
Student Teachers' Perceptions of Basal Reader Materials and Methodology

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One aspect of achieving excellence in reading is the ability of student teachers and beginning teachers to use commercial instructional materials such as basal readers confidently and effectively. If these teachers lack familiarity with and understanding of the commercial materials they use for reading instruction, negative consequences are possible. They may misuse them, spend an inordinate amount of time in preparation, or fail to take full advantage of certain features, all of which could negatively affect the achievement of their students.

The Role of Basal Readers in American Elementary Schools

The best estimate we have of how frequently basal readers are used in American elementary schools is that they are used in the vast majority of classrooms. Aukerman (1981) stated, "there is an 80 to 90 percent probability that an elementary classroom teacher will be obliged to use them in some way or another." Despite the trend toward Whole Language and use of novels in reading instruction, the National Council of Teachers of English Commission on Reading stated, in late 1988, that basal reader series dominate reading instruction in roughly 90 percent of the elementary school classrooms in the United States (Goodman, et al., 1988).

Two additional studies confirm these estimates. Smith and Saltz (1988) surveyed 391 schools nationwide on teachers' perceptions of basal

reading series. Ninety-three percent of the respondents felt they were expected to follow the manual "very closely" or "somewhat closely" while only six percent believe they were expected "not to follow the manual very closely." The four beginning teachers in the study all felt the manual should be followed either "very closely" or "somewhat closely." Similarly, Barr and Sadow (1989) examined how fourth-grade teachers in two U. S. school districts used basal reading programs, concluding "the evidence from this [study] and other studies supports the conclusion that teachers rely heavily on basal programs" (p. 69). Thus it seems highly likely that most student teachers and beginning teachers will use basal readers in some way and will follow the manual fairly closely.

However, basal readers aren't always used as intended. Durkin (1984) investigated whether there was a match between what basal reader manuals recommend and what elementary school teachers do. She found that teachers tended to deviate from several recommendations in the manual. For example, she found that in the prereading aspect, teachers tended to minimize or ignore new vocabulary, background information, and prereading questions. However, they did an adequate job on postreading comprehension assessment questions.

Russavage, Lorton, and Mullham (1985) surveyed and observed 25 elementary school teachers in one district with respect to what they thought and did about basal readers. These teachers consistently identified basal reader manuals as including "few strategies for developing background knowledge or resolving conflicts of inaccurate prior knowledge" (p. 316). They also identified the broad area of skill instruction as a problem.

Basal Readers in Undergraduate Reading Education Courses

In the undergraduate elementary school reading education class at Kansas State University, one topic is the basal reader, accompanying materials, and related methodology. It seemed prudent to know how our students felt about these materials, how prepared and confident they were as a result of their course work, and how the student teachers used these materials during student teaching.

Another reason for gathering information about this topic was to evaluate the validity of this topic in the reading methods class. One way of configuring a methods class is "reality congruence." That is, what is taught in the reading methods course is partly determined by how reading is taught in the schools, particularly in the classrooms where the students will student teach. If there is too great an incongruence between the reading methods class and the way reading is taught in student

teaching, a disservice may be done to all involved. Gathering information at the end of student teaching can provide glimpses into reading-instruction practices in these classrooms and permit any necessary course modification.

Methodology

Our student teaching ends with a one-and-one-half-day professional semester conference on campus. I developed a brief questionnaire about the basal reader, its accompanying materials, and related methodology (see Appendices). I administered it to 64 Elementary Education student teachers on the last day of the semester. I stressed the importance of candor and insightfulness to assure the validity of responses. I read each item and made any necessary comments and then had all students respond to each item all at once.

Results and Conclusions

1. Seventy-four percent of our student teachers reported basal readers were used four to five days a week in their student teaching classroom. This finding generally agrees with findings of previous research on the pervasiveness of basal reader use. Thus we need to continue preparing our student well to use the basal reader.

2. Forty percent of our student teachers reported at least occasional use of tradebooks in reading instruction in their student teaching classrooms. Whole Language concepts and tradebooks in reading instruction are making inroads in our geographic area and must be included in our reading methods course.

3. Students were quite secure about three parts of the Directed Reading Activity (DRA): (a) Vocabulary to be pre-taught, (b) discussion of the selection, and (c) skills. Therefore, our methods class instruction in these areas seems sound and should probably be continued as is with only minor modifications. What we are doing in the area of skills instruction seems sound and isn't causing our student teachers the same problems found by Russavage et al. (1985).

4. Because student teachers were least secure during the first several weeks of student teaching with (a) introduction of the selection and (b) extension/enrichment activities, we need to examine our reading methods class practices to see whether some changes need to be made in these areas. Durkin's study (1984) which found similar problems, may deserve our attention in this analysis.

5. Eighty-six percent of the students reported using teacher-constructed written activities 50 percent or more of the time. This figure is so high that a "reality congruence" model demands that our methods courses be examined to determine whether this topic is adequately dealt with. Further data collection examining student teachers' perceptions of their preparation and confidence in this area may also be justified.

6. How we deal with workbook/skillbook pages in our reading methods course needs to be studied for several reasons: (a) Over half of the student teachers reported that an average of two or more pages were assigned per day, (b) no real problems were reported with explaining or scoring workbook pages, but nearly 20 percent of the student teachers reported some to much difficulty discussing and clarifying them after students had completed the work; (c) fifty-five percent of the student teachers reported discussing workbook pages after they were completed only half of the time or less, which means that about three fourths of the workbook pages never got discussed after they were completed. None of these topics (which could provide fruitful investigation) has been addressed in the research reviewed.

Discussion

Educators of reading teachers need information about the tasks their students will face in teaching reading during student teaching. A strong case can be made for a fairly high correspondence between the training reading teachers will receive and that they will give. Now seems an important time to gather such data because of the emphasis Whole Language and the use of tradebooks are receiving contrasted with that of basal readers. But for methods classes to be most effective, detailed information is also needed about items such as how prepared and confident student teachers feel about teaching parts of the DRA. Then all of this needs to be interpreted in light of previous research.

With regard to this specific study, what my colleagues and I seem to be doing in our undergraduate reading methods classes about basal reader methodology generally seems adequate. Our student teachers report fewer and less severe problems than those reported by classroom teachers in previous related research. But some minor adjustments described above are warranted.

This study also provides us with some baseline data with which we can make future comparisons and with which other researchers can compare their student teachers' perceptions. Equally important, we and others now have a mini-model—"reality congruence"—that permits us to determine how parts of our reading education courses correspond

with the demands of student teaching. Both of these should permit us to configure our reading methods courses to the realities faced by our student teachers in order to achieve a higher excellence in reading.

References

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Appendix A

Perceptions of Basal Reader Materials and Methodology

1. Structured, school-like teaching experience while a college student:

_____ a. I have been a Teacher Aide (DED 100 Pre-Professional Lab) only.

_____ b. I have had *no* more than TWO significant, structured teaching experiences, e.g., Teacher Aide plus Friendship Tutoring.

_____ c. I have had more than two significant, structured teaching experiences, e.g., Teacher Aide plus Friendship Tutoring.

2. My cumulative GPA for all college work is: (Please don't round! 3.49 \neq 3.5)

_____ a. 3.8 - 4.0 _____ c. 3.0 - 3.39 _____ e. 2.4 - 2.59

_____ b. 3.4 - 3.79 _____ d. 2.6 - 3.0

3. Grade level I taught during Student Teaching:

_____ a. K _____ c. 2 _____ e. 4 _____ g. 6

_____ b. 1 _____ d. 3 _____ f. 5 _____ h. 7-8

4. About how often were basal reader materials (reader, workbook, worksheets, etc.) and/or ideas from the teacher's manual used in your Student Teaching classroom—by you and/or by your Cooperating Teacher? ON THE AVERAGE, TO SOME EXTENT:

_____ a. 5 days per week _____ d. 2 days per week

_____ b. 4 days per week _____ e. 1 day per week

_____ c. 3 days per week _____ f. Less frequently than e

5. How well prepared did you feel you were to use the basal reader as a result of your experiences in EDCI 474 Elementary School Reading?

Poorly

Moderately

Excellently

1

2

3

4

5

5. How frequently did you assign written activities/exercises—either from the basal material or that you wrote—over the selection? e.g., true-false, matching, short answer, etc.

<u>Never</u>	<u>Occasionally</u>	<u>50-50</u>	<u>Often</u>	<u>Nearly Always</u>
1	2	3	4	5

6. How frequently were reading workbook/skill pages/seat work used in your classroom? On the average:

- _____ a. Two or more pages per day.
 _____ b. One page per day.
 _____ c. One page every two days.
 _____ d. One page every three days.
 _____ e. Less frequently than d.

7. How much difficulty did you have with any of these aspects of using workbook/skill pages?

	<u>Little/ none</u>		<u>Some</u>		<u>Much</u>
a. Explaining work to be done; instructions	1	2	3	4	5
b. Grading/checking/scoring	1	2	3	4	5
c. Discussing/clarifying <i>after</i> completion	1	2	3	4	5

8. How frequently did you discuss with the class/group a workbook/skill page after it had been completed?

<u>Never</u>	<u>Occasionally</u>	<u>50-50</u>	<u>Often</u>	<u>Nearly Always</u>
1	2	3	4	5

9. How frequently did your Cooperating Teacher use trade/library books instead of basal readers for reading *instruction* (not just for recreational reading)?

<u>Never</u>	<u>Occasionally</u>	<u>50-50</u>	<u>Often</u>	<u>Nearly Always</u>
1	2	3	4	5

10. If your Cooperating Teacher (CT) used the approach in 9, how prepared did you feel to use it as a result of EDCI 474 Elementary School Reading? Please DON'T respond if your CT didn't use this approach!!!

<u>Poorly</u>		<u>Moderately</u>		<u>Excellently</u>
1	2	3	4	5

11. With regard to the basal reader, the teacher's edition, and the workbook, what *significant* things did you have to do during Student Teaching that you felt ill-prepared to do?

- a.
- b.
- c.