

Reading

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The Changing Basal Reader

Concern with the quality and content of basal readers is so widespread that their ridicule has become a part of our national folklore. Critics maintain that basal readers usually don't include fine literature. Even when such literature is included, critics complain, it is edited so extensively to meet the requirements of readability formulas and to remove any controversial content that the resulting story is not worth reading.

The evidence, however, contradicts the criticisms. Over several generations, reading textbooks have constantly changed—and improved! Recently Comas (1987) reviewed eight reading programs (fig. 1) submitted to the Texas Department of Education for adoption in 1986 to determine (1) the number of award-winning selections included in those series, (2) changes since the mid-1970s in the percentage of award-winning selections in the same publisher's series, and (3) the extent and type of editing done to the stories.

The main findings refute the criticisms, although the results are too extensive to report in detail here. Comas used a conservative definition of award-winning literature that excluded some stories publishers had identified as award-winners. She wanted to be sure that the stories she identified as award-winners had in fact won *important* awards.

About one-third of all the stories in these eight programs had won an award for outstanding literature, and the percentages for some series were as high as 68 percent. Further, sampling from the 2nd, 5th, and 7th grade books of these eight series, Comas found a dramatic increase in the number of award-winners from the basals of the '70s to those of the '80s. The 2nd grade increase was almost 400 percent, the 5th grade increase was slightly less than 100 percent, and the 7th grade went up by 66 percent. If award-

Economy Company	1975	1986
Ginn and Company	1976	1987
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich	1979	1987
Houghton Mifflin	1976	1986
Macmillan	1975	1987
Riverside Publishing Company (Rand McNally in 1974)	1974	1986
Scott Foresman Company	1978	1987
Scribner Publishing Company (Lippincott in 1975)	1975	1987

Fig. 1. Reading Programs Compared in Comas' Study

winning literature is the goal, publishers have responded to the concern.

What about the editing? Aren't these stories watered-down versions of the originals? Not so, reports Comas. In her exhaustive review, she examined every change from the original version to the basal reader version for each of the award-winning stories. She found that most changes were minor language modifications, including synonym substitutions, commas added for clarity, and changes in the ways compound words were written. Comas concluded that few of the changes could be considered harmful to the stories' literary qualities. Most stories had few changes and, in fact, about 15 percent of the stories had no changes at all. Further, the number of editing changes in award-winning stories declined markedly from the 1970 series to those of the 1980s.

While Comas' results provide concrete evidence regarding the inclusion of award-winning literature and the editing of those stories, we could all find exceptions; and each of us has horror stories about favorite tales damaged by insensitive editing. However, those complaints probably concern basals published in the past. Today, we can count on basal readers to give youngsters more than just a taste of good literature.

This study does not provide definitive results about the selection of the particular stories included in basal

readers. Are certain stories or special kinds of stories excluded even if they have won awards? Further studies are needed to examine publishers' story-selection processes.

The struggle to provide interesting, challenging stories to children is not over. Ongoing court cases like the one in Hawkins County, Tennessee, will cause publishers to continue to avoid controversy and to select the "safest" stories or to choose episodes from award-winning stories that are the least controversial.

In the meantime, those who take an active role in the adoption process should voice their concerns. But their efforts should be undertaken with the clear awareness that the literary content of today's basals is outstanding. And those who think the basals of the past were better than those of today, like those who fondly remember the "good old days," should contemplate 'Will Rogers' comment that they probably never were! □

Reference

- Comas, J. "Award Winning Children's Literature Found in Basal Textbook Readers." Unpublished doctoral diss., Indiana University, 1987.

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