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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS FOR BEGINNING READING IN SINGAPORE

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A programme which emphasizes beginning reading development as prevention for later reading difficulties is becoming more and more important to Singapore's education system. As teachers become more aware of beginning reading approaches which can aid in such development (such as the Shared Book Approach¹ and Language Experience Approach to Reading/LEAR²) they begin to seek available materials which can be used to supplement these approaches in preparation for the more formal reading programmes used from P1 onwards.

To assist teachers in their search, three programmes suitable for their needs are discussed below:

- *Breakthrough to Literacy*³
- *Ready to Read Series*⁴
- *The Storybox*⁵

These programmes were chosen because they are available in Singapore; they are written in the standard British English acceptable in Singapore; and they have been on the market long enough to have been tried extensively by teachers and children in actual classrooms. They have been deemed suitable after being examined in reference to the following four areas:

- the general assumptions made by the materials writers about language development;
- the format of the materials themselves;
- the kinds of language used in the materials and the sequencing of difficulty; and
- the relevance and appeal of the content to children.

General Assumptions

All three of the programmes were developed according to the following assumptions about learning English including oral language, reading and writing skills:

- children need to experience success at all stages of learning;
- English can be learned effectively in an integrated language arts approach in which listening, speaking, reading, and writing reinforce each other;
- English has certain patterns and high frequency words, which can be learned more permanently through repetition in different, meaningful contexts rather than by sheer memorization;
- children learn to read by **reading** and they should be exposed to a wide variety of relevant, highly motivating printed material which reflects both their spoken English and the words occurring frequently in printed English;
- children's learning progresses at different rates and reading materials should reflect these differences by progressing gradually from simple to more complex levels of difficulty;
- beginning reading programmes should emphasize meaning over mere word calling;
- beginning reading programmes should include both the teaching of, and the opportunities to use, word attack skills in order to encourage independent reading;
- beginning reading programmes should provide for the development of the readiness-to-read behaviours such as left to right eye movements and the concept that print can represent speech;
- children learn to write by writing and opportunities to write should be provided early;
- the Shared Book and Language Experience approaches help bridge the gap between non-reading and individual independent reading;
- materials should provide structure for the teacher and yet be flexible enough to allow for teacher and pupil differences; and
- reading and writing are important events in everyday life and should be represented in beginning reading materials.

All of these assumptions are common to the Shared Book and Language Experience approaches making any of the three programmes described compatible with either approach.

The Materials

Although the underlying assumptions to the programmes are similar, the materials are somewhat different and should be considered separately.

Breakthrough to Literacy is a beginning literacy programme developed in the UK as part of a research and development project in the late 1960s. Since publication, the programme has become familiar to Britain, Australia, America and other English speaking countries as well as some parts of Africa where English is not the native language.

The major components of the programme are:

- “sentence makers” or large slotted cards with basic high frequency vocabulary printed on the slots;
- individual word cards having printed words to match those on the sentence makers and which can be inserted into the slotted cards;
- “word makers” of similar construction but with companion cards of consonants, vowels and common combinations;
- 80 colour coded readers at four general reading levels, each about 16 pages long with text in order of increasing difficulty;
- a teacher’s manual with detailed instructions for each of the components;
- 40 nursery rhyme cards with companion tapes or records providing a model for spoken English; and
- miscellaneous materials for oral language development and sentence making as in the LEAR approach.

The *Breakthrough* materials provide the teacher with a graded and integrated scheme for beginning language arts instruction. By combining the English first learnt by primary age children with the sentence makers in which the vocabulary reflects high frequency words, the writers have attempted to make the transition from listening and speaking to reading and writing an easy and progressive one. Initially, it is a meaning-based programme, relating speech and print to the children’s experience. Once a basic vocabulary has been learnt using both LEAR and the sentence makers, the system of English and word

attack skills are taught as an integral part of the reading process in the beginning readers.

The content of the *Breakthrough* readers deals with experiences relevant to young children, e.g. eating, going to sleep, going to the barber, shopping with mother, pets, and school activities. Emphasis is always on meaning first. There is variety in the content including stories, information books related to science and how-to-do, with some photos as well as illustrations.

There are no stock characters that continually reappear and a multi-ethnic society is represented. The topics reflect stages of physical development (a lost tooth) as well as literacy development (children are seen to be learning to read and write as well as listening to stories read by their teachers and parents). The importance of reading is emphasized with examples of children reading to each other, to a parent, to a teacher, and even to their stuffed toys!

Practically speaking, the sentence and word makers involve a large number of "fiddly bits" (insert word and letter cards, sentence stands, etc). However, any LEAR-oriented approach advocates the use of word "banks" of cards or other means of filing words learned by the children. *Breakthrough* actually helps the teacher organize this procedure.

The *Ready to Read* series was developed specifically for reading instruction in New Zealand in the early 1960s. It is the oldest of the three programmes and is currently undergoing extensive revision based on recommendations from the schools.

The materials consist of the following:

- caption books in which one different high frequency word is highlighted in each;
- 12 "little books" of about 18 pages each, colour coded for differing levels of complexity;
- 6 larger books from 72 to 92 pages each containing from 6 to 10 stories of higher difficulty levels; and
- a teacher's guide which gives detailed plans for each book as well as a list of parallel books available as supplementary readers. Besides the basic *Ready to Read* books, children are exposed to other books of similar levels of difficulty, LEAR charts and stories written and/or composed by the teacher or children.

As in the *Breakthrough* materials, the *Ready to Read* readiness period is extensive, beginning with discussion of signs, captions, the teacher telling and reading stories to the children, and picture discussion with early attempts at writing. In this way, high frequency words are learnt in a meaningful context first. These words plus interest words are encountered quite gradually in the beginning readers and as in *Breakthrough*, they are learnt in a variety of contexts rather than memorized in set passages.

Analytic phonics, use of context and prediction skills are encouraged from the beginning, thus giving the children a variety of word attack skills to use.

In general, the content is relevant to children, depicting childhood experiences. There are no stock characters although a few of the characters appear in more than one story. There is a variety of content with some information books and there are a few examples of children and adults reading.

The ***Storybox*** package was begun as a supplementary series, also in New Zealand in the late 1960s and at present it is being distributed in numerous countries including America, South Africa, and in Britain as the ***Story Chest***. It was first promoted in Singapore at the 1982 Book Fair and has become popular with teachers, parents and children.

The following materials make up the *Storybox* package:

- 135 individual story books of varying sizes and levels;
- 16 blown up books for Shared Book Experience;
- cassettes of taped stories; and
- a teacher's book (1983) describing features of the programme and offering general suggestions for teaching and follow-up suggestions, story by story.

Like *Breakthrough* and *Ready to Read*, *Storybox* emphasizes meaning first, developing readiness concepts and building up sight vocabulary of high frequency and high interest words using Shared Book and LEAR activities. Stage 1 is devoted to enjoyment of reading, predicting outcomes, meaningful context, and high frequency words. Once these aspects are developed and high frequency words are recognised rapidly, more specific word attack skills are taught in stages 2–7. Phonics and structural analysis skills are taught as examples appear in the stories. Children are involved

in both reading and writing activities every day through Shared Book and LEAR approaches.

Various themes are used in the *Storybox* stories both from language/literature and from child development. Rhymes are included to show varieties in language. Favourite fairy tales are included as well as new tales such as *The Big Toe*. Themes relevant to social development, self awareness, coping with problems and fear are also included. Stories are intended to motivate through relevance and high interest. There are also stories from natural science, social studies and mathematics. There are no stock characters and content represents multi-ethnic as well as fantasy societies. There are a few models of reading presented such as a girl reading in bed, tigers reading to each other before bed, etc. The illustrations are imaginative, colourful and appealing to children and adults alike.

Conclusion

For teachers who are looking for reading materials which can be used with Shared Book and LEAR approaches and are available in Singapore, the three programmes described are all suitable. They fulfil requirements felt to be important for beginning reading success:

- reading is viewed as one of the four language arts and is integrated with the other three;
- multi-level, colour or number coded individual readers cater for the differences in reading abilities found at any age level;
- teachers' manuals or resource books contain suggested plans and various bits of teaching information;
- natural or near natural language is used in order to bridge the gap between speech and formal text;
- reading for meaning is stressed throughout, over the mechanical aspects of the reading process; yet
- the basic word attack skills are taught as an integral part of reading without overemphasizing any one of these skills;
- a large amount of relevant, highly motivating reading material is available both in core and supplementary readers to provide opportunities for wide reading

- practice and to ensure transfer of skills to different contexts rather than stressing memorization;
- writing is integrated with the other language skills with some emphasis on books made by teachers and children;
 - models of children and adults reading are presented; and
 - high frequency vocabulary is introduced gradually and reinforced through repetition.

Deciding which of the three programmes is best will be difficult since they each have their own strengths and appeal. In any case, those materials which motivate average and below average children to “practise” reading and which also provide them with the reading skills needed for independent reading are the materials which should be chosen.

References

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