USING BASAL READERS

From Dutiful Fidelity to Intelligent Decision Making

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Educational trends come and go. In the current high-stakes climate, schools often require teachers to use “research-based” materials. Do the solutions to our educational problems lie in foolproof materials or insightful teachers?

A third-grade teacher for nine years, Ms. Harriet Alvarez (pseudonym) has seen many instructional trends and programs come and go, but basal reading programs have been a constant throughout the years. Now in the current high-stakes environment, her school system has purchased a new core program and mandated that all teachers use it. After all, it is “research based.” For the first time in her teaching career, the basal reader is no longer a teaching tool; it is “the program.” Her district has also embraced the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) and she must employ the new reading program to meet these standards.

After studying the new basal program, Ms. Alvarez knows that she is fortunate to be given the professional respect and authority to make choices regarding the instructional use of the program. Teachers in other districts are required to use their programs with fidelity. Ms. Alvarez is knowledgeable about what research says about effective reading instruction. She also knows that it is her professional responsibility to provide the best literacy experiences for her students (Turner, Applegate, & Applegate, 2009). Ms. Alvarez contemplates how she will use the core reading program in her classroom instruction to meet the CCSS and create an exciting literate environment. How will she apply what she knows about best practice to the basal program to maximize her students’ learning?

Ms. Alvarez is a real teacher who for years has crafted a successful literacy program. She understands how basal programs work, she knows the needs of her students, and she sets explicit goals that are informed by the CCSS. In this article, we share the decisions she makes and how her professional judgment and responsibility guide her use of these programs. We believe her experience is instructive for all teachers.

The structure of a basal program—its units, materials, and lesson plans—can guide the thinking of novice teachers, but as a teacher grows in knowledge and experience, she can modify and augment the program to meet her students’ needs (Kersten & Pardo, 2007). Even the most experienced professionals can find within a basal program

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materials and ideas to solve some instructional problems, but it is not the best set of tools for educating avid readers or those who struggle with the basics. We discuss the eight tactics Ms. Alvarez employs to get the most out of her basal program. First, however, we describe what is known about core reading programs, specifically their development and research base.

Research on Basal Reading Programs
A basal reader is a complex collection of reading selections, support materials, and assessments held together by a hefty teacher’s edition. Seventy-four percent of schools and teachers use a basal reader, either following it closely or sampling from its many components (Education Market Research, 2010). In addition to the long-standing student anthology, basals include small leveled readers, big books, workbooks, and assessments. The most recent basal readers have components addressing Response to Intervention, English learners, and differentiated instruction (Dewitz, Leahy, Jones, & Sullivan, 2010). Basal readers follow education trends but rarely initiate new ideas—they are market driven (Chambliss & Calfee, 1998).

Research on basal reading programs has always cast doubts on their instruction and curriculum design. Thirty years ago, Durkin (1981) studied comprehension instruction in core programs and found that they provided practice and assessment but failed to help the teacher provide explicit instruction into the comprehension process. Over the next 30 years, the same flaws persisted to varying degrees. Researchers noted lack of explicit instruction (Dewitz, Jones, & Leahy, 2009), the lack of metacognitive emphasis (Miller & Blumenfeld, 1993), poor guided reading questions (McKeown, Beck, & Blake, 2009), the failure to build prior knowledge (Dewitz et al., 2010; Walsh, 2003), and insufficient volume of text to build fluency (Brenner & Hiebert, 2010).

Chambliss and Calfee (1998) argued that the structure of basal programs does not lead students to reading independence because the lessons focus on unchanging routines and not growing expertise.

How Should Basals Be Used?
Some educators have advocated that the basal should be followed with fidelity to maintain the integrity of the programs (McIntyre et al., 2005). Others have adopted a pick-and-choose approach, using only selected reading passages or specific skills within the programs. The argument for fidelity began with No Child Left Behind (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 2002, Title 1, Part B, § 1201) and Reading First federal programs requiring instruction based on scientific research evidence.

From extensive interviews, we learned that basal reading programs are not written by a limited number of authors with a close eye on the research. Rather, authors, editors, graphic designers, and marketing experts develop these programs reflecting market demands, teachers’ wants, and research findings.

From these deliberations, editors develop prototypical lesson plans, which authors, editors, and teachers, serving as focus groups, review. Once consensus is achieved, the job of writing the program is outsourced to other companies and their stable of freelance writers. The program authors may never review many critical components of a program. The development of a core program is driven as much by market research as by reading research.

Pause and Ponder

■ Think about the children in your classroom. How can you best communicate goals to them?
■ How can teacher-selected fiction and nonfiction read-alouds build knowledge and vocabulary in your basal reading program?
■ How much time do your students spend in connected text within and outside the basal reading program each day? How can you increase the amount of reading that takes place within your classroom?
■ How often do you model the use of comprehension strategies for your students? Do you think aloud as you read for them?
“core reading programs,” independent research agencies and state departments of education gave them a stamp of approval labeling them research-based (Simmons & Kame’enui, 2003). The evidence that any program was research based was determined by independent reviewers using a set of criteria to rate components of the programs. Rarely was one basal program pitted against another in a randomized experimental study. Publishers embraced the label of “scientifically based reading research,” using it as a marketing tool.

The concept of fidelity is further built on the idea of infallibility. If you use any basal program and all its components, you and your students will not fail. Publishers argue that one consistent pattern of instruction, with some differentiation, will lead to positive outcomes for all students. Basal programs also embrace a concept of sufficiency. Marketers of basal programs argue that all of the tools a teacher needs to teach reading are contained within the box. Yet in a Florida study in which teachers were compelled to use the basal with fidelity, 25% of third graders failed to pass their state assessment (McGill-Franzen, Zmach, Solic, & Zeig, 2006).

Pursuing fidelity also raises tremendous practical issues. Within basal reading programs, there are more instructional ideas than there is time to implement them. For example, basal programs provide during-reading questions, multiple sets of post-reading questions, and personal response activities. Using all these options will exhaust the teacher and the students; selectivity is essential. Basal programs provide sidebar directions for low achievers, average students, gifted students, and English language learners and special links to other content areas. The teacher must choose what parts of the program to follow. What, then, is the standard implementation of the program? To what parts of the lesson plan should the teacher be faithful?

The schools and districts that do not adhere to the concept of fidelity must still have confidence in the program’s texts and the instructional activities, selecting them with a critical eye. Are the instructional lessons as thorough and explicit as they can be (Dewitz et al., 2009)? Is the scope and sequence of instruction in a logical order (Jitendra, Chard, Hoppes, Renouf, & Gardill, 2001)? Do the leveled texts provide sufficient practice with individual words or word parts (Hiebert, 2009)? Are the assessments valid and reliable?

Logic and research suggest that following a basal program with fidelity is not the right path. Schools and teachers must exercise their professional judgment when using instructional materials (Pearson, 2007). They must know when to follow suggested lesson plans, delete instructional activities, supplement, and modify. Hoffman and his colleagues (1998) found that a teacher’s philosophy of instruction influenced how she used the reading program. Those with a strong skills focus continued in that vein, even when using a literature-based program. When Piasta and his colleagues studied teachers’ use of reading programs, they found that even within the confines of a scripted reading program, knowledgeable teachers made important decisions that enhanced their effectiveness, modeling, prompting, and encouraging their students beyond the program’s script (Piasta, Connor, Fishman, & Morrison, 2009).

Basal reading programs provide teachers with a rich assortment of text and instructional tools, saving precious preparation time. Ms. Alvarez embraces eight tactics as she uses her basal program to create a rich literary experience for her students. These eight tactics will also enhance the reading instruction of any teacher who is using a core program.

Modifying and Augmenting Your Basal Reader

Set Goals and Aim High

Basal programs are about instructional routines, moving students through a series of texts and tasks (Chambliss & Calfee, 1998). Basal reading programs do not set explicit goals about desired levels of achievement, interpretative skills, reading breadth, or enjoyment. Basal programs provide multiple assessments for measuring students’ skills attainment, the ability to read and answer questions on grade level passages, and one-minute fluency progress checks. If a student has difficulty with any of the assessments, the programs provide suggestions for interventions or reteaching skills.

Ms. Alvarez sets concrete and tangible quantitative and qualitative goals that are understandable to students, parents, and administrators and are informed by the CCSS. Quantitative goals should articulate a level of performance either on a

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summative high stakes assessment or performance on informal measures such as running records or informal reading inventories. So it is reasonable to state that all third-grade students can read a fourth-grade passage at an instructional level on the Qualitative Reading Inventory 5 (Leslie & Caldwell, 2010) by the end of the year.

Ms. Alvarez understands that the assessment tools in a core program can help her assess her goals, but these tools must be considered in light of the other tools her district requires. So she and her colleagues conduct an inventory of the available district and core program assessments, selecting those that will give them insight into their students’ progress in decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. She realizes that testing can crowd out instruction as one test builds on another. She keeps issues like gender, diversity, interest, vocabulary, and length in mind when choosing books to read, focusing on prominent authors who have written several books. Highlighting these books gives children information that helps them guide their reading selections within a weekly lesson focus on the same vocabulary and knowledge because pictures provide information that the text does not.

Ms. Alvarez, like many teachers, uses authentic children’s literature for read-alouds, ignoring when necessary the resources provided in the basal. She selects read-aloud texts that complement the topic or theme of the lesson. She keeps issues like gender, diversity, interest, vocabulary, and length in mind when choosing books to read, focusing on prominent authors who have written several books. Highlighting these books gives children information that helps them guide their personal book choices.

We recommend at least two read-alouds per week, pairing a work of fiction with a thematically linked nonfiction book (Santoro, Chard, Howard, & Baker, 2008). For example, if your basal theme is animal families, your first read-aloud might be Gail Gibbons’s nonfiction book Sea Turtles, followed by The Tortoise and the Hare. Explain the differences between the two genres, highlighting author’s purpose for teaching a lesson through entertainment versus providing information. Pairing books will build students’ knowledge.

Build Up Prior Knowledge

A successful reader is knowledgeable, strategic, and motivated (Alexander & Jetton, 2000). Ms. Alvarez realizes that many of her students come to school without the experiences that enable more affluent children. Basal readers place considerable emphasis on teaching skills and strategies but neglect the development of knowledge (Hirsch, 2010; Walsh, 2003). Although the several reading selections within a weekly lesson focus on the same vocabulary and knowledge, this tight lesson structure is frequently abandoned at the unit level.

Our examination of the units in core programs suggests that few build knowledge from one selection to another. More commonly, the reading selections are grouped under vague titles, such as Relationships or Natural Changes, and the knowledge a student might gain from reading the first selection does little to help his comprehension of the next (Dewitz et al., 2010). In the Natural Changes unit, students first read a realistic fiction piece about a boy who collects words, and then they read a hybrid information–fantasy piece about the role of an illustrator, the life of a...
Mexican farmer, an old Japanese man confronting modern life, and, finally, the biography of Thomas Edison. These selections develop no common set of knowledge.

Basal reading programs also build students’ knowledge through knowledge development lessons that precede each reading selection. We examined these lessons in three basal reading programs with a group of third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade teachers from both high- and low-income schools (Dewitz et al., 2010). Teachers reported that the lessons failed to teach the concepts that their students would need. Often the lessons were limited to activating the knowledge that students already had, but not deliberately enlarging their knowledge base. The teacher’s manual for the story about a storyteller, Allen Say’s *Kamishibai Man*, provides one paragraph about the traditional art of storytelling. No information is provided about Japanese culture, rural versus urban life, or the experiences of the older generation coping with a new modern Japan, all important themes in the story.

Ms. Alvarez uses literature read-alouds, guided discussions, and the Internet to build knowledge. When the students are reading the story *Kamishibai Man*, other books—Allen Say’s *Grandfather’s Journey* and Ina Friedman’s *How My Parents Learned to Eat* (illustrated by Allen Say)—help Ms. Alvarez to build their knowledge. The Internet provides videos of rural and urban Japan and shares stories of new immigrants. Finally, Ms. Alvarez goes to the library and checks out an additional 20 books on Japan and immigration. She lets students dig into these topics during their independent time, extending the lesson beyond the one-week limit of the basal.

**Read Extensively Outside the Basal**

Once these programs were called basals; now they are core reading programs. Shifting the labels is critical. *Basal* denotes a basic, foundational tool, whereas core suggests the program should be the central, most essential part of a reading program. These programs should be used as basals with the understanding that additional books and tools are necessary to equip students for literacy success.

The CCSS (2010) call for more complex texts than found in a basal anthology, nonfiction trade books and novels. Even literacy experts of yesteryear argued that basal readers required the use of additional reading materials. Gates (1964, as cited in Smith, 1986) stated,

> I have always believed that if one accepts the theory that the basal reading program must be used it should be adjusted to individual needs and that each child should be encouraged to move on into wider and more advanced material as rapidly as possible. (p. 224)

Current research on six leading reading programs reveals that there is not enough text to read for students to become fluent, let alone avid readers. The average program provides enough text so that a third grader with weak oral reading fluency could read everything in the program averaging only fifteen minutes of reading per day. Better readers could complete the program in less time getting less practice (Brenner & Hiebert, 2010). Text makes a difference; reading volume matters. It is well known that good readers read more than less-abled readers (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988), and volume of reading is a predictor of text comprehension (Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala, & Cox, 1999). Of course, reading takes place in the content areas and during other parts of the school day. However, more reading volume is warranted, particularly from programs that purport to be research based.

Ms. Alvarez strives to move students into wider and more advanced material as soon as possible. She uses the anthology or leveled books in the basal for modeling and guided practice, but the bulk of her students’ reading comes from nonfiction trade books and novels. She chooses trade books that match the themes of the units, tailored to students’ instructional reading levels, which allows them to explore these themes in greater depth. She makes independent reading an important part of her reading program, encouraging students to read widely while monitoring their comprehension and motivation (Reutzel, Jones, Fawson, & Smith, 2008). Hers is a hybrid program (Kersten & Pardo, 2007).

**Adapt the Scope and Sequences to Meet Students’ Needs**

The sequence and scope of skill instruction in basal programs does

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not fit the needs of all students. By sequence, we mean the order in which word identification, vocabulary, and comprehension skills are taught, and by scope we mean the depth of coverage given to particular skills, because skill complexity should increase over time. Skills are connected to individual reading selections, and it is assumed by many teachers that the skills must be taught along with accompanying reading selections. We have come to question the scope and sequence of skills within basal programs, as well as the assumption that skills can’t be divorced from their reading selections (Dewitz et al., 2010). There are strong reasons why teachers might deviate from the basal-prescribed instructional plan and take direction from their students and the CCSS.

Decoding skills in almost all basal reading programs are sequenced in the same order, beginning with consonant and short vowel sounds, and moving to more complex vowel patterns. This invariant sequence presents many teachers with a dilemma. What should the teacher do when the program moves inevitably to long vowels, but some students are still struggling to master short vowels? Evidence suggests that short vowel patterns need to be mastered before students can be successful with long vowel patterns (Invernizzi & Hayes, 2004). We believe that it is the teacher’s responsibility to continue to work on a phonics skill, using differentiated small-group instruction until data suggest that students are ready to move on.

Basal reading programs sequence three word-learning skills: the use of context clues to infer word meaning, the use of dictionaries to learn word meanings, and knowledge of prefixes, suffixes, and word roots. It is relatively impossible to discern the rationale underlying the sequencing of these word-learning skills, so teachers should feel free to change the sequence to meet the needs of their students. These skills should be taught thoroughly and early in a school year. If students can gain some proficiency with these word-learning strategies during the first months of instruction, they have the tools to build their own word knowledge as they read independently.

The scope and sequence of comprehension skills and strategies instruction in most basal programs is overly complex, teaching too many skills under too many different labels, lacking in thoroughness, and unsupported by research (Dewitz et al., 2009). Several programs teach making inferences, drawing conclusions, and making generalizations as the same mental strategy but with three different labels. This is confusing to students and teachers.

Some programs break related skills apart, separating main ideas from details, or story structure from characters or setting. We argue these skills should be grouped together. Skills do not build in a logical manner. It should not be the case that this week students are reading an excerpt from Kate DiCamillo’s Because of Winn Dixie and working to understand story structure and then next week they read a biography about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and work on drawing conclusions.

Ms. Alvarez uses her knowledge and professional judgment to modify the scope and sequence of comprehension instruction guided by the goals in the CCSS (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). She teaches essential comprehension strategies early and well, using them throughout the school year so that students develop into strategic readers. Multiple research reviews point to the importance of predicting, summarizing, self-questioning, making inferences, and comprehension monitoring (Duke, Pearson, Strachan, & Billman, 2011; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). The basal Ms. Alvarez uses covers many of the CCSS, whereas some skills in the basal program can be ignored. Fact and opinion and persuasion, skills in the third-grade program, are not explicitly listed in the CCSS, whereas the use of text features for reading information must be taught, even though they are neglected in the basal.

**Be Explicit and Model Thinking**

Research has long informed us that effective strategy instruction involves a gradual release of responsibility (Duke et al., 2011), beginning with direct explanation and modeling, then guided practice, leading to independent application of strategies by students. The first step, direct explanation, places the primary responsibility with the teacher who identifies the strategy,
explains the underlying mental process, focuses on text features, and explains why the strategy is important and when to use it.

Basal reading programs lack the explicitness that researchers recommend. In our examination of basal reading programs (Dewitz et al., 2009), using the criteria suggested by Duffy (Duffy et al., 1986), teacher’s manuals earned a strong rating in providing teachers with explicit directions about the mental processes but rarely focused on the text features (headings, signal words) required to implement the strategy. The basals were weak on the when and why of strategy instruction. It is not enough to know how to make an inference; the reader must initiate that process when it is necessary.

Ms. Alvarez modifies the basal lessons, increasing the explicitness of the comprehension and vocabulary lessons. For example, she grounds this work on determining main ideas in science or history topics, providing the purpose and motivation students need. She explains how to determine the main idea by leading her students through a process that has them note the title, headings, and bolded words and search for topic sentences. She thinks aloud about how these text features would help one formulate a main idea. Ms. Alvarez explains why discovering the main idea is useful for their study of history, providing the reader with motivation and purpose for the strategy. She explains when determining the main idea might be applied, because strategies are used to solve text-processing problems.

Ms. Alvarez models and thinks aloud often, providing more examples than her core program suggests. Most core programs guide teachers to model their thinking, even including scripts for novice teachers, but the programs neglect to ask students to model or think aloud. Students are asked many questions, but rarely are they directed to discuss their thinking so the teacher can guide and develop it. When students think aloud, they develop some insight into their own comprehension processes.

**Enhance Guided Practice**

Guided practice occurs when the teacher shows the students how to comprehend a text, supporting students’ attempts to do so. We found that in core programs, the most common instructional directive was for teachers to ask questions, and 75% of all instructional moves were questioning (Dewitz et al., 2009). Conversely, teachers were directed to model and guide the comprehension process less than 10% of the time in almost all basal programs. To make the problem worse, many of the questions in the teacher’s manual do not focus on the meaning of the text, but sidetrack students into thinking about decoding, structural analysis, and even the mechanics of writing (McKeown, Beck, & Blake, 2009). Often the questions do not follow the story’s structure.

Ms. Alvarez works to adjust the guided reading suggestions found in her core program. First, she considers what big insights or interpretations students should construct from their reading. She anticipates comprehension problems students may encounter with reading selections, identifying issues such as lack of prior knowledge, the need to make connections between ideas, complex sentence structures, or vague pronoun references (Kucan, Hapgood, & Palincsar, 2011). She reviews the questions in the teacher’s edition and uses those that do the following:

- Follow the structure of the text
- Help students make connection between ideas within the text and to prior knowledge
- Focus on higher order inferential questions
- Help students think metacognitively (e.g., What question might we ask? Would summarizing help us understand the story?)

Finally, her professional knowledge leads her to use research-based practices, such as reciprocal teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984) or questioning the author (Beck, McKeown, Sandora, & Kucan, 1996) if she believes that her students might benefit from focusing on metacognition or unlocking the meaning of a particularly difficult passage.

**Differentiate Instruction**

Basal programs approach differentiation in a tentative manner. They provide options to reteach skills to students who did not demonstrate mastery on criterion referenced tests. They have leveled books and workbooks for students reading on, above, and below grade level. The current versions of basal programs provide small-group lessons for these students, but the amount of differentiation varies from one program to another. Some programs attempt to anticipate the needs of students, providing more phonics and fluency for struggling readers and comprehension and vocabulary for advanced readers.

Basal programs cannot differentiate instruction because doing so would require data about the performance of individual students. The developers don’t know which vocabulary words
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your students have learned or need to know, and they don’t know why individual students struggle to comprehend. They may lack prior knowledge, fail to use strategies, or fail to monitor their comprehension. It is a bit like asking a plumber to tell you how to fix a toilet, but not telling him what is wrong. Despite the best of intentions by publishers, differentiation of instruction will always be under the control of the teacher exercising personal decision making using student data.

Ms. Alvarez differentiates four aspects of instruction: time, teaching, texts, and tasks (Allington, 2002). Struggling readers need more time in small-group guided instruction and strong readers need less (Connor, Jakobson, Crowe, & Meadows, 2009). Good readers make more progress when they are working alone or with a partner on meaning-based activities. A strong comprehender who naturally predicts, infers, and monitors won’t require extensive explicit instruction in the comprehension process. The weaker readers need explicit instruction in decoding and comprehension and extensive guided instruction.

Basal readers typically provide one anthology selection and one short leveled text for each reader. This is not enough text for the struggling reader to become fluent, nor will a 16-page advanced-level reader provide the challenge and interest that strong readers seek. So Ms. Alvarez provides novels, nonfiction trade books, and time for Internet research. Finally, she differentiates the tasks students are asked to complete. Not all readers need to complete a story map to comprehend a narrative, nor do they need a concept map to sort out the main idea and details of an informational passage. As the year goes by, the tasks must change with the growing proficiency of the students.

Closing Thoughts
Ms. Alvarez uses the core program in a thoughtful manner, drawing on her professional knowledge. The best instruction does not result from fidelity, but “when combination of methods are orchestrated by a teacher who decides what to do in light of children’s needs” (Duffy & Hoffman, 1999, p. 11). Ultimately the core program cannot differentiate instruction; the teacher must design it. Teachers should have children reading beyond the basal, moving actively into children’s literature; work to develop prior knowledge; and model and guide comprehension more precisely. The selection of skills and strategies should be guided by students’ need and the district’s standards.

Research has never shown that the program is more important than the teacher. Rather, we know that good teachers mold and modify the use of reading programs to their beliefs (Baumann & Heubach, 1996; Hoffman Sailors, Duffy, & Beretvas, 2004), and the most knowledgeable teachers can improve instruction even in the most scripted programs (Piasta et al., 2009). Excellent teachers must make moment-by-moment decisions to scaffold for their students. Although basal/core programs view instruction as a sequence of skills and tests, excellent teachers such as Ms. Alvarez approach instruction by asking the following:

- What is my vision for my students by the end of the year?
- What kind of readers do I want my students to be?
- How will I get my students there?

Basal programs are merely one tool in the process. In the end, it is the teacher who matters most for our students. As the findings of Bond and Dykstra (1967) in their classic First Grade Studies revealed, and as the position statement on multiple methods from the International Reading Association (1999) showcased, the teacher makes the difference. Good teachers can out-teach any program. As Bond and Dykstra (1967) stated, “To improve reading instruction, it is necessary to train better teachers of reading rather than to expect a panacea in the form of methods and materials” (p. 123).

REFERENCES


**TAKE ACTION!**

1. Examine and adjust. With approval from your school administrator, develop professional learning communities to examine your basal reading program in regard to the headings in this article. Using the knowledge you gain, develop a plan of action, complete with tips for teachers, as they use the reading program. Consider devoting short professional development moments to these items, asking teachers who adjust instruction, such as Ms. Alvarez, to share at the meetings.

2. Develop a look-for list. Professional learning communities devoted to basal program study may develop “look-for” items for school leaders and administrators when they observe during the literacy/language arts block. “Look fors” should be short, concise, and easily observable and may start with the points highlighted in this article.

3. Start a conversation. Plan horizontally and vertically. With your grade-level colleagues, meet to make two lists: (1) skills and strategies that you expect students to come into your grade level using with proficiency, and (2) skills and strategies that your students will leave your grade level using with proficiency. Then meet with teachers in adjoining grade levels to compare lists. Discuss how you might adjust your basal reading program to better meet the needs and expectations of your grade levels and beyond.


