BASAL READERS:

The Lost Opportunity To Build the Knowledge that Propels Comprehension

By Kate Walsh

Publishers will spend tens of millions of dollars to produce a reading program—and for good reason. The nation's school districts invest over a billion dollars in reading textbooks *every year*.

As they compete for sales, these programs have taken on many similar characteristics. They display a lot of artwork to help children engage visually as they learn to draw meaning from spoken and written words, and they offer multiple teachers' guides with detailed lesson plans, classroom and homework activities, and related readings for faster and slower children. Though some programs take different approaches to teaching decoding, with regard to their pedagogy of comprehension, they are almost indistinguishable. Some use more stories or poems than others; some call for teacher read-alouds more often—but they all have the same basic components.

Unfortunately, a review of the five most widely used basal reading programs reveals that none even attempts the kind of sustained building of word and

Kate Walsh is the former director of Language Arts for the Core Knowledge Foundation. She has spent the past few years reviewing and critiquing reading textbook series. For this article, Walsh examined reading programs from five of the most widely used basal series: Harcourt Trophies, Houghton Mifflin Reading, Macmillan McGraw-Hill Reading, Open Court Reading, and Scott Foresman Reading. Her review was limited to the K-3 portions of these programs and focused on those components related to increasing language and reading comprehension.

domain knowledge that is essential for increased reading comprehension—and for averting the fourthgrade slump. In order to make the transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn" described by Jeanne Chall, children must have a foundation of broad vocabulary and world knowledge that includes important domains and is built up over time. Without this knowledge, children may be able to sound out the words in their textbooks, but will not be able to extract adequate meaning from the text. Children from mid- to high-income homes pick up much of this word and world knowledge at home. But children from low-income homes depend on their schools—and, ultimately, on the reading series that their schools decide to use. Beginning to emphasize word and world knowledge in upper elementary school is simply too late for these children.

In the photos and discussion over the next three pages, three specific examples are provided to explain how these programs miss opportunities to build word and world knowledge: (1) they don't focus on systematically building essential knowledge and vocabulary during teacher read-alouds and discussions aimed at building background knowledge; (2) they waste time by including many more lessons on formal reading comprehension skills than researchers have found are needed; and (3) by offering mostly incoherent, banal themes, they miss opportunities to develop word and world knowledge by offering and exploiting contentrich themes.

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Basals Acknowledge the Need for Background Knowledge, But Do Little To Build It

'n the early grades, the heart of a reading basal is a collection of simple stories with which children can prac-Ltice their emerging decoding skills. In general, these stories don't impart much word or domain knowledge—partly because it is important not to interfere with practicing decoding skills. There are a few fabulous examples of how such simple stories can introduce tremendous world knowledge (for example, Open Court's story titled *Homes Across the World* introduces children to the world's diverse geography and cultures with houses on stilts, houses with thatch roofs, and much more)—but such stories are

Therefore, a critical way to build vocabulary and world knowledge is through stories that teachers read aloud and through the discussions that follow. Most of the basals seem to recognize this and suggest devoting time to read-alouds. But the provided read-alouds rarely introduce interesting vocabulary or content; and, by second grade, they are typically not part of the daily (or even weekly) schedule. (Harcourt Trophies is a notable exception, providing almost daily teacher read-alouds with interesting vocabulary.) In addition, teacher editions instruct teachers to "build background knowledge" about story content before reading the stories (whether basal or read-aloud stories). But most of the stories' content deals with slight topics grounded in the domestic world of the modern American child, making it unlikely that students' horizons will be broadened.

To increase students' word and world knowledge, students must be exposed to more rigorous content: Teacher read-alouds should be roughly two grade levels above the students, and students' basal stories should ideally develop the same bodies of knowledge that have been introduced in the teacher readalouds. Moreover, significant chunks of timesay 20 minutes daily—should be devoted to discussion after each read-aloud. This allows time to ensure that all students comprehend the high-level read-alouds, explain new vocabulary, and start using the new vocabulary and new ideas and concepts.

Teddy Takes a Vacation: In one typical five-week unit from a 2nd-grade basal, the teacher read-alouds were all short poems or several-paragraph stories like those above, containing very ordinary vocabulary. Only one story departed from the simple world of family and friends and themes of sharing, playing, and family celebrations. Across several 1st- and 2nd-grade basals, some topics on which teachers were asked to build background knowledge were: what teddy bears look like; what makes grandmothers special; and what could happen if everyone brought their pets to school.

Puppy for Sale!

"m sitting in the window of Pat's Pet Shop. It could be worse. At least I have my friend Blackie with me. Blackie has been at Pat's for a couple of months. I've been here only a couple of weeks. I miss the warmth of my mother and my three sisters and four brothers. But I try not to think about it. At least here in the window I can watch the people go by.

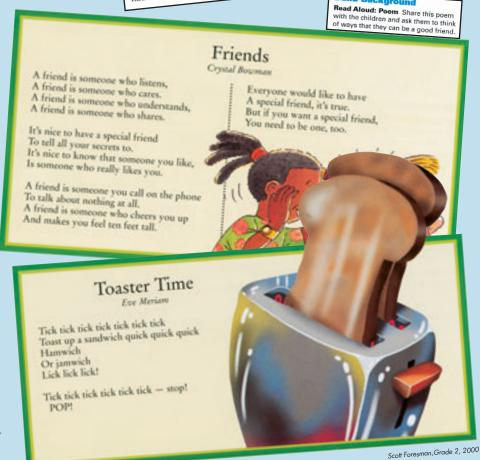
"There he is, that little boy who was here this afternoon with his mother. It was really nice when he held me in his arms. He smelled like that fluffy blue blanket in my old home. And he had soft hands. He knew exactly

how to hold me as he put me back in the box by the window.

"Of course, Pat tried to interest him in Blackie. She told his mother that he is friendly, that he is good with children, that he's almost paper trained. But you can't blame Pat-Blackie does need a home."



Build Background



Build Background

Read Aloud: Poem Share this poem with the children. Ask them what their favorite things are to put on toast.

LARRY'S

BABY

BOA

Build Background Have children tell you what they know about teddy bears. Ask: Does anyone have a teddy bear? What does it look like?

BEFORE READING

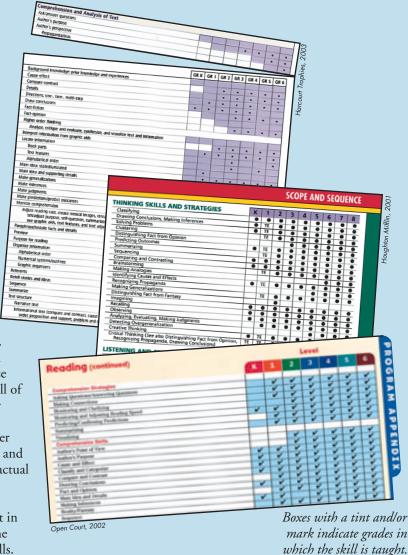
Build Background Ask children what they think might happen if every child brought his or her pet to school on the same day. Have children describe a few possible funny things that could happen. Harcourt Trophies, Grade 2, 2003

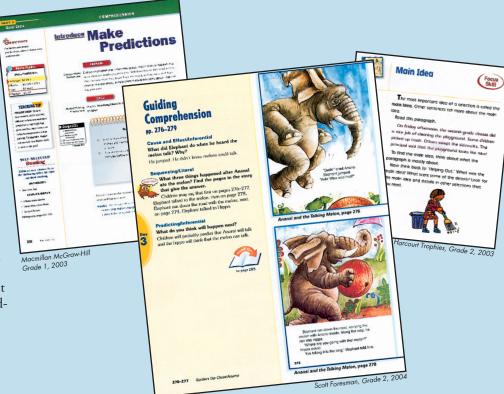
Excessive Time Is Devoted to Acquiring Formal Comprehension Skills Such as "Sequencing"

urrent reading programs, without exception, view the teaching of reading comprehension largely as a set of formal skills to be taught and practiced. None of the programs acknowledge the importance of building broad, general student knowledge as the primary means by which to improve reading comprehension. Instead, beginning in kindergarten, students are asked to rehearse skills such as sequencing, classifying, inferring, or finding the main idea. Here are three typical Scope and Sequence charts from basal teaching guides (*right*). You can easily see that the same skills are practiced year in and year out. For example, students in these programs, and most others as well, practice the skill of sequencing from kindergarten through grade 6 (or even 8).

Although this illustration doesn't show how other topics are addressed, it is critical to note that these and other reading programs allocate as much or more actual time to rehearsing comprehension skills than they allocate to teaching any other element in their language-arts program. It's not that time isn't spent in an effort to strengthen comprehension, but that the time is spent strictly on formal comprehension skills.

In reality, when children experience problems comprehending text, it is more likely due to the child's lack of knowledge of the subject matter. For example, a child can make inferences about dinosaurs because he happens to know a lot about dinosaurs. The same child will exhibit almost no such reasoning about the Big Bang theory because he lacks knowledge about it. The notion that we can teach students a set of skills that they will be able to apply to new and unfamiliar texts or situations is a process that cognitive psychologists call "skills transference." This is regarded as an inordinately difficult task for our brains to pull off and, therefore, is not a practical educational goal. But it is a goal set forward by every major reading program on the market.





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The Themes Around which Basals Are Organized Are Typically Contrived and Trite and Do Little To Build Knowledge

eveloping knowledge in a particular domain and becoming comfortable using its specialized vocabulary depend on devoting time to selected topics—time in which new ideas and concepts can be built and contemplated; time to progress from introductory to more detailed texts; time to discuss new information and concepts; and time to repeatedly hear and practice using the vocabulary of the domain in a variety of contexts. Teachers, who have long organized academic content into units of study, knew this even before cognitive scientists began their studies of learning, memory, and expertise.

All the popular basal series are organized around themes, but unfortunately, problems abound. Many of the themes are little more than catch-all labels for stories that hardly relate. Many themes address only utterly ordinary day-to-day knowledge and thus introduce only a minimal amount of academic content and vocabulary that is new to students. Here are some actual themes for grades one and two pulled from three widely used basal series: "Together Is Better," "Being Me," "Express Yourself,"

"Imagine That!" and "Keep Trying." Themes like these will do little to enhance students' domain knowledge, vocabulary, and comprehension.

It is a rare theme that offers carefully selected and sequenced readings that build from basic information to detailed discussion while systematically adding new vocabulary and repeating recently introduced vocabulary. In fact, none of the basals have such a well-constructed theme in their kindergarten or first-grade programs.



A Better Way To Build a Theme

One of the best examples of a well-constructed theme is Open Court's "Fossils" (Grade 2, Unit 4). Based on the theme overview in this photo, you can see that students are going to learn a good bit about fossils, dinosaurs, and dinosaur fossils. By being focused, the theme allows students to explore the two main, interrelated topics in-depth and builds many

opportunities to repeat related vocabulary in class. In addition to fossil and dinosaur, words such as scientist, paleontologist,

imprint, extinct, bones, and skeleton appear frequently in the selected readings. The concept of prehistory is also well introduced, as the readings state that dinosaurs lived millions and millions of year ago several times before the word prehistoric is used. But, unfortunately, only one of the selections is a teacher read-aloud, meaning that the language is not as advanced as it could be if the readings did not have to be at the second grade level.

