

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF READING
READINESS IN CERTAIN NEW BASAL READERS

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been a flourish of published materials in the area of reading instruction. This writer has observed that companies have been very quick to respond to the criticisms of reading specialists by publishing new readers and elaborate systems. They first reacted to critics who said there was not enough phonics emphasis in the programs; then they changed the all-white middle-class format; and lately they have been working on additional or enrichment materials. Too often students in the reading instruction programs have made the assumption that these materials are meeting the needs of the children just because they are new publications. More time needs to be taken to actively evaluate these new materials in light of our ever-changing understandings of reading concepts.

This thesis is an attempt to critically analyze some new basal readers in light of their readiness programs. The paper is in two parts, Part One being a discussion of the desirable qualities of a good readiness program according to certain acknowledged experts in the field, and Part Two being the analysis of the texts. It is hoped that this thesis will not only help those immediate contemporaries of the author take a closer look at these specific texts, but also encourage the continuing analysis of new texts.

Part One

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, educators have been concerned with a thing called reading readiness. It was defined by Albert J. Harris as "a state of general maturity which, when reached, allows a child to learn to read without excess difficulty." ¹ It seems that "in American schools there has always been a close association between starting school and starting to read." ² However, educators began to notice that there was a high rate of repeaters in the first grade due to reading difficulties, and this led to the concept of reading readiness, which would help develop certain abilities believed to be necessary for normal reading skills to occur. This concept of readiness and what it encompasses has changed many times, but more and more studies have shown that "reading readiness is not one thing. It is not a single package of certain kinds and amounts of abilities." ³ It must become different things for different children, or it does not serve to ready them personally.

Because the readiness concept is so complex and yet so important to the developmental reading process, it should be

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1. Harris, Albert J., How to Increase Reading Ability, 5th edition, McKay, David, Company, Inc. (New York), p. 21.
 2. Durkin, Dolores, Teaching Them to Read, Allyn & Bacon, Inc. (Rockleigh, N.J.), 1970, p. 19.
 3. Ibid.

studied carefully before a certain program is applied. A look at what three reading experts consider important to a readiness program should help establish a criteria by which to evaluate certain texts. The experts in this case are Dolores Durkin, Albert J. Harris, and Arthur W. Heilman, the respective authors of Teaching Them to Read, How to Increase Reading Ability, and Principles and Practices of Teaching Reading in which the following beliefs concerning reading readiness were uncovered.

All three experts listed many of the same items needed for an effective reading readiness program. The first topic was that of a testing device which should be used sometime during kindergarten or the beginning of first grade to determine the readiness level the child was already at. This would help the teacher know which children needed a specific readiness program and also which abilities needed to be stressed. Many school systems or individual classrooms fail in this first basic step: they simply provide a six-week readiness course for all first graders. This unnecessarily delays many children who are already capable of beginning the reading process, and it also limits the children who need the program to only six weeks, even if they need more.

Another important point brought out by the specialists was that the readiness program should be rich and varied. It should be designed to meet individual needs and differences so that each child is benefitted according to his special problems and abilities. This is where the teacher comes in and plays such an important role. It is impossible to use any one program straight through to its completion for each child and still meet individual needs. The teacher must select from available programs and materials those things that certain children might benefit from; she must be able to create or supplement new items for further study; she must constantly evaluate the progress of each child so that his attention is

focused on just the abilities he needs for reading to begin successfully. These things do not come from a set program, and they do not require a specific length of time, but only through these methods can a truly helpful individualized program be set up.

Dolores Durkin had much to offer concerning many basal reading systems. She believes that workbooks, which have often been the only thing used for a readiness program, should provide for varying abilities and not assume that one level of work goes with one level of reading. This means that the same skills should be approached at differing levels to account for individual differences in the classroom, and that the workbook should not necessarily be gone through page by page by every child. An experienced teacher would be more apt to have available worksheets and assignments of varying ability levels than a beginning teacher, who usually relies heavily on the basal system.

Durkin says that "the concept of readiness denotes a relationship - in this case, a relationship between the abilities and understandings of a child and the type and quality of reading instruction that will be offered." ⁴ Gates also referred to this idea in 1936 when he wrote, "The optimum time of beginning reading is not entirely dependent upon the nature of the child himself, but it is a large measure determined by the nature of the reading program." ⁵ This would tend to imply that reading readiness programs set up by basal reading systems do help introduce the child to the program he will be using.

Heilman also believed that the strength of the readiness program is in the capability of the teacher to make it relevant to each child. He said that "programs of instruction designed to develop readiness should differ considerably from

4. Ibid., p. 69.

5. Gates in Durkin, Teaching Them to Read, p. 69.

classroom to classroom. If one were to recommend that a particular program be adopted for all children, this would negate what is known about individual differences." ⁶

Although this attitude would seem to belittle the importance of the basal system, Harris points out that "the suggestions for supplementary and enrichment readiness activities in the teachers' guides" can be very helpful in developing a good varied program. ⁷ These extra ideas can actually be very useful in making a structured program an individualized one, ready for use with small groups.

Durkin, Harris, and Heilman all listed certain things which should be noted concerning the student at the beginning of reading instruction. The readiness level can be ascertained by considering the following items: chronological age, mental age, I.Q., visual perception, auditory perception, vision, hearing, general health, physical maturity, cultural level of environment, richness of experience, vocabulary, emotional stability, group participation, and interest in books. A close examination of these aspects will help the teacher determine what specific items a child needs help with. Then the teacher should look to the readiness program, and hopefully find all of the important ingredients necessary to help that child.

By combining the ideas of all three specialists and by referring to the above list of readiness abilities, one can arrive at a checklist for reading readiness programs. A good reading readiness program should provide materials for the following items:

1. Testing - readiness or I.Q.
2. Visual Discrimination
3. Auditory Discrimination
4. Language Experience
5. Vocabulary Development
6. Interest in Books

6. Heilman, p.45.

7. Harris, p.54.

7. Left-to-Right Sequence
8. Sequence Arranging
9. Listening Skills
10. Individualized Lessons
11. Enrichment and Supplementary Materials

Some of the above factors are more particularly a part of the total readiness program than the basal system, so it would be beneficial to note those that are of specific concern in the basal readers themselves. Of the same list of items, those a good reading system should include are the following:

1. Visual Discrimination
2. Auditory Discrimination
3. Language Experience
4. Vocabulary Development
5. Left-to-Right Sequence
6. Sequence Arranging
7. Listening Skills
8. Individualized Lessons
9. Enrichment and Supplementary Materials

This list will be the one used in this paper to evaluate certain basal reading readiness programs. It must be understood that this list is by no means permanent; as new concepts are determined concerning reading processes, it should be updated so that new evaluations are relevant to new materials.

Part Two

This part is concerned with the actual reading readiness programs as developed by certain publishing firms. The four systems that will be discussed are Houghton Mifflin (1971), Lyons & Carnahan (1972), Scott Foresman (1971), and Macmillan (1970). The criteria for evaluation are those previously listed items arrived at through a study of certain experts' opinions on reading readiness. Here they are again stated:

1. Visual Discrimination
2. Auditory Discrimination
3. Language Experience
4. Vocabulary Development
5. Left-to-Right Sequence
6. Sequence Arranging
7. Listening Skills
8. Individualized Lessons
9. Enrichment and Supplementary Materials

If a series does offer certain testing devices or specific cultivation of an interest in books, it will of course be mentioned as an added factor in its evaluation.

The reading readiness textbook published by the Houghton Mifflin Company is titled Getting Ready to Read. The copyright date is 1971. This text is described as a pre-reading skills program and follows a pre-reading book called Getting a Head Start. This evaluation is concerned with the former book which deals with readiness skills.

The listed purpose of this program is to ready children for reading not by teaching them to "sound out" words, but rather by teaching them first to consider context and then look at the consonants. This keeps before the student the importance of always reading for meaning.

The pre-reading exercises consist of the following:
(1) Using Spoken Context, (2) Distinguishing Letter Forms, (3) Listening for Beginning Sounds in Words, (4) Making Letter-Sound Associations, (5) Using Spoken Context and Letter-Sound Relationships, (6) Using Spoken Context and the First Letter of a Printed Word, and (7) Matching End Sounds and Letter Forms.⁸

No test is supplied or suggested, although the teacher's edition does mention grouping pupils for instruction. The divisions given would be the "most mentally mature," the "average," and the "slow learners."⁹

Visual and auditory discrimination are worked on when each letter form and sound are introduced. Besides this work on sounds, there is no specific exercise for either visual or auditory discrimination.

Concerning language experience, it is noted that "those children whose pre-school environment has been unfavorable

8. Houghton Mifflin, Getting Ready to Read, p.1.

9. Ibid., p.5.

for normal language development, and whose experiences have been extremely limited...may lack the language development necessary to understand the oral directions, ...the pictures and the common situations used in the context sentences." ¹⁰ Language experience and vocabulary development then should be worked on before this readiness program could be effectively initiated in a deprived group or classroom.

Vocabulary development is worked on in the last twelve lessons in which the following fifteen words are introduced: a, and, go, he, I, in, is, it, not, on, the, to, we, will, and you. Of these fifteen words, nine were in the top ten highest frequency words from a computerized study of favorite library books.

All fifteen words do occur frequently in the first primer offered by Houghton Mifflin, so this readiness program definitely leads on to further study in the same system.

A section on rebus reading does a little toward developing an interest in books and also toward some idea of sequential order. However, no specific exercise or lesson concentrates on either of these items.

Left-to-right sequence is taught and reinforced in every lesson as the format of the book is in color-schemed boxes with items pictured in rows. These lessons deal with the items from left to right and often make note of this action. Listening skills are built into most lessons and are usually an overall objective. Specific materials for listening, however, are not found here.

This program is adaptable to individualized lessons. Ones that are needed can be used for one person or for small groups. The teacher's edition even lists a shortened program for rapid learners and talks of omitting unnecessary lessons. Each lesson also has a section called Providing for Individual Differences. This section gives extra suggestions along the

10. Ibid., p.6.

same line as the lesson. Also, extra activities and exercises are given in the back of the book. Some of these are special exercises for slow learners. A list of books recommended for additional practice of word attack skills is also given.

Supplementary materials are in abundance, with 22 boxes of plastic objects, word cards, picture and key cards, animated key cards, letto cards, word covers, and a pocket or wall chart. There are also optional materials listed when additional work is necessary in some areas.

The reading readiness program developed by the Lyons & Carnahan Company is called ABC and Me, and it was copy-righted in 1972. This readiness system goes letter by letter through the alphabet, a-z, working on individual sounds and building them into words and eventually into simple sentences. There might be some question about going straight through this book as most teachers prefer teaching either vowels or consonants first.

No general testing or evaluative device is suggested for the beginning of the year to determine the child's level of readiness so that an appropriate program could be arranged. This would have to be done independently by the teacher.

Although visual and auditory discrimination problems are undoubtedly encountered in lessons dealing with letters and sounds, there are no specific exercises to help this situation. Some games and extra activities would be beneficial in this area, however.

Stimuli for language experience is also somewhat lacking. "It is assumed, of course, that the children who are about to begin a readiness program have had ample time to adjust to their school environment and that they have already been given a rich variety of language experiences -- dramatic play, discussing, sharing experiences, repeating nursery rhymes, retelling stories, and sharing possessions."¹¹ In many cases,

11. Lyons & Carnahan, ABC and Me, teacher's edition, p.14.

this statement is assuming much that is not there. Many educators believe that these language experiences should also be a part of the readiness program itself.

Some lessons toward the end of the program work on vocabulary development by introducing certain sight words. There are specific lessons concerning such words as I, see, a, Mom, can, my, school, play, like, and little. Then short sentences are formed from these learned words.

The variety of activities suggested for additional use refer to stories and picture books or games which help instill a general appreciation for books. This feeling is very important to develop in the young reader if he is to become a growing, independent person.

Left-to-right sequence is introduced with the letters and the lessons on their sounds. The child is asked to draw an arrow under the word in the direction the teacher wrote. Then the child is to walk in that direction. Movements of this manner are believed to be very helpful in retaining this piece of information which sometimes causes great difficulty in reading.

There are some enrichment activities that provide for sequential order. An example is the following excerpt:

Prepare a set of three or four pictures that depict a simple activity or story. Have the children take turns arranging the pictures in sequential order to tell the story. ¹²

Listening exercises are included in some additional activities that deal with comprehension and recall. Although it does not seem to be a basic idea of the program, the listening suggestions that are listed could lead to others if needed. One example of this kind of suggestion is shown below. First the story is read, and then the questions to check listening are given.

12. Itid., p.38.

Yesterday Grandmother came to our house. She brought her cat, Misty, with her. As soon as Grandmother took Misty out of the box, Misty hid under the bookshelf. She finally came out to jump at a ball of string we were playing with in front of the bookshelf.

When did Grandmother arrive? Where did Misty hide when she was taken out of the box? What brought Misty out from under the bookshelf? ¹³

This whole program could be broken into individualized units very easily. Also small groups could make good use of the lessons on letters and their sounds. A teacher could draw from the worksheets whatever particular sounds or letter recognition skills needed to be developed. This is probably a very good system to know about and have on hand for special case problems with letter forms and sound associations.

Enrichment activities are listed for all lessons. There are resources given in the back of the Teacher's Edition, as well as lists of films, anthologies, and special resources for specific lessons.

Level 1 is the series of materials that deals with readiness skills in the Scott Foresman Reading Systems. This series has a copyright date of 1971. This system has many components which can be used in varying combinations to reach the goals of learning to read. The core components are the Studybook, an Independent Practice Pad (or Masters) and a Manual. Additional materials include such things as linguistic blocks, alphabet cards, word and picture cards, cassettes and records, games and puzzles, and storybooks. All of these different materials make possible a very intricate individualized system where subgroups or independents can work on separate items according to specific needs.

13. Ibid., p.92.

Although there is a test for the end of Level 1, there is no test given or suggested for beginning evaluation of the child's level. However, it is very possible due to the make-up of the Scott Foresman system, that even a "ready" child would benefit from some lessons in this program just because of its outstanding emphasis on language experience and development. The pictures and stories are excellent and induce conversations of personal opinions and experiences.

Besides these sections dealing with language, an alphabet section has also been included to work on letters and sounds. Auditory and visual discrimination are of great concern here.

Developing an interest in books is definitely one of the objectives of this system. Each section makes use of at least one story or picture book in its lessons. Also, additional activities often refer to books. New and exciting topics are brought out in these Scott Foresman books that just naturally bring out people's enthusiasm for books.

Left-to-right sequence is worked on in a natural manner through presentation of the many stories and the written words. The Practice Pad reinforces this teaching. Sequence arranging is dealt with in the stories and in the conversations and discussions. Listening skills almost come naturally when a class is using this system simply because the rate of interest is so high in the types of stories presented.

There is no doubt about enrichment and supplementary activities being provided and suggested by Scott Foresman. One look at the array of materials and the masters provided assures a teacher that resources and ideas will be no problem.

The Macmillan reading readiness textbooks are called We Begin and How We Read. These are both copyrighted 1970.

The guide to We Begin lists some sources for advance information about the child's readiness capabilities, and this list includes intelligence tests and readiness tests as well as kindergarten records, parent-teacher conferences, tests of eyesight and hearing, and tests of psycholinguistic abilities.¹⁴ In addition, Macmillan does assert that the first readiness book, We Begin, should be used as a diagnostic test. The book is purposely short so that it avoids holding back from actual reading any able students. A second readiness book, How We Read, is then provided for extended work on readiness abilities. This would appear to be a very good diagnostic, as well as developmental, readiness program.

Visual discrimination is a big part of the lessons which deal with numbers, colors, and letters. Some sections on concepts for alike, different, and the same also contribute to training in visual perception. Each teaching unit has a whole section on Auditory Perception with activities that are suggested to accompany a specific lesson.

Language experiences and vocabulary development are both increased through the lessons in a section called Language Development. This is another source of enrichment and furthering activities that the teacher can use and add to in order to meet individual needs.

The best opportunities for individualizing this program come not in its format, but in its many varied supplementary activities. These suggestions are quite good and could be adjusted to many different levels of groups. There is one section on Provision for Individual Differences in every lesson, so it is clear that the individual is rated very highly in this program.

Many of the beginning lessons are particularly concerned with left-to-right sequence. The guide continually mentions demonstrations of the movement so that the children are actually aware of it.

14. We Begin, p.9.

The enrichment activities are particularly numerous, and they incorporate games, poems, and songs as well as worksheets and problems into the regular readiness program. Many of these enrichment activities help develop an interest in books. Also, related activities are always listed which often include book titles that would be appropriate to the specific lesson or concept. Creative arts are also correlated constantly with the reading exercises. In some lessons, creative dramatics are encouraged to help develop an idea. A good example is the following:

Ask the pupils to show in turn how they would touch something that is hot. Let them make their own interpretive gestures. If encouraged to do so, young children will do this very meaningfully. Then ask them to show how they would touch something soft, something heavy, something prickly, something hard. Continue with any other words descriptive of feelings which they have named. 15

Besides these enrichment ideas that are so abundant, Macmillan offers supplementary materials in the form of story cards, a display stand, and duplicating masters. There is definitely much here for a good individualized readiness program.

The reader is free to make his own comparisons of these systems based on these evaluations. They will each differ according to what sort of abilities one is wishing to find helpful items for. A teacher in search of a good program should also go further into other systems, applying some of these same criteria so that the evaluations are somewhat comparable.

15. Ibid., p.192.

This writer believes that the best system would be one in which several readers were available and the teacher were at liberty to devise her own program according to the specific needs of her class. If this were the case, all of the programs discussed in this paper would be useful in some way. Scott Foresman is particularly good for language experience exercises and vocabulary development; Macmillan is outstanding in extra enrichment activities; Houghton Mifflin is good for comprehension skills; and Lyons & Carnahan is excellent on letter-sound associations and auditory discrimination.

If, on the other hand, only one basal reader were to be used, and this writer were to choose which one, it would be a battle between Scott Foresman and Macmillan. Scott Foresman has such interesting material that it is hard to pass up, but Macmillan has a very relevant overall format. All in all, these new programs are quite encouraging to new teachers who are learning about reading disabilities and teaching problems.

SUMMARY

As can be readily seen by the foregoing evaluation, each system emphasizes different aspects of the total reading readiness program. This is not necessarily bad. This thesis was not in search of any one best all-inclusive program to be offered as the savior of our reading process. Instead, it has been concerned with the varying approaches and emphases placed on the different components of the readiness program. As was stated by the experts, different children respond better to different approaches, and the effective teacher knows of many approaches. She is familiar with the philosophies of the different reading systems, and she can pull from them what she needs to make up a good individualized program for her class.

As Dolores Durkin said, "Even the very best of materials ought to be viewed only as a means to an end -- an end that is selected by a teacher as being relevant for the children assigned to his classroom."