

CURRENT ISSUES

Battering Basals

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The teaching of reading has undergone many changes over the years. All of these changes were based on what was the latest in research. These developments have shaped today's basals. (The common basal series is often designed for grades K-6 and includes student texts which contain stories and reading skills lessons, ditto masters to practice the skills, skills tests to evaluate student mastery of the various skills, and review material if the performance on skills tests did not meet the publisher's criteria.) Robert W. Bruinsma, an associate professor of education at The King's College in Edmonton, Alberta, is not at all happy with the present reading fare in elementary school basals. He wrote an article in the October-November issue of the *Christian Educators Journal* called "Basals, Basals Everywhere and All Their Minds Did Shrink."

Before considering Bruinsma's view of basals, perhaps it would be helpful to take a look at the five most popular approaches to

beginning reading instruction. This might permit you to assess the approach of the basal used in your school and provide for a better understanding of Bruinsma's criticism. The descriptions, which are greatly simplified, are taken from *Psycholinguistics and Reading: From Process to Practice* by Constance Weaver.

The phonics approach emphasizes learning letter-sound relationships in order to sound out words. This approach was especially popular during the early part of this century. The sight word method came next. The goal of this method was to give students a stock of basic words (I, and, the) which the student could recognize on sight. This method was widely used until the mid 1960s when phonics made a comeback. The linguistic and language experience approaches have never had as much popularity as those mentioned before. The linguistic approach presents sets of words to students from which spelling-sound relationships can be inferred (Nan can fan

Dan). In the language experience approach the student dictates a story from his own experience. The student can then read his story with an adult and begin to associate the written words with the spoken words. The final beginning reading approach, the eclectic approach, combines elements from the other four methods.

In explaining his negative view of basals Bruinsma writes:

Why do I feel so negative about the use of basals to teach reading in Christian schools? My unhappiness about this state of affairs can be summarized under three main headings: 1) Basals generally demean language and literature (especially at the primary levels); 2) Basals demean the role of the teacher and the child in the teaching/learning process; and 3) The cost of basals steals money away from more worthwhile curriculum expenditures.

As for the demeaning of language Bruinsma points out:

No one teaches children to talk by presenting them with carefully sequenced bits and pieces of English phonology and syntax. It is becoming increasingly clear that learning to read and write is also most easily accomplished when the learning environment presents

language in whole, functional, and meaningful contexts. That means that even the earliest selections children are asked to read should be real language that is comprehensible and important to learners.

Bruinsma then cites an article by American psycholinguist Kenneth Goodman which appeared in a recent issue of *Language Arts*.

— Basals put undue emphasis on isolated aspects of language: letters, letter-sound relationships, words, sentence fragments, or sentences.

— Basals often create artificial language passages or text fragments by controlling vocabulary, building around specific phonic relationships or word-attack skills, and often create artificial texts by applying readability formulas to real texts.

This artificiality of basal texts is further bemoaned when Bruinsma writes, "... the subject matter is often insipid and trivial, which is a shame given the recent explosion of worthwhile *literature* (his emphasis) being written for young children." Bruinsma concludes the first section of his complaint by pointing out that secular publishers are now displaying a bias against religion and family values.

Many manuals prescribe detailed scripts for teacher-pupil interaction in the mistaken belief, I suppose, that teachers are imbeciles who need to be protected from their own ignorance of how best to teach kids. . . . The sad fact is that most reading lessons involve far more underlining, filling in the blanks, circling of answers, and other non-reading related busy-work than reading. Estimates from a number of widely respected studies indicate that in a forty-minute reading lesson the average individual child spends less than five minutes in actual reading.

A quick phone call to the principal of the Christian school which my children attend provided me with the following statistics. It costs roughly \$1,200.00 per class to buy the initial basal readers and support materials and an average of from \$300.00 - \$500.00 per class per year to maintain and purchase non-reusable components of the series. For what it costs to

The article concludes by saying, "The fact is that children do not need a basal series in order to learn to read; only (some) teachers seem to need one in order to 'teach' reading." Bruinsma promises to provide "principled and workable alternatives to the teaching of reading using a basal series" in his next article.

It is doubtful that anybody connected with learning would put the teaching of reading in the category of "frills." Although some school librarians might be watering at the mouth over the opportunity to buy so many books, how many schools would be willing to take a risk in an area of such educational importance? If other schools took the plunge and met success, would that be enough for any of our schools to test the same waters, or are we doing well enough to continue on the same tack? ■■■

