COMPARING BASAL PROGRAMS

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A crucial set of tools for teachers of beginning-stage readers is contained within the classroom texts. The vast majority of school systems use published basal programs to help deliver instruction to beginning stage students (Hiebert & Martin, 2001). Research has shown that the materials and activities in such programs have significantly influenced classroom instruction (Moody, et al., 1999). Therefore, it is important to realize which programs incorporate good instruction techniques. This study examined five popular basal reading programs – Open Court, McMillan-McGraw/Hill, Harcourt, Houghton Mifflin, Scott Foresman. Several characteristics of the basal programs were evaluated, including flexibility, decodability, readability, and text engagingness. These characteristics were chosen because previous research has shown them to be influential on a program’s efficacy in teaching children to read.

Differentiation of instruction issues and grouping issues (flexibility) were examined through analysis of the teacher’s manual suggestions. The manuals were evaluated regarding the use of assessments to plan effective instruction and the use of varied group arrangements within the classroom to insure delivery of that instruction. Research indicates that teachers find portfolio, observational checklists, and running records to be the most useful types of assessments (Baumann, et al., 2000). This study, however, found that all five of the programs relied heavily on standardized, fill-in-the-blank types of assessments. Some types of observational checklists and running records were used to place students in leveled texts but the only program that explicitly guided teachers to place students at differing entry points in the materials was Harcourt. Lessons
were primarily intended to be whole class directed. Each of the programs made use of
the circle-seat-center format and most categorized the same types of activities for each
grouping. Pacing was an issue for all of the reviewed programs. While they did include
either a reteach or an intervention package for struggling students, the whole class lessons
continued at the same pace.

In order to address the issue of decodability, the phonics lessons were examined
to find which letters and orthographic chunks have been presented. The corresponding
texts were then analyzed for the presence of those letters and chunks. The programs that
correlated most highly with the beginning stage developmental progression (Bear,
Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2000) were Houghton Mifflin and McMillan-
McGraw/Hill. The programs whose texts included the most words that were decodeable
based on their phonics sequence were Open Court, Houghton Mifflin, and Harcourt.
However, all of these programs offer more opportunities for students to practice the
phonics features being taught than programs analyzed in the past (Stein, Johnson, &
Gutlohn, 1999).

To address the issue of appropriate levels, several readability formulae were used
to ascertain the reading level of the text selections. The number of difficult words, as
well as repetition of vocabulary and sentence lengths, were also analyzed. All of the
programs had fewer words in the beginning passages and more words in the later
passages, the number of unique words per passage also increased as the year went on.
Programs were equally consistent at increasing the number of words per sentence and per
page throughout the later passages. However, the programs did not all start at the same
level of difficulty and did not increase the difficulty level at the same rate. There was
much variation in the readability scores for the beginning, middle, and end of the year passages. The differences in gradation of difficulty from program to program mean that students might have a smoother transition to more difficult passages in one program than another. There were also many passages rated as more difficult than the first grade level. Since none of the programs conformed exactly to levels expected in first grade, the readability levels should be seen as a factor to work around in the decision to adopt a given program. School systems should plan on incorporating carefully leveled texts from outside sources to ensure that students have materials to read at their instructional level. Additionally, classroom teachers should level the passages within the basals so they may offer more scaffolding with difficult passages.

Text engagingness was examined by asking students how they rate the text selections with respect to several variables. They were asked to respond to the pictures, story, and content of the text selections. The results from this study indicated that the students rated all of the programs highly. Open Court was rated highest for text, the students cited the perceived difficulty level of the words as the most common reason for either liking or disliking the text. McMillan-McGraw/Hill was rated highest for pictures, with the rationale for the rating focusing on the colors and illustrative technique used. For story content, students also preferred McMillan-McGraw/Hill, citing a salient section of the story as their reason for the positive ratings.

It is not possible to recommend one program as an overall “best pick”. Each of the programs was outstanding in at least one area and none excelled in all areas. It is important to remember that basals do not stand alone in actual school use. A basal is not a curriculum and districts need to be ready to supplement for amount of text read, fluency
practice, and/or word study activities beyond what the basal provides. Only then will we have a balanced curriculum. The basal is a tool for delivering good instruction, it shouldn’t be the instruction. However, it is important to choose the most appropriate tool for a particular district. In choosing a basal reading program it is necessary to have an idea of the strengths and needs of the system. There is a useful tool for evaluating programs available on the internet at http://reading.uoregon.edu/resources.php. School systems should use a checklist such as this, with knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses, to guide their choice of basal programs.

References


