Basic Skills Resources for Secondary School Teachers and Administrators

Excellent materials are available to help secondary students learn basic skills in a functional context.
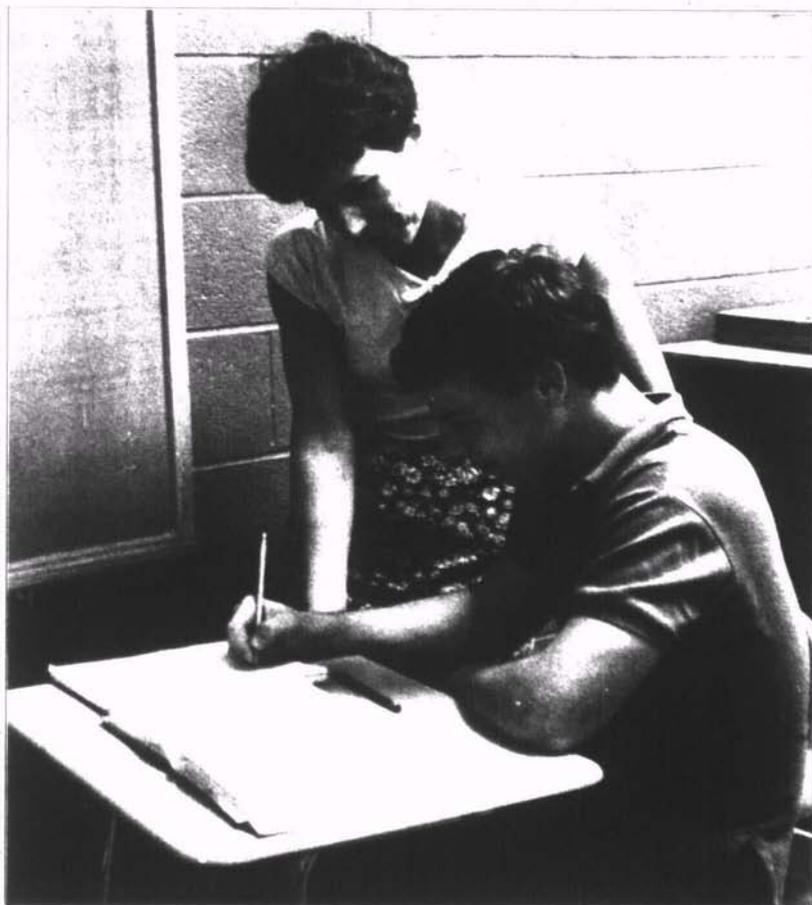
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Good basic skills instructional resources are available for secondary school teachers. In Franklin County (Columbus), Ohio, teachers in the second year of a Title II Basic Skills Improvement Program are using an array of quality books to design content-related basic skills activities.

The program features day-long workshops, classroom observations, and monthly meetings designed to help secondary teachers from all subject areas learn techniques for incorporating basic skills into their instruction. Our primary objective is to enhance teacher and administrator awareness of basic skills program standards. We define basic skills as:

● Reading—The ability to comprehend printed material and to think critically about it

● Writing—The ability to select, organize, and adapt ideas for specific intentions and audiences

● Mathematics—The ability to solve everyday problems involving quantitative reasoning

● Oral Communication—The ability to use speaking and listening behaviors for designated purposes and audiences.

The project considers reading, writing, mathematics, and oral communication to be complex skills. For example, the most fundamental basic skill in mathematics is not computation per se but the ability to reason quantitatively.

Our approach to basic skills does not emphasize narrowly conceived mechanical exercises such as computation drill and sentence diagramming. Instead we hope to assist teachers to develop instructional activities that will foster students' overall problem-solving skills.

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The project promotes functional practice and application of basic skills. Functional in this context means, for example, composing a letter to a newspaper editor as part of a journalism unit or interviewing a local resident for a community history project.

These activities require practice and application of basic skills as used by professionals in their everyday work. In this respect, our approach to basic skills is one of integrated, experiential learning.[1]

In addition, our orientation to basic skills favors learning that moves from the whole (for example, writing a relevant piece of communication) to the part (correctly spelling all the words in the communication). While the part—in this case, spelling—is important, it is only a means to an end and properly assumes a subordinate position in the curriculum.[2]

Materials Selection Criteria

We have applied the following criteria to selection of basic skills teaching resources:

● Title—The book, monograph, or article "fits" the program; in other words, it reiterates some key words used in our basic skills workshops or relates the skill to an individual discipline (*Teaching Reading and Mathematics* by R. Earle, for example).

● Authorship—Books written or edited by a practicing teacher are for obvious reasons very appealing.

● Length—A 30- to 50-page monograph seems the ideal length. Anything longer requires several sittings to read and increases the chance that teachers will not use the material. This criterion disqualifies such excellent resources as Richard Vacca's *Content Area Reading*, Gary Tate and Edward Corbett's *The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook*, and the NEA series on *Education in the 80's*. Texts of this sort can be used in follow-up workshops or introduced selectively during the original training.

● Format—First, we look for a short introduction that spells out the theoretical framework from which the textual information is derived. Here again information that repeats the language used during the workshop reinforces teachers' learning. Second, there should be a discussion of teaching strategy, activity, or evaluation method replete *with examples of student work*. Teachers generally react adversely to theory only if it is propounded independent of accompa-

nying examples. Finally, a bibliography creates the possibility of a "lighthouse" effect: one good book points the way to another. Teachers reading these books internalize their content and gradually begin to generalize the information to all aspects of their teaching.

● Appearance—Colorful covers and paperbacks are best, if possible. Hardbound books are expensive and are easily associated with a more formal kind of textbook learning that teachers often reject as irrelevant.

A Sample of Our List

Some of the books that have met the majority of our selection criteria are listed here.

Reading

Classroom Strategies for Secondary Reading. J. Harker (Newark, Del.: International Reading Association, 1977).

Improving Reading in Science. J. Thelen (Newark, Del.: IRA, 1978).

Reading in the Business Education Classroom. L. Mikulecky and R. Haugh (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1980).

Reading in the Mathematics Classroom. C. Smith and H. Kepner (Washington, D.C.: NEA, 1981).

Reading in the Science Classroom. J. Bechtel and B. Franzblau (Washington, D.C.: NEA, 1980).

Reading in the Social Studies Classroom. T. Bullock and K. Hessee (Washington, D.C.: NEA, 1981).

Teaching Reading and Mathematics. Richard A. Earle (Newark, Del.: IRA, 1980).

Teaching Reading in Social Studies. J. Lunstrum and B. Taylor (Newark, Del.: IRA, 1980).

Using Sports and Physical Education to Strengthen Reading Skills. L. Gentile (Newark, Del.: IRA, 1980).

Writing

Designing and Sequencing Prewriting Activities. L. Johannsen, E. Kahn, and C. Walter (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1982).

Formative Writing: Writing to Assist Learning in All Subject Areas. V. Draper (Berkeley, Calif.: Bay Area Writing Project, 1979).

Inside Out Developmental Strategies for Teaching Writing. D. Kirby and T. Liner (Montclair, N.J.: Boynton/Cook, 1981).

Mapping the Writing Journey. M. Buckley and O. Boyle (Berkeley, Calif.: BAWP, 1981).

The Write Occasion. P. Woodworth and K. Keech (Berkeley, Calif.: BAWP, 1980).

Writing From Given Information. S. Gray and K. Keech (Berkeley, Calif.: BAWP, 1980).

Mathematics

Graphical Comprehension. E. Fry (Providence, R.I.: Jamestown Publishers, 1981).

Language of Mathematics (6–12). (Indianapolis, Ind.: Indiana Department of Public Instruction, 1981).

Problem Solving: A Handbook for Teachers. S. Krulik and J. Rudnick (Boston, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1980).

Oral Communication

Communication for Problem Solving. D. Curtis, J. Mazza, and S. Runnebohm (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1979).

Human Communications Handbook, Volume 1. B. Ruben and R. Budd (Rochelle Park, N.J.: Hayden Book Company, 1975).

Human Communications Handbook, Volume 2. B. Ruben (Rochelle Park, N.J.: Hayden Book Company, 1978).

Speech Communication Activities in the Writing Classroom. J. Blankenship and S. Stelzner (Urbana, Ill.: ERIC, 1979).

Availability of high caliber basic skills materials will not by itself promote student achievement. Materials, after all, remain inert unless teachers act on them. Yet the availability of these resources allows educators to design and implement improved basic skills curriculum expeditiously. **EL**

[1]For a comprehensive discussion of experiential learning, see Larry McClure and others, *Experienced-Based Learning: How to Make the Community Your Classroom* (Portland, Ore.: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1977).

[2]Compatible with this perspective on basic skills and valuable to administrators and teachers alike is "The Essentials of Education," a pamphlet available from the National Council of Teachers of English Order Department, 1111 Kenyon Rd., Urbana, IL 61801 as follows: 1–14 copies, free for a stamped, self-addressed envelope; 15 or more copies at 5¢ each; contact Carl Johnson at NCTE for reorders of 100 or more at 3¢ each (stock #15934).