences and into the realm of critical reading.

Critical reading defined by Harris and Hodges (1995) as "the process or result of making judgments in reading" (p.45), and by Betts as "evaluating relevancy and adequacy of what is read" (cited in Harris & Hodges, 1995, p.45) is relevant to this study. As the comments of these students indicate, they were evaluating these texts and making judgments

about the efficacy of various text features in expressing the full meaning of the text. All of them noted the loss of meaning caused by omitting critical illustrations in both texts. They also discussed how text features affected their reading as exemplified in Anne's comment about how multiple illustrations and pieces of text on a single page confused her, "It was hard for me to figure out what to look at." Given the above definitions, these students were engaging in critical reading.

The children's critical reading did not end there. As demonstration of their skill, students then took it upon themselves to actively engage in comparing original and basal stories. After reading an Amelia Bedelia story in the basal, Helen went home and found the exact same story in a book at her house. She brought it to school and explained to the class how she noticed that all of the illustrations in the basal were in green, white, and black whereas in her real storybook the illustrations were different colors. The towels that Amelia was asked to change were green in the basal but pink in the original version. Jacquelyn and her students noticed that many illustrations were not included in the basal as the original and basal story were compared side-by-side. Now that the students were aware of differences between the basal stories and original literature and their impact on construction of meaning, they were interested in exploring those differences. This was only the first of many such incidences.

## Discussion

There are discrepancies between original pieces of literature and material included in basals. Reutzel and Larsen (1995), Kucan (1994), and Galda (1991) discussed alterations to stories placed in basal readers. Book covers and dedications are missing, illustrations are changed, layouts are reformatted, and changes are made to color and font. These researchers suggest that basals do not include "true" literature (Galda, 1991; Reutzel & Larsen, 1995) that allows the reader to experience the picture book as an aesthetic whole (Genette, 1997; Golden & Gerber, 1990; Higonnet, 1990; Marantz, 1977).

As the students here demonstrate, visual features of text influence understanding. In picture books, understanding rests not in the words alone but in the complex relationships between verbal and visual signs (Sipe, 1998; Suhor, 1984). When those relationships are disrupted, comprehension can be affected.



These students were affected by changes made in these stories; they found it difficult to understand certain aspects of the basal versions. However, the comparison that students made of the different versions of these texts provided them the opportunity to move toward becoming more critical readers. This fits with research (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988; Short, 1992; Sipe & Brightman, 2005) that suggests that comparison of multiple versions of a text encourages children to engage in high levels of thinking and interpretation. The comparison generates discussion of the visual features of texts that are important components of stories, and the inter-relationship of print and visual features (Kiefer, 1995; Stewig, 1995). This leads to understanding of the deeper meanings of texts.

Our experience with these students suggests that comparing basal texts to their original versions may be beneficial in helping children understand the role of various text features such as illustrations and how they can affect understanding. This strengthens comprehension and promotes the critical skill of evaluation. While teachers often have students compare two different stories or versions of a story from different cultures such as *The Egyptian Cinderella* (Climo, 1989) and *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* (Steptoe, 1987), comparison of original and basal stories goes a step farther. It involves comparison of versions otherwise assumed—at least by children if not teachers—to be similar. This comparison can promote awareness of varied text features and the impact of those features on the construction of meaning. It can also lead to evaluation of the texts, an important part of critical reading.

While this study involved a small number of children and only a few texts, it helped us to better understand the differences between basal and original versions of stories and how these differences can impact students. Additionally, it has generated a useful instructional strategy—comparison of original and basal versions—helping students and teachers become aware of important text features and evaluate the impact of these features on the construction of meaning.

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