

The Changing Character of Basic Reading Materials

ALMOST every issue of a professional or popular periodical carries an article heralding a sensational new approach to the teaching of reading including a description of some amazing new material that promises to be the panacea for all reading problems. Mothers of eighteen-month-old babies are urged to send for kits of oversized flashcards to begin reading instruction at home; beginning reading lessons for three-year-olds have been serialized in local newspapers; new alphabets have been invented; and the traditional alphabet has been subjected to technicolor for ease of identifying sound. Many claims are being made for these inventions in reading materials; some can be substantiated by research while others are but loud cries in the marketplace.

Less sensational but of far greater importance for reading instruction in our American schools, are the significant changes in the production of new basic reading materials. Since basic readers are used in some 95 percent of our primary grades and in 88 percent of the middle grades, any major change in these materials deserves educators' attention and analysis. For the past 30 years basic

readers have changed very little; of course each new revision saw new stories added and skill instruction refined. Today, however, reading programs have expanded greatly to meet the needs of our changing society. No longer is one basic text per grade adequate to challenge the reading abilities of all children.

Children in urban schools may use different books than do children in rural or suburban areas. Books that are representative of the multi-ethnic background of this country have been prepared. Content has been broadened to include both fictional and nonfictional selections. The literary quality of the books has been improved greatly and there is a noticeable step-up in both the vocabulary and skill development. These are major changes in basic reading materials, not minor revisions. They deserve careful scrutiny.

Vocabulary and Linguistic Controls

Vocabulary controls have been lifted or eased at a considerably earlier level in basic readers published since 1960. One publisher¹ claims that by the middle of the primary grades "the word

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¹The Macmillan Reading Program. New York: The Macmillan Company.

analysis skills have become so productive that the 'new word' concept is obsolete." Another series² has maintained systematic vocabulary control including word count and many repetitions for reinforcement through the third grade readers. Starting with the fourth grade, each selection must test at the appropriate grade level according to different readability formulas. This same company maintains that by the end of the third grade, children have been taken through the skills that in the previous edition were not finished until the end of the fifth grade. Another company³ has added a fifth section to each of its readers in the 1962 Edition. This section does not have the vocabulary controls which the other sections of the books do. There is then a decided step-up in both vocabulary and the skills taught in the newer editions of basic readers.

Research from linguistics also has influenced the style of writing in recent basic readers. While most readers have avoided the "Dan Can Fan Nan" approach advocated by one linguistic reader, they have tried to be more faithful to the natural language patterns of children. Contractions are included in conversation; sentences are kept short but seldom include the repetitious "Oh, oh, oh," "look, look, look" of the tired first grade jokes. The sentence patterns and vocabulary of two series^{4,5} of books developed for use with urban children were derived from the actual recorded speech of these youngsters. The vocabulary of these readers is controlled but

effort has been made to avoid unnatural or stilted sentence patterns.

Basic Readers and i/t/a

When writing books for beginning readers, it is well to remember that the text is controlled one way or another; either the vocabulary is limited, the language patterns, or the sound. The New Initial Teaching Alphabet devised by Sir James Pitman in England consists of some forty-four different symbols which are used to make our English language more consistent in its sound-symbol pattern. Research with this teaching medium has been carried out successfully in several American school systems.

Now one large publishing house⁶ has transliterated its first grade reading materials to make an experimental edition. This firm has set up a carefully controlled research study using identical methods and materials except for the one variable of the i/t/a medium. This edition will not supplant the firm's established edition but will be an experimental edition available to other schools interested in conducting their own research projects. Publication of an experimental edition represents a new departure in basic reading programs.

The Changed Content of Basic Readers

Dramatic changes have occurred in the content of many new basic readers. Not since the McGuffey Readers has there been as much emphasis upon well-selected literature for children. Concern for the child's literary heritage is noticeable in the frequent inclusion of folk

² The New Basic Reading Program. Chicago: Scott Foresman and Company.

³ The Reading for Meaning Series. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

⁴ The City Schools Reading Program. Chicago: Follett Publishing Company.

⁵ Chandler Language-Experience Readers. San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company.

⁶ The Experimental Edition. Chicago: Scott Foresman and Company.

and fairy tales, fables, well-known poetry and both old and modern classics. In a series⁷ bearing a 1965 copyright, the middle-grade books contain almost every genre of literature, including essays, poetry, biography, autobiography, historical fiction, modern fantasy, folk tales, myths, legends, drama, and a full-length book. The inclusion of the latter allows the teacher to give children special guidance in reading a longer selection since these will constitute much of their recreational reading in the future. One supplementary series⁸ of books also includes a long selection. Both nonfiction and fiction are represented in the more recent basic readers to dispel the criticism that children never have the opportunity to learn to read nonfiction.

Articles, newspaper features and personal accounts frequently include such primary sources as original documents and actual photographs. By providing a greater variety of both fiction and nonfiction, more emphasis has been given to the development of the attitudes and skills needed for critical and appreciative reading. One series⁹ of books is based entirely upon reading in the content fields, with materials being drawn from social studies, arithmetic, science and literature. Children are helped with study skills such as practice in note-taking, outlining, using reference materials, and establishing time concepts in conjunction with their reading rather than the social studies program.

Even the illustrations and art work of basic readers have changed significantly. It was once thought that the mark of excellence of illustration in a reader

for any grade depended upon the securing of one artist for an entire book. No longer is this the case. Just as no one literary form can serve the many purposes that the content of basic reading must serve, no one style or technique or medium can serve the many purposes of illustrations. However, in most first grade reading materials, illustrations are realistic and character delineation must be consistent throughout the stories.

As children mature they can appreciate more abstract and sophisticated art design. Basic readers for the middle grades reflect this maturity and a few provide a real education in art itself. When selections have been made from beautifully illustrated books in children's literature, several series^{10,11} have obtained permission for the original art work. This serves to introduce students to some of the best illustrations of children's literature today. Examination and comparison of even the covers of basic readers at present as contrasted with those of ten years ago give a sampling of the many changes that have occurred in the technological aspects of publishing books today.

Multi-Ethnic Editions

Following the lead of the Great Cities School Improvement Program in Detroit in developing the first integrated books, some four or five publishers will be bringing out their own multi-ethnic editions this year. These editions have taken somewhat diverse approaches as they attempt to reflect our changing American Society. The "Detroit Readers,"¹² as they

⁷ Middle Grade Reading Program. Chicago: Scott Foresman and Company.

⁸ The Enrichment Readers. Boston: Ginn and Company.

⁹ *From Actors to Astronauts*, etc. New York: Harper and Row.

¹⁰ The Wide Horizon Readers. Chicago: Scott Foresman and Company.

¹¹ The Reading Caravan. Boston: D. C. Heath and Company.

¹² The City School Reading Program. Chicago: Follett Publishing Company.

are generally known, first appeared in 1959 and included stories which were bi-racial and urban centered. While realistic, such grim facts as tenement buildings were not pictured, in order to avoid implanting the idea that the inner city is the only environment possible for these children. Since only the pre-primers and the primer are available, vocabulary limitations prevented the introduction of too many characters. The program is planned to go through third grade and future books will portray all major ethnic groups. There has been some criticism of the fact that the one white child in the pre-primers appears to be a very isolated little boy living in a Negro community. However, the new fourth and fifth pre-primers introduce other characters both white and Negro and correct this earlier objection. Five pre-primers are included in the series rather than the conventional three. It is claimed that there is a psychological benefit from having shorter books that can be completed more rapidly.

Another company on the West Coast¹³ has brought out six pre-primers built around school and play experiences and illustrated with actual photographs of Negro, white, and Oriental children. Many of the stories are based on children's own recorded speech and action as they played on slides, swings, rode bikes and went to the supermarket. Authors then built stories using appropriate selections from the children's speech. This approach has the advantage of being faithful to children's own language patterns, but the disadvantage of producing stories with little plot. This series will be extended to all six grades.

A series of readers particularly designed for the inner city child is being

¹³ Chandler Language Experience Readers. San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company.

developed by a college of education for a large publishing house.¹⁴ The two pre-primers center around the activities of the people in the city itself. Working mothers, city helpers and persons from a variety of multi-ethnic backgrounds are included. The series is not completed but will extend through grade three. The company¹⁵ producing this series is publishing an all new basal reading program that is multi-ethnic also. However, the uniqueness of this special primary program is its complete urban setting.

At least one major publishing company¹⁶ has completed its multi-ethnic series through six grades. Beginning with the readiness books, first graders are introduced to the well-known characters of their basic readers and to an equally interesting Negro family. The socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of the two families are assumed to be equal and the children play with each other in a suburban setting. In the first reader other children from different ethnic groups are included, a Chinese boy, a Mexican girl, a Negro teacher, etc. Each of these characters is carefully delineated and is an integral part of the stories; none is added merely to make a multi-ethnic book. By the middle grades, stories of a multi-ethnic nature have been selected from children's literature, for example, selections from *Amos Fortune*, *Free Man*, by Elizabeth Yates, and *Southtown*, by Lorenz Graham, are included. Some of the stories realistically face the problems of prejudice and would provide opportunities for excellent class discussions of one of the major social problems of our time.

¹⁴ The Bank Street Readers. New York: The Macmillan Company.

¹⁵ The Macmillan Reading Program. New York: The Macmillan Company.

¹⁶ The Multi-Ethnic Edition. Chicago: Scott Foresman Company.

Next year there will be no excuse for presenting our children a picture of a "smiling fair-skinned world," for good texts are available (and more are coming) that reflect the multi-ethnic character of our society. The development of these books has been no easy accomplishment, for all groups have wanted to say how it should be done. Cities requested "realistic readers" and then rejected them if they portrayed the slums. Some thought suburban settings were too idealistic; others wanted no mention of a segregated setting in the South even when escape from that situation was the theme of the story. Educators and textbook committees are in danger of setting up new stereotypes for old. For only when an ethnic group is portrayed as having a wide range of characteristics, vocations, socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds are we moving away from a stereotype into a truthful portrayal. When multi-ethnic books are commonly accepted in our schools (hopefully, when they become the standard basic readers), then perhaps they can be evaluated more objectively.

Providing for Individual Needs

Formerly, all children were expected to read the basic reader for their grade level and the only adjustment made for varying reading abilities was the child's placement in a particular group which then determined the *time* he read the assigned reader. Realizing that the better readers needed more challenging materials, one company¹⁷ developed enrichment readers to accompany their basic texts. This year another publishing house has designed one book¹⁸ for the

better readers and another book¹⁹ for the slower readers.

The book for the more able reader contains from five to six complete, or almost complete, trade books. The reading level is approximately two years above the stated grade level. The book for the slower reader begins two years below the established grade levels and ends slightly above the normal grade level. The content of the latter book is multi-ethnic and boy oriented. It includes how-to-do-it articles, secret codes, riddles, sports stories, cartoons, narrative verse and one long selection from a book. Publication of these books shows a recognition of the variety of reading needs of our children.

Packaged Classroom Libraries

Almost all basic reading programs encourage wide recreational reading beyond their instructional program. Lists of recommended trade books are incorporated in teachers' manuals. Yet somewhat less than one third of the elementary schools have centralized libraries and books are difficult to obtain. Frequently teachers are overwhelmed by the number of new trade books that appear each year (nearly 3000 juveniles were published in 1964), and they may not know how to make wise selections.

In order to alleviate this situation, some seven or eight publishing houses have offered "packaged library sets" of books. Some of these sets include only the publisher's own publications, other sets are from book clubs, while several sets only include excerpts from books for children "to sample." At least two packaged library sets are produced in

(Continued on page 439)

¹⁷ The Enrichment Readers. Boston: Ginn and Company.

¹⁸ The Wide Horizons Readers. Chicago: Scott Foresman Company.

¹⁹ The Open Highways Readers. Chicago: Scott Foresman Company.

(Continued from page 381)

conjunction with basic reading programs, however. One²⁰ of them contains 30 paperback books for grade 4 level, a teacher's manual, and pupil-record books. Another one²¹ includes 25 hardback books for use at the grade 3 level with a teacher's resource book and a pupil-record book. "Libraries" for other grade levels will be published by both these companies. These books have been carefully selected for children's use.

Responsibility for Selection

Not all of the innovations in new reading materials have been described in this article, since the field of reading is one of the most prolific in the creation and use of instructional materials. However, many of the changes that have occurred within the greatly expanded area of basic reading materials have been discussed. Publishers are in much the same position as car manufacturers who make several standard models but offer infinite variations of those models.

Today textbook publishers of reading materials offer educators their standard reading programs with a wide array of such possible choices as: multi-ethnic editions, books for poor readers, books for superior readers, books written in i/t/a, sets of packaged trade books, etc. The educator is asked to make the final choice for the kind of reading program he wants for his school. This is putting the responsibility for the reading program back where it belongs, in the hands of the professional educator.

²⁰ The Reading Spectrum. New York: The Macmillan Company.

²¹ Invitations to Personal Reading. Chicago: Scott Foresman Company.

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