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Have Primer Level Basal Readers Changed in Readability Over the Last 50 Years?

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The purpose of this study is to examine the changes in readability in primer level basal readers over the last 50 years.

With the current debate over the success of using authentic children's literature for reading instruction (Routman, 1988) versus the call from some teacher educators for a systematic, skills-based approach to the teaching of reading (Crawford, 1997), publishers have developed basals that purport to satisfy both sides of this pendulum swing. Recent research also indicates that basal instruction continues to be the dominant form of reading instruction in elementary classrooms (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). Over 90% of American elementary school classrooms use basals to some extent for their reading instruction time (Goodman & Shannon, 1994).

Even though the look of the basal reader has changed, has the readability of the beginner basals changed over the years? A longitudinal comparison between the readability levels of primer basals published from 1949 to 1997 seemed appropriate for this study. The authors' propose that with

the use of authentic-based literature, less controlled vocabulary and fewer decodable words, the current reading texts have increased the readability to a more difficult level.

The term *readability* in this study refers to an estimate of the difficulty level of the written text with results expressed as a reading grade level. The issue of readability formulas has been challenged in recent research (Bruce, Rubin, and Starr, 1981). The opponents to readability formulas believe that the text and reader variables, such as motivation and background knowledge, interact in determining the readability of reading material for the individual reader. However, in spite of these criticisms, readability formulas are still widely used in education (Gillett, Temple, 1994).

Basal Readers

Basal readers, or basal reading programs, are "a collection of student texts and workbooks, teacher's manuals, and supplemental materials for developmental reading and sometimes writing instruction, used chiefly in the elementary and middle

school grades" (Harris and Hodges, 1995, p. 18). According to Webster's dictionary, the word basal means "of or relating to the foundation, base, or essence" (Grove, 1986, p.180) Basal readers, by their definition, are the foundation or base upon which a reading program is built.

Historical Perspective

From about 1910 to about 1985, basal readers reached their pinnacle of popularity (Graves, Juel & Graves, 1998). The scientific movement had a great influence on educa-

tion, particularly in reading instruction, during the historical period from 1910 to 1924. Tests were developed, textbook writers began to produce readers based on silent reading procedures, and teacher's manuals were brought into general use during this time (Smith, 1965). The basal readers for the ear-

liest grades employed carefully controlled vocabulary, contained very brief narratives, and relied on pictures to convey much of their meaning. Much of the instruction students received centered around directed reading lessons, which included preparation for reading, silent reading, and follow-up questions along with discussion of each selection. The lessons were often punctuated by skill work in decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension (Graves, Juel & Graves, 1998).

Educators, such as William S. Gray, during the first third of this century were responsible for turning American schools away from the alphabetic-spelling method of reading to the look-and-say approach. Other educators continued to debate the best way to teach children to read.

To the advocates of phonics and more holistic approaches of reading, the look-and-say method seemed artificial and of dubious value (Graves, Juel & Graves, 1998).

Between 1950 and 1965, reading instruction was shaped by expanding knowledge of the world and the technological revolution (Smith, 1965). "By the 1950's, basal reading instruction had become an institutionalized part of education" (Crawford, 1997, p.10). The concern about basal readers of this time centered on their controlled vocabulary and use of high-frequency words. The stories were considered banal and not well constructed. Present day critics have noted that selections in basals of this era dealt almost exclusively with white and middle-class characters, themes, and settings (Graves, Juel & Graves, 1998).

In the 1960's, basal reading series were revised and extended. The latest editions had new covers, enlarged page sizes, improved typeface, and novel artwork. The content of the readers consisted of stories, poems, and plays. Textbooks of this era began to reflect the multiculturalism of America while attempting to meet the needs of students who did not meet grade level expectations. Some basal reading programs of this time emphasized teaching of letters and sound associations during the early stages in reading and gave special attention to the use of context clues in determining meaning (Smith, 1965).

During the 1970's, basal readers again went through heavy revision and extensive additions. The new reading series had contemporary and colorful illustrations, more appealing covers, and even larger page sizes. In addition to the stories, poems, and plays, informational articles and skills lessons were included. The text had longer passages, contained excerpts from modern children's literature, and incorporated more multi-cultural selections. The new basal reading programs of the 1970's were a reaction to the criticisms that basals included

too much skill instruction and that instruction in phonics and other subskills of reading were not integrated with actual reading (Graves, Juel & Graves, 1998). "The estimates are that basal reading programs account for 75 percent to 90 percent of what goes on during reading periods in elementary school classrooms" (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott & Wilkerson, 1985, p.35).

Literature-based Basals

From 1985 to the present, the literature-based basal series are founded on the notion that "... real literature has proved to be an excellent vehicle for developing, enhancing and enriching lifelong, active literacy" (Routman, 1988, p.18). The focus in this approach to teaching reading is to entice children into an aesthetic love for literature as you are teaching them the process (Cole, 1998). In addition, the basals of the 1990s stand apart from past series in that student anthologies are only one component of an entire integrated language arts program. In today's basal series, themes generally provide a strand of cohesiveness that pull all components together, making instruction more holistic rather than being separate components of the language arts program (Crawford, 1997).

Literature-based instruction emerged as a result of teachers' concerns with the lack of stimulation in the stories provided by past basal series (Cloud, Silva & Sadoski, 1987 as found in Reutzel & Larsen, 1995). Some feel this new, changing philosophy may also be due to teachers speaking out for more authentic literature and their desire to play a greater part in the decision-making taking place in their classrooms in regard to language arts instruction. Researchers and teachers have criticized basal readers of the past for lacking conflict, character development, and authentic situations and for their contrived language, controlled vocabulary, and eliciting of emotive responses in children (Goodman, Shannon, Freeman & Murphy,

1988). In the transition from the 1980s to the 1990s, basal authors have responded to these criticisms with the most dramatic changes seen in the history of basals (Hoffman, et. al., 1994).

The literature-based basal of the 1990s has been received with mixed reviews. McCarthy & Hoffman studied the first-grade level of the 1980s and 1990s basals and found that the new series "offered reduced vocabulary control, minimal adaptations, more diversity of genre, more engaging literary quality, more predictable text, and increased decoding demands" (McCarthy & Hoffman, 1995). In addition, Greenlaw has contended that the new basals offer quality children's literature in a context in which teaching reading is organized and sequential in nature (Greenlaw, 1996). In opposition, Reutzel and Larsen assert that even though quality literature is being included in student anthologies, minor adaptations are still made to the stories. This affects the authenticity of the text. Some adaptations are: omissions of illustrations; parts of the original story are deleted; and the reader misses the developments preceding and following the part selected.

The comparison between the basals of the 1980s and the 1990s demonstrates several areas of differences. Some word-level changes include smaller fonts and the use of less common adjectives, adverbs, and verbs. Adaptations made at the sentence level mentioned are: sentence junctures; continuations of thoughts being spread across a number of pages; more decoding demands; more compound-complex sentences; and illustrations that merely complement rather than help the child understand the story (Cole, 1998). With all of these factors considered, the reading difficulty of the text is greatly affected.

Method

Two primer level basal series were selected: the Houghton Muffin Company and the Scott Foresman Company. These series

Table 1Houghton Mifflin texts used in study

Jack and Janet, (1957), (1966)
 Honeycomb, (1976)
 Parades, (1989)
 Surprise, (1997)

Scott Foresman texts used in study

The New Fun with Dick and Jane, (1951)
 Fun with Our Friends, (1962)
 Ready to Roll, (1967)
 Outside My Window, (1987)
 My Favorite Foodles, (1997)

were chosen because they published basals during a 50-year period and remained independent entities throughout this time frame. The two basal reader series chosen are among the five best sellers in the United States (Reutzel, 1995). The texts for this study can be found in Table 1.

The second, third, and fourth stories were selected to be analyzed for readability level. This selection process was administered because the first story of a text tends to be lower in readability than the rest of the book and, therefore, was not selected. Also, some texts did not go beyond four stories. Story introductions, poems, and skill sheets were not included in the sample.

Each passage chosen for testing was run on an Apple Power Macintosh 7600/120 computer using *The Reading Level Stack Program* (1989) by Computer Assisted Patient Education, Inc. Both the Spache Primary Reading Formula and the Fry Reading Formula were selected to determine the readability level of all the text samples.

Readability

The first of the two readability formulas, the Spache Primary Reading Formula, is considered accurate for grades 1-3 (Glass & Cook, 1990). The Spache formula is based on sentence length and frequency of difficult words. It uses a revised list of 1,041 words representative of the vocabulary currently present in primary reading materials. According to a study done by Harris & Jacobson (1980), the Spache readability score agreed with basal publishers' designations from preprimer through 2.1.

The second test used was the Fry Readability Formula. The Fry formula encompasses grade levels one through college. The Fry test uses the average sentence length and the average number of syllables per 100 words. It does not use a set word list to determine difficulty as the Spache does. The Fry readability formula has also been compared with publishers' designations and found to agree well (Fry, 1980).

Since the Fry graph does not provide scores in tenths of a grade, Spache scores from each sample were used and the three passages from each level were averaged. Finally, the results from the two series were combined. The Fry graph was used as a comparison measure to the Spache scores on each sample to verify readability results. The publishers also use the Spache and the Fry as a readability measure for their series.

Table 2

Average Reading Levels					
Name of Text	Company	Copyright	Spache	Fry	Average Readability
Jack and Janet	Houghton Mifflin	1957			
<i>Who Is It</i>			1.60	1.0	
<i>What Can It Be?</i>			1.63	1.0	
<i>One Mitten Is Gone</i>			1.65	1.0	1.63
The New Fun with Dick & Jane	Scott Foresman	1951			
<i>Up and Down</i>			1.82	1.0	
<i>Who Is It?</i>			1.83	1.0	
<i>Dick Helps Sally</i>			1.98	1.0	1.88
Jack and Janet	Houghton Mifflin	1966			
<i>What Can It Be?</i>			1.65	1.0	
<i>One Mitten Is Gone</i>			1.65	1.0	
<i>The Little Goat</i>			1.55	1.0	1.62
Fun with Our Friends	Scott Foresman	1962			
<i>Sally and Billy</i>			1.73	1.0	
<i>Work to Do</i>			1.78	1.0	
<i>Mother Helps Pete</i>			1.77	1.0	1.77
Honeycomb	Houghton Mifflin	1976			
<i>Lucy Didn't Listen</i>			1.73	1.0	
<i>Can A Mouse Really Help</i>			1.64	1.0	
<i>Ira Sleeps Over</i>			1.94	1.0	1.77
Ready to Roll	Scott Foresman	1967			
<i>A New Home for Melvin</i>			2.35	2.0	
<i>Shadow Tag</i>			1.77	1.0	
<i>Wild Animals at the Zoo</i>			2.41	2.0	2.18
Parades	Houghton Mifflin	1989			
<i>The Little Red Hen</i>			1.89	1.0	
<i>One More Thing, Dad</i>			1.97	1.0	
<i>Doghouse for Sale</i>			1.87	1.0	1.91
Outside My Window	Scott Foresman	1987			
<i>A Good Home</i>			1.87	1.0	
<i>Do Not Take This Tree</i>			1.93	1.0	
<i>Come See My Home</i>			1.93	1.0	1.91
Surprise	Houghton Mifflin	1997			
<i>There's An Alligator Under My Bed</i>			3.02	3.0	
<i>If You Give A Moose A Muffin</i>			3.12	3.0	
<i>George Shrinks</i>			3.44	3.0	3.20
My Favorite Foodles	Scott Foresman	1997			
<i>Aiken Drum</i>			3.20	3.0	
<i>The Great, Big, Enormous Turnip</i>			2.05	1.0	
<i>Hello House</i>			2.13	2.0	2.46

Results and Discussion

An unpaired t-test for readability comparing old basals (1950-1985) to literature-based basals (1985-present) was conducted on the StatView program. With a p-value of 0.0657, the results indicated that a significant statistical difference did not exist between the two groups. The p-value indicates that the mean scores

showed no significant difference. When considering the standard deviation results, there was a remarkable distinction. The old basals showed a standard deviation of 0.207 versus the literature-based texts at 0.611. These figures indicate the variability of reading levels and how the average readability has increased in the literature-based readers.

Table 3

Unpaired t-test for readability

Grouping Variable: group

Hypothesized Difference = 0

	Mean Diff.	DF	t-Value	P-Value
lit, old	.562	8	2.131	.0657

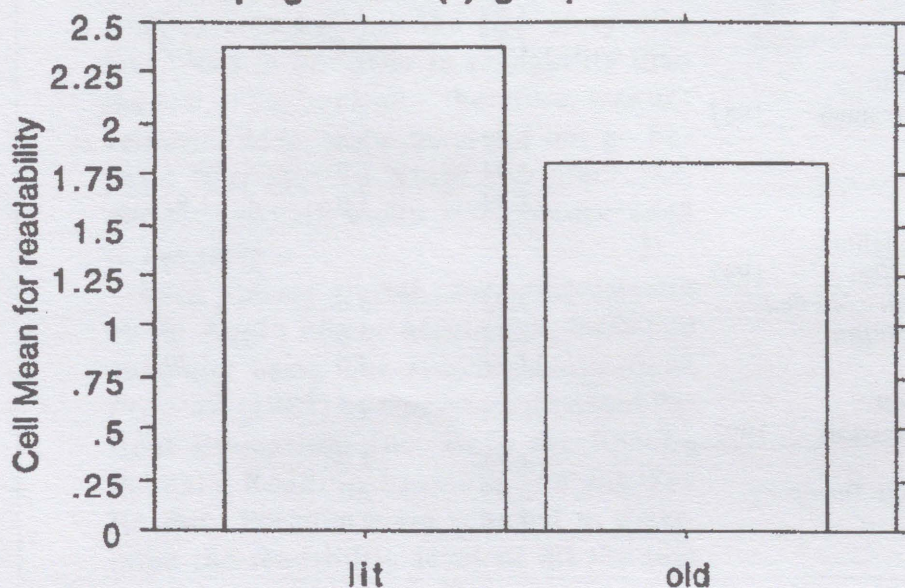
Group Info for readability

Grouping Variable: group

	Count	Mean	Variance	Std. Dev.	Std. Err
lit	4	2.370	.373	.611	.306
old	6	1.808	.043	.207	.084

Cell Bar Chart

Grouping Variable(s): group



Although statistical analysis seems to indicate no significant difference in readability between the two groups compared, a closer look at the actual texts reveals a difference in the reading levels of the various texts. Major differences between the old and literature-based primers can be characterized in the following ways: less vocabulary control with fewer high-frequency words; reduced number of words per story; a decrease in repetition; greater decoding demands upon the reader; less-common terminology; and more predictable text (McCarthy, Hoffman, Christian, Corman, Elliot, Matherne, & Stahl, 1994, McCarthy & Hoffman, 1995).

The implications to reading instruction in regard to the new revisions in literature-based text are significant. Although the new basals provide structure to the many components of a balanced reading program, they should not be con-

sidered all-inclusive. The suggested reading level indicated for each literature-based text may not necessarily correspond with each story's readability. With regard to readability, the new basal program needs to be supplemented with instructional materials that accommodate the wide range of abilities that exists in each classroom. Some examples include trade books to preserve the authenticity of the literature and texts that are at the instructional and independent reading level of the students.

This study is a starting point to investigate the critical differences between past and present reading programs. More research is needed to consider how effective the literature-based basals are in teaching children to read.

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