

EVALUATING TEXTBOOKS FOR PRIMARY GRADE READING INSTRUCTION

A usable heuristic for L1 education

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Abstract

Across a large number of countries, reading textbooks is widely used in primary grade reading instruction. In Denmark, a quantitative study has shown that one single reading textbook (*The first reading*) strongly dominates the primary grades classrooms. *The first reading* presents itself as a learning material that covers all aspects of reading instruction, and that is based on recent research on primary grade reading. This article presents a set of criteria for the analysis and evaluation of textbooks for primary grades reading instruction, based on an overview of recent research studies on reading instruction showing that a balanced approach is the most successful (i.e. a combination of technical and meaning-oriented elements). The criteria are exemplified by analysing *The first reading* with the purpose of answering the question of whether it is actually research based as claimed. The analysis shows that the technical elements are systematically supported by *The first reading*, whereas the meaning-oriented elements are either left out or treated in an overridingly drill-based manner. In conclusion, it is argued that the set of evaluative criteria might constitute a helpful professional tool for teachers in relation to the challenging task of using textbooks as part of a balanced reading instruction.

Keywords: textbooks, reading instruction, balanced reading, textbook evaluation, primary grades

1. INTRODUCTION

The point of departure of this article is the significant role played by textbooks, or basal readers, in reading instruction in the primary grades in many educational systems. Reichenberg has pointed out how from the early 1990s and onwards there has been a move towards deregulation of the text book market around Europe and elsewhere, including countries such as Sweden, Australia, Denmark, United Kingdom, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Italy, Norway, and the Netherlands (Reichenberg, 2016). This move has resulted in the dismantling of governmental approval systems for textbooks, and led to increased teacher and school autonomy regarding textbook selection as well as a more competitive textbook market (Långström, 1997). Regardless of these changes, textbooks still play a dominant role in many countries as pointed out by Reichenberg (2016) and Knudsen et al. (2011). These general tendencies also apply to textbooks for early reading instruction. Traditionally, textbooks have been a key component of early reading instruction, and this is still the case in many educational systems. This is indicated by PIRLS 2011, the large scale comparative study on 4th grade students' reading skills, in which the teacher questionnaire shows that the reading textbook is an essential element in reading instruction in the large majority of the 45 countries participating in the study (Mullis, Martin, Foy & Drucker, 2012, p. 236). Other, more nationally based, studies confirm the same picture. Knudsen et al. (2011) point to the prominent role of textbooks in early reading instruction in Norway, Sweden, France and Brasil, and a number of studies show a similar situation with regards to United States (e.g. Brighton, Moon, & Huang, 2015; Dewitz & Jones 2012; Hoffman et al. 1998). In the case of Denmark, which is the empirical focus in this special issue of the journal, both Frost (2003) and Elbro (2008) have described the important role played by textbooks in early reading instruction in Danish classrooms. Moreover, the quantitative study on textbooks used by Danish L1 teachers presented in the article by Bundsgaard, Buch, & Fougts (2020) in this special issue reveals that one particular textbook stands out and strongly dominates the teachers' choice of textbooks for the reading instruction in the primary grades. This is noteworthy given the fact that there are a considerable number of textbooks and basal readers on the market, which is deregulated and commercialised, and that the teachers and schools have autonomy regarding their choice of textbooks. The textbook in question is *Den første læsning* [The first reading] by Borstrøm and Petersen, first published in 1999. Since then, it has been reprinted several times. According to the quantitative study, 21% of the teachers use *The first reading*, and note that the percentage is calculated from the total population of teachers in the study including the teachers beyond the primary grades (Bundsgaard, Buch, & Fougts, 2020). On their website, the publisher asserts that "the textbook material [i.e. *The first reading*, ed.] is based on the most recent knowledge of children's reading and spelling development in order for you [i.e. the teacher, ed.] to be sure that your students receive the best possible start for their reading and writing" (Alinea, 2018, my translation). Similarly, the teacher's guide for *The first reading* stresses that both the content and the

composition of the textbook are based on updated research on children's reading development (Borstrøm & Petersen, 2000, p. 5). In the quantitative study on Danish L1 teachers' use of textbooks, the teachers state as one of their primary reasons for using *The first reading* that "it is based on documented research on reading instruction in the primary grades" (my translation; the survey data is available at the website korturl.dk/2ou). Thus, the teachers echo the evidence claim made by the textbook authors and the publisher. Based on the results of the quantitative study, there are reasons to assume that a large proportion of children in Denmark have their first important encounter with written language in a formal school context through the material in *The first reading*, and consequently, it would be most relevant and important to try to verify the evidence claim that accompanies the textbook. The aim of this article is to propose a set of general criteria for the evaluation of textbooks for early reading instruction based on review studies of research on effective reading instruction, and to use these criteria for the analysis and evaluation of *The first reading*, which in this sense constitutes an empirical example for the use of the criteria. The review studies point to a balanced approach to reading instruction as being the most efficient, which means an approach that balances technical and meaning-oriented aspects of dealing with written text in the teaching of reading in the primary grades. Following the analysis of *The first reading*, I will, in the last section of the article, address and discuss challenges regarding the balanced approach in relation to teachers' use of textbooks as well as to teachers' professional competences in general.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 *Research on reading instruction in the primary grades*

Around the same time as *The first reading* was first published, two comprehensive review studies were made in the US targeting research on instructional elements that most efficiently support the development of children's reading skills. In the following, I will give a brief summary of the main findings of the two studies, and subsequently, I will complement and compare these findings with more recent research within this field.

The two review studies in question are The National Research Council's report (hereafter the NRC-report), *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), and the report made by The National Reading Panel (hereafter the NRP-report), *Teaching Children to Read* (National Reading Panel, 2000). Cognitive and psycholinguistic research dominate in both review studies, but they differ methodologically in the respect that the NRP-report only includes research studies based on an experimental or quasi-experimental design including control groups, whereas the NRC-report applies less restrictive criteria of selection and thus also includes descriptive and qualitative studies.

The NRP-report reviewed the following areas related to reading development and reading instruction: Alphabets (phonemic awareness and phonics instruction), fluency, vocabulary instruction, and reading comprehension. Based on meta-analyses and syntheses of existing research, the report reaches the following main conclusions connected to the areas of study:

- Phonemic awareness supports children's reading development, and it is possible to strengthen children's phonemic awareness through direct teaching (National Reading Panel, 2000, p. 2-3). Systematic phonics instruction has a significant positive effect on children's reading development, in particular for children in the early primary grades (5 to 7 years of age) (National Reading Panel, 2000, p. 2-92).
- Repeated oral reading guided by teachers, peers or parents has a positive effect on children's reading fluency and reading development (word recognition and reading comprehension) (National Reading Panel, 2000, p. 3-3).
- Direct vocabulary instruction is important and necessary, and it is most efficient if it includes a variety of different methods, rich and motivating contexts, and the use of ICT and multimodal representations (National Reading Panel, 2000, p. 4-3 ff.).
- Direct instruction in reading comprehension and reading comprehension strategies (e.g. visualisation, question generation and answering, summarisation, and comprehension monitoring) can strengthen students' reading outcome and motivation. Instruction is most efficient if it includes multiple comprehension strategies used flexibly with regard to specific texts (National Reading Panel, 2000, p. 4-5 ff.).

The NRC-report is based on thematic overviews and syntheses of a large corpus of research studies on reading instruction and children's reading development. Through this methodological approach, the report arrives at a number of recommendations regarding the elements that reading instruction in the primary grades should include:

- Phonemic skills and their preconditions; instruction with a focus on phonemic awareness, knowledge of letters and the conventions of alphabetic writing, and direct instruction in spelling-sound correspondences, spelling conventions, and frequent words (Snow et al., 1998), p. 194 ff.).
- Reading fluency; trained and developed through the reading of a varied selection of high-quality texts at the children's own reading level (Snow et al., 1998, p. 7 and p. 195).
- Word knowledge; instructional activities directed at enriching and developing the students' vocabulary, e.g. by the shared reading of content-rich text focusing on the use of new words in oral interaction and in different contexts (Snow et al., 1998, p. 7 and p. 217).

- Background knowledge; instructional activities that enhance the student's linguistic and conceptual knowledge within a wide variety of content areas (Snow et al., 1998, p. 7 and p. 219 ff.).
- Reading comprehension and comprehension strategies; teaching that supports the students' comprehension skills by direct instruction in multiple comprehension strategies, such as summarising, predicting, inference-making, and comprehension monitoring (Snow et al., 1998, p. 322).
- Writing; instructional activities focusing on the students' independent writing with the double purpose that the students both experience the communicative purpose of writing, and that they use writing to practice the segmentation of speech sounds and the sound-spelling relationship (Snow et al., 1998, p. 187 and p. 196).
- Outside school reading; systematic effort on the part of the school and the primary grade teachers to promote the students' independent reading outside school (Snow et al., 1998, p. 7 and p. 324).

Despite the accordance between the two reviews on several points, it can be noted that the recommendations in the NRP-report are dominated by elements related to the technical aspect of reading, whereas meaning-oriented elements are included to a larger extent in the NRC-report. Thus, without naming it as such, the recommendations in the NRC-reports point to a balanced or comprehensive approach to reading instruction. Turning to more recent studies on reading instruction, this research also shows support for the balanced approach.

In their article on primary grade reading, the reading researchers Foorman and Connor review a considerable number of studies on early reading instruction conducted between 2000 and 2011 (Foorman & Connor, 2011). One of their main conclusions based on the review is that the more recent reading research in different ways and from different angles indicates that a balanced approach to early reading instruction is the most efficient in supporting the development of the students' reading skills. I will briefly mention some of the most interesting of these recent research studies.

In a large statistical study, Stuebing, Barth, Cirino, Francis, and Fletcher (2008) show that if systematic phonics instruction is combined with what they call language activities (another term for meaning-oriented instructional elements), it has a stronger effect on students' reading skills than instruction focussing solely on phonics.

Several studies indicate that reading skills are highly correlated to writing skills and oral language skills (Catts, Fey, Zhang, & Tomblin, 1999; Mehta, Foorman, Branum-Martin, & Taylor, 2005; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002).

Classroom-based intervention studies show that students profit from both phonics-oriented and meaning-oriented instructional approaches, but that instructional strategies that combine the two approaches have the strongest effect on students' reading skills as measured on standardised tests (Xue & Meisels, 2004). Other

intervention studies have examined how phonics-based and meaning-based elements should be weighted in balanced reading instruction. Results from these studies indicate that it is not the exact measure of phonics- and meaning-based elements that conditions the students' gain from the teaching. In fact, the decisive factor seems rather to be that the balanced approach is a general pedagogical principle in the teaching, in the sense that the students in a continuous and systematic manner work with both kinds of elements (Craig, 2006; Mathes et al., 2005; Roberts & Meiring, 2006).

A number of intervention studies point to the positive impact of differentiation as an essential element in early reading instruction (Connor et al., 2011; Reis, McCoach, Little, Muller, & Kaniskan, 2011). Other studies have examined how the effects of different instructional strategies depend on the students' prior language and literacy skills. Results from these studies indicate generally that students with weaker language and literacy skills (e.g. word reading and vocabulary) profit from explicit instruction in decoding strategies, whereas such instruction has little or in some cases even negative effect on students with stronger skills. At the same time, the latter students tend to profit more from higher-order meaning-oriented instructional activities (Al Otaiba et al., 2008; Brighton, Moon, & Huang, 2015; Connor et al., 2009; Connor, Morrison, & Katch, 2004). Foorman and Connor conclude by emphasising the advantages of a balanced approach to reading instruction, arguing that the reviewed research indicates that "classroom instruction [...] that conceptualises literacy instruction multidimensionally rather than as either-or (e.g. phonics versus whole language) will be more successful". Furthermore, they add, that this research "underscores the importance of a comprehensive reading/language arts approach where mastery of the alphabetic system is integrated with opportunities to read engaging books and to write" (Foorman & Connor, 2011, p. 150).

2.2 Balanced reading instruction in actual teacher practice

Considering the complex orchestrating of many different elements, which balanced reading instruction demands, one may question if it is in fact possible to follow this approach in actual everyday teaching. In this regard, it is relevant to look to the research conducted by the research group around Pressley and Wharton-McDonald. In a number of studies, this research group has examined the teaching practices of excellent primary grade reading teachers, and these studies show that the excellent teachers actually do what the research recommends (Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, & Morrow, 2001a; Pressley et al., 2001b; Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, & Hampston, 2006; Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, & Hampston, 1998). Based on detailed classroom observations, the researchers have been able to work out a number of common features that characterise the reading instruction in these teachers' classrooms (Pressley et. al., 2001a, p. 63 ff.):

- Explicit and systematic instruction in a broad range of skills and strategies related to both decoding and comprehension. The main part of this instruction is integrated in meaning-oriented activities (such as reading or writing of whole texts).
- Emphasis on literature. The teachers read aloud frequently to the students from a variety of types of literature and other kinds of texts of high quality. The students have easy access to a well assorted classroom library, and the classroom is set up as a place for reading among others through decorations and particular reading areas.
- A lot of reading and a lot of writing. The students read a lot in a variety of ways (silent independent reading, reading in pairs, choral reading, one-to-one reading with the teacher, out-of-school reading with parents). The instruction includes daily and varied writing activities with a strong focus on using writing for communication.
- Cross-curricular and content-rich activities. Reading and writing are integrated with content-area instruction, e.g. history or science, permitting the students to use reading and writing in meaningful content-rich contexts and enriching their word knowledge.
- Differentiation. The teachers match tasks and activities to the different needs and skill levels of different groups of students in such a way that the activities are sufficiently challenging without being too demanding. The teachers monitor the students' literacy skills and progress in order to inform their decision-making.
- A positive learning environment—characterised by good classroom management, support for self-regulation and collaboration. The lessons were well-planned and organised, and the interior design of the classroom, the rules and routines regarding classroom interactions, and the use of different activity forms were the result of deliberate reflections on the part of the teacher.

Pressley et al. name the approach to reading instruction that they deduce from their study of excellent teachers, as balanced teaching (e.g. Burns, 2006). It should be apparent that a large degree of correspondence exists between the features that characterise balanced teaching, and the components that the review studies identify as constituents in efficient primary grade reading instruction.

2.3 Criteria for the evaluation of textbooks for primary grade reading instruction

Now turning the attention to reading textbooks and basal readers, I will argue that when a reading teacher or a researcher evaluates a given textbook, the question they must ask is to what extent this textbook supports a balanced approach to reading instruction. In order to be able to answer this question in a systematic manner, I propose a set of criteria for the evaluation of reading textbooks based on the synthesis of the research findings and review studies presented in the preceding parts

of this article. For a reading textbook to support a balanced approach to reading instruction, it should include or address these components:

- *Explicit instruction in decoding*, including phonemic awareness and phonics.
- *A lot of student reading*, with a focus on strengthening the students' reading fluency through a variety of re-reading and read aloud activities.
- *A rich textual environment*, as a support for meaning-oriented reading activities including out-of-school reading
- *Explicit instruction in reading comprehension and reading comprehension strategies*
- *A lot of writing*, writing as an integrated part of the reading instruction, including a focus on the communicative function of writing.
- *Content-rich and cross curricular activities*, reading and writing used in different content domains, including a focus on enriching the students' word knowledge.
- *Differentiation*, including the possibility for a flexible distribution of code- and meaning-based activities to groups of students with different skill levels and learning needs.

As mentioned above, I propose these criteria as a framework for the analysis and evaluation of textbooks *for primary grade reading instruction*. In figure 1 below, I have set up the framework in a table to show that the different components in the framework relate to different aspects of the students' literacy development. The rationale behind the table is inspired by 'the four resources model' developed by Freebody and Luke (1990, 2003) as a heuristic for literacy pedagogy across grade levels and educational contexts. In the table, the components in the framework are linked to three of the resources that, according to Freebody and Luke, an individual need to develop in order to be a competent reader (and writer).

The components *Explicit instruction in decoding* and *A lot of reading* link to "breaking the codes of texts" as this resource regards the technical aspects of reading such as knowing and using the alphabet, sounds in words, spelling, directionality etc. The components *Explicit instruction in reading comprehension and reading comprehension strategies* and *A lot of communicative writing* relate to the resource named "participating in the meanings of text", which implies being able to understand and compose meaningful written texts. The components *A rich textual environment* and *Content-rich and cross curricular activities* link to the third resource, "using texts functionally", since both of these components are about building the students' experience and knowledge of various kinds of texts and of how texts are used in different ways and for different purposes in different social contexts (Freebody & Luke, 2003, p. 6 ff.). *Differentiation* cut across all three resources as it refers to a general pedagogical approach that, in the case of textbooks for reading instruction, implies the flexible application of the other instructional components in relation to the learning needs of a specific group of students. The two arrows in the table indicate that some of the components do not link exclusively to just one of the resources. Thus, reading textbooks that incorporate *a rich textual environment* not

only allow students to use texts functionally, they also give the students the opportunity to participate in meaning construction in a variety of text types and genres. Likewise, reading textbooks that include a lot of communicate writing invite the students to participate in the construction of meaningful texts, and by doing so they also let the students experience how texts are used functionally in different communicative situations. Finally, a note on the fact that the last resource in the ‘four resources model’, “critically analysing and transforming texts”, is not included in the table. The reason for this is that the research on effective primary grade reading instruction does not point to this aspect of literacy (cf. the preceding sections). Freebody and Luke argue that all four resources are relevant at all grade levels (Freebody & Luke, 1990, p. 15), and I will not dispute that, but based on the research, I also think that it is fair to say that not all aspects of literacy are equally important to address at all levels of students’ literacy development.

Figure 1. Framework for the evaluation of reading textbooks

Components in reading textbooks supporting balanced reading instruction				
Components that help students <i>breaking the code of texts</i>	<p><i>Explicit instruction in decoding</i>, including phonemic awareness and phonics as well as writing to support decoding skills</p> <p><i>A lot of student reading</i> with a focus on strengthening the students’ reading fluency through a variety of re-reading and read aloud activities</p>	Components that help students <i>participating in the meanings of text</i>	<p><i>Explicit instruction in reading comprehension and reading comprehension strategies</i></p> <p><i>A lot of communicative writing</i> as an integrated part of the reading instruction</p>	Components that help students <i>using texts functionally</i>
			<p><i>A rich textual environment</i> as a support for meaning-oriented reading activities including out-of-school reading</p> <p><i>Content-rich and cross curricular activities</i> reading and writing used in different content domains, including a focus on enriching the students’ word knowledge.</p>	
<p>Differentiation including the possibility for a flexible distribution of code- and meaning-based activities to groups of students with different skill levels and learning needs</p>				

In the remaining part of the article, I will use this framework for the analysis and evaluation of the Danish reading textbook, *The first reading*. However, before I embark on the analysis, it is imperative for me to underscore that when analysing I do not postulate a causal relation between the textbook and the actual teaching realised in the classroom (cf. the introductory article in this special issue). What I examine in the analysis, is the instructional potential of the reading textbook as a basis for balanced teaching, or in other words, to what extent *The first reading* supports the reading teacher in realising a balanced approach to reading instruction.

3. METHOD: DOCUMENT ANALYSIS OF THE FIRST READING

I have conducted the study of *The first reading* as a document analysis (Bryman, 2008; Duedahl & Jacobsen, 2010) using the criteria presented above as my analytical

framework. *The first reading* is a comprehensive learning material. In the analysis, I have focused on the materials for first and second grade in the Danish primary school (henceforth termed *The first reading 1* and *The first reading 2*). *The first reading* also comprises learning materials for kindergarten and for third and fourth grade. For each grade level, *The first reading* consists of a reading textbook, a students' workbook and a teacher's guide. *The first reading 1* also includes a textbook focusing on the alphabet and the learning of letters (*Bogstavbogen* [The book of letters]). The textbooks for both first and second grade are made up of eight fictional narratives, called 'stories', each divided into eight chapters. All the stories evolve around the same two protagonists, the siblings Ida (girl) and Emil (boy), and a selection of characters (humans and animals) related to the two siblings. For each chapter, the workbook contains a number of different tasks. The teacher's guides have a page-by-page guide for the teacher for each chapter in the textbook as well as for the tasks in the workbook. It also contains an introductory section explaining the theoretical and pedagogical principles on which *The first reading* as learning material is based.

Taking into consideration the length of the article, I will restrict the analysis to three of the criteria from the evaluation framework. The three criteria presented in the analysis are selected in order to illustrate three possible analytical outcomes of the evaluation. Elsewhere, I have made an exhaustive analysis based on all the criteria, and this analysis shows that the evaluation of *The first reading* can be divided into three groupings according to the evaluation criteria (Bremholm, 2017). In the first grouping the importance of the given criteria is recognised by the textbook authors (in the teacher's guide), *and* the given criteria manifests itself in the reading textbook and the workbook. This is the case for "Explicit instruction in decoding" and "A lot of student reading". In the second grouping the importance of the given criteria is recognised by the textbook authors (in the teacher's guide), *but* the given criteria does not manifest itself in the reading textbook and the workbook. This is the case for "A rich textual environment", "Explicit instruction in reading comprehension and reading comprehension strategies", and "A lot of writing". Finally, in the third grouping the given criteria is not recognised by the textbook authors (in the teacher's guide), and it does not manifest itself in the reading textbook and the workbook. In other words, this criteria is absent from the learning material in question. This is the case for "Content-rich and cross curricular activities" and "Differentiation". The three criteria selected for this analysis are exemplary in the sense that they each illustrate one of the three groupings.

4. RESULTS: *THE FIRST READING* AND BALANCED READING INSTRUCTION

4.1 *Explicit instruction in decoding*

With reference to the simple view of reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986), the authors of *The first reading* declare in the teacher's guide that the main purpose of primary grade reading instruction is to ensure the students' understanding of the basic

phonetic principle of alphabetic writing and the skills to decode simple, single words. Such skills are the precondition for later automated reading of words and sentences and thereby for releasing mental resources for the comprehension aspect of reading. Thus, the authors argue that phonics and the alphabetic principle must be core elements in primary grade reading instruction (Borstrøm & Petersen, 2000, p. 8).

In accordance with this declared intention, explicit instruction in decoding is a dominant and systematic feature of *The first reading* both with regard to the content and the structure of the learning material. Structurally, the dominance is manifested by the manner in which progression is built into the material and the reading texts. Overall, across its different parts, *The first reading* progresses from a focus on language sounds and phonological awareness in the textbook for kindergarten, to a focus on knowledge of letters and the basic alphabetic principles (letter-sound correspondence and phonetically regular words) in the textbooks for first grade, and onwards to a focus on the more complicated orthographic principles and conventions of alphabetic writing in Danish (e.g. principles for letter sequences) in the textbook for second grade. It should be noted that Danish, like English, has a deep orthography characterised by many opaque and irregular spelling-sound structures (Seymour, Aro, & Erskine, 2003). The texts in the reading textbook for the students are composed with a selected vocabulary which conforms with the described progression of the material, and includes a large number of phonetically regular words as well as many word repetitions (75% of the words in the textbook in *The first reading 1* are phonetically regular). The explicit instruction in decoding manifests itself in the repeated and systematic activities throughout the material. As an example among several others, every new chapter in the reading textbook is introduced by explicit instruction in the sounding out of the new words in the text, and the page-by-page manual in the teacher's guide includes a detailed instruction in how to perform this phonetic activity.

In connection with the reading texts, the teacher's guide also contains instructional activities focusing on phonetic, morphologic or semantic issues relevant for decoding. These activities are placed under the heading "Linguistic activities" in the page-by-page guide in the teacher's guide, and they regard issues such as genitive form (in Danish indicated by the morpheme *-s*), spelling patterns in rhyme words, identification of vowels, silent letters, full stops and question marks. Likewise, tasks training decoding skills are a prevalent feature of the students' workbook.

Finally, it is worth noting that the composition of the reading texts constitutes a particular quality in the learning material regarding the aspect of decoding. Studies show that the repetition of new words in texts for beginner readers is an important support for the development of the students' word reading skills (Foorman & Connor, 2011, p. 143). In *The first reading*, the reading texts are composed with the use of a controlled selection of words and frequent repetition of the selected words (the first 1000 words in the reading textbook comprise 151 different words). This composition principle supports the students' automated decoding of the words in question, and thus their reading fluency.

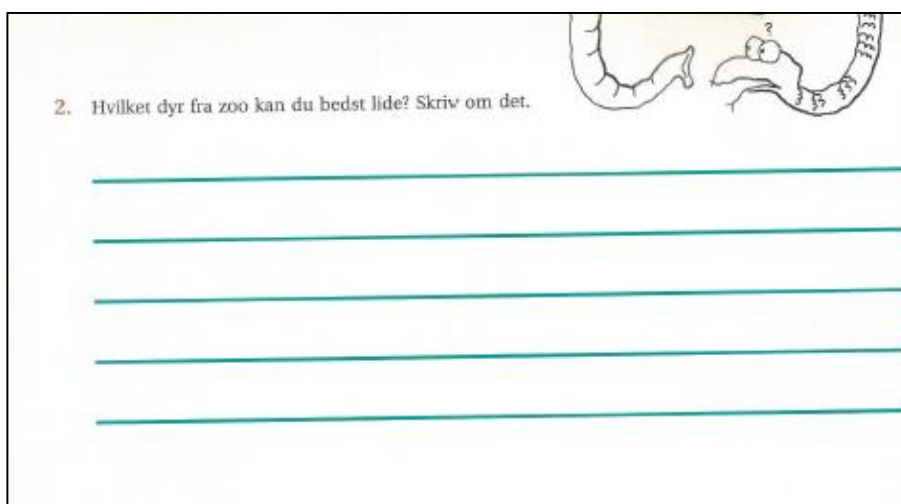
4.2 *Writing as an integrated part of reading instruction*

As mentioned above, “A lot of writing” is an example from the second grouping of criteria in which the importance of the given criteria is explicitly recognised by the textbook authors, *but* the criteria is not manifested in the reading textbook and the workbook. In other words, the role of writing in *The first reading* is contradictory. On the one hand, the description of writing in the teacher’s guide aligns quite well with research-based principles and recommendations, while, on the other hand, the actual incorporation of writing in the workbook and in the page-by-page manual to the reading textbook does not correspond with the described principles.

In the teacher’s guide for *The first reading 1*, writing is assigned an important role in reading instruction, and it is emphasised that the instruction, in parallel with the technical aspects of reading, must include a focus on the students’ oral and written communicative skills. It is pointed out that the tasks in the workbook are designed with the intent that dialogue, reading and writing constitute an integrated whole, and furthermore, it is highlighted that the workbook contains open-ended and creative writing tasks with an explicit communicative focus (Borstrøm & Petersen, 2000, p. 10, 13 & 14). The teacher’s guide for *The first reading 2* makes explicit reference to research in order to underline the importance of a close interconnection between reading and writing instruction in the primary grades, and for this reason the learning material includes a daily “dose of writing” in the form of open-ended writing tasks (Borstrøm & Petersen, 2002, p. 9).

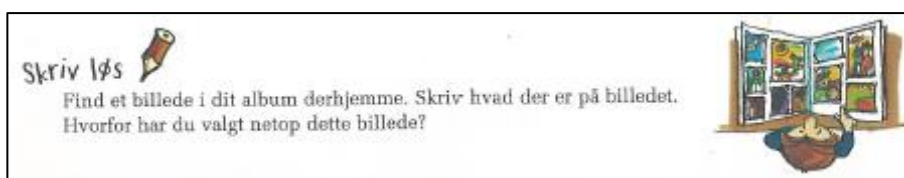
However, when taking a closer look at the actual writing tasks in workbook 1 and 2, it becomes apparent that writing is used predominantly in drilling tasks (“fill out the blanks”) focusing on decoding and word reading, i.e. technical aspects of reading. In spite of the fact that the open-ended writing tasks are emphasized in the teacher’s guides, they are considerably outnumbered by the technical drilling tasks in the workbooks (the open-ended tasks constitute about 10% of the total number of writing tasks). On top of that, the actual design of the so-called open-ended writing task constitutes a more fundamental problem. The vast majority of these tasks are designed in such a way that they do not in reality allow the students the opportunity to use the written language as a means to represent content that is of value and interest to them in a meaningful communicative situation. Below, I have inserted two typical examples of open-ended and creative writing tasks from workbook 1 and 2 (Borstrøm & Petersen, 1999a & 2001b).


Figure 2. Open-ended writing task from workbook 1 (p. 36). The text in the task says: "Which animal from the zoo do you like the best? Write about it." (my translation).



2. Hvilket dyr fra zoo kan du bedst lide? Skriv om det.

Figure 3. Open-ended writing task from workbook 2 (p. 54). The heading of the task is: "Write away". The instructive text in the task says: "Find a picture in your photo album at home. Describe what is in the picture. Why did you choose this specific picture?" (my translation).



Skriv løs 

Find et billede i dit album derhjemme. Skriv hvad der er på billedet.
Hvorfor har du valgt netop dette billede?

Analysing the communicative situation instigated by these tasks shows that the students are being positioned explicitly as the sender. It is not made clear who the receiver is, but, at best, it must be the teacher. At worst, it is no one—because it is questionable to whom the students are actually writing when doing these tasks. The genre for this communicative act is 'student assignment' while the purpose—if there is one—is to complete the task. As a consequence, the tasks may be described as examples of what has been characterised as a school-only type of communication, which means a kind of communicative interaction that does not occur outside the context of school (Hetmar, 2011, p. 78). By virtue of their school-only characteristics, the open-ended and creative writing tasks may in fact be described, despite the intention proclaimed in the teacher's guide, as particular versions of the drilling tasks that dominate the workbooks of *The first reading*.

It is also worth noting that the teacher's guide for *The first reading 2* with reference to process-based writing theory includes a lengthy description of instructional tools and techniques to support the pre-writing stage of the students' writing (Borstrøm & Petersen, 2002, p. 9). There is no mention, however, of any of the other stages of the writing process, neither in the teacher's guide nor in relation to the activities in the workbook. The authors do not offer any explication of this omission, and it seems obvious to interpret it as an indication of the fact that the learning material does not include a real and systematic focus on the students' communicative use of writing.

4.3 Differentiation

"Differentiation" is an example from the third grouping of criteria in which the given criteria are absent from all parts of the material in *The first reading*. Differentiation is not a theme in the teacher's guides, and hence, the textbook authors do not direct the teachers' attention to the importance of this aspect in primary grade reading instruction, or make recommendations and suggestions as to how the teachers might handle the question of differentiation when using the learning material. Likewise, neither the page-by-page guide nor the workbooks suggest approaches or activities that address the aspect of differentiation. As a matter of fact, the authors acknowledge that there are substantial differences between the students in a class when they start in school, and that some students already at this early stage probably will have quite developed reading and writing skills (Borstrøm & Petersen, 2000, p. 7). However, the basic pedagogic principle throughout the learning material is, nevertheless, that all students work simultaneously with the same content at the same pace. In this sense, the learning material does not address the fact that some students quickly achieve basic decoding skills and, as a consequence, will profit from a stronger focus on meaning-oriented instructional activities (cf. the research studies that point to the importance of a differentiated approach to students' different developmental progress, as mentioned in a previous section of the article).

4.4 Conclusion: An unbalanced base for reading instruction

The complete analysis of the learning material confirms what is indicated by the analytical examples in the previous sections of the article. Despite its distinct qualities, *The first reading* is not a sufficient basis for the primary teacher who strives to carry out balanced reading instruction (Bremholm, 2017). On the one hand, *The first reading* constitutes a systematic and research-based instructional support for developing the students' decoding skills and their reading fluency. Regarding other essential aspects, the learning material is, on the other hand, inadequate. One reason for this is that the learning material is blind to these aspects, so to speak, as in the case of 'differentiation' and 'content-rich and cross-curricular activities'. Another reason is that, despite declarations recognising the importance of certain aspects in the

teachers' guides, the actual implementation of the aspects in question in the learning material is insufficient, as in the case of 'writing', 'reading comprehension' and 'a rich textual environment'. With regard to writing, the analysis above shows that the communicative purpose of writing is largely ignored in *The first reading*. In the case of 'reading comprehension', the complete analysis shows that the learning material does not include reading comprehension strategies or direct instruction, and that it is characterised by a general and unsystematic approach. Correspondingly, with regards to 'a rich textual environment', the analysis shows that the students' reading interests and independent reading are not integrated in the learning material, and that the textual universe is confined to fictional genres only (Bremholm, 2017).

To sum up the analysis, it can be concluded that the evidence claim made by the authors and the publisher of *The first reading*, as mentioned in the introduction, is not fully supported by recent research on primary grade reading instruction. Admittedly, the learning material is well-founded with respect to the technical aspects of reading, but it is largely insufficient in terms of the meaning-oriented aspects of reading. In this regard, it may be said that *The first reading* constitutes a particular Danish reflection of the diagnosis of reading instruction in the primary grades in the US, 10 years after the publication of the NRC- and the NRP-report made by the reading researchers Duke and Bloch (2012). Thus, they observe a marked predominance of the technical and easily assessed aspects of reading at the expense of the meaning-oriented aspects that are more complicated to test and assess. Reflecting on the consequences of this choice of priority regarding primary grade reading instruction they warn that a narrow and shortsighted focus on mainly technical skills carries the risk of educating the students to a practice of reading that reduces reading to a question of technique. In the long term, this might have serious ramifications since it may hinder the students from developing a more complete understanding of reading as a resource for communication and learning (Duke & Block, 2012, p. 61). A similar concern is raised within a distinct sociocultural perspective by, among others, Gee (1999, 2001).

5. DISCUSSION: TOWARDS BALANCED READING INSTRUCTION?

In this article, I have presented a set of criteria for the evaluation and analysis of learning materials for primary grade reading instruction. The extensive research on which the criteria are based points to a balanced approach to reading instruction as being the most efficient in terms of supporting children's reading development. In the article, the criteria are demonstrated with *The first reading* as my example, as it is by far the most commonly used learning material by Danish reading teachers. The criteria as well as the analysis of *The first reading* raise a number of questions, some of which I address and discuss in this concluding section of the article.

Before turning to these questions, however, I will relate the findings in this article to the collaborative mixed methods study on learning materials in Danish as L1 that constitute the common ground for the articles in this special issue. I do so in order

to discuss whether the conclusions from the analysis of *The first reading* bear semblance to more general characteristics of learning materials in Danish as L1. In this regard, I will highlight two important conclusions from the analysis of *The first reading*. According to the first of these conclusions, *The first reading* prioritizes technical aspects of reading while to a wide extent ignoring the meaning-oriented aspects. This resonates with the finding in the overall study that in learning materials for Danish as L1 there is a predominance of skill-based and formalistic approaches to the subject matter at the expense of approaches focusing on understanding, interpretive thinking and students' independent work. We see this result in the quantitative part of the mixed methods study (Bundsgaard, Buch, & Foug, 2020), as well as in several of the qualitative studies. The study on learning materials for grammar teaching, for example, shows that these materials preponderantly focus on correctness and de-contextualised grammatical concepts without including the use of grammar and linguistic knowledge in actual communicative situations (Kabel, 2020). Likewise, the study on learning materials for literature teaching, concludes that these materials are characterised by an instrumental approach to the students' acquisition and use of a fixed set of analytical concepts while very little attention is paid to the students' interpretive thinking and their appreciation of literature (Rørbech & Skyggebjerg, 2020).

The second conclusion from the analysis of *The first reading* to single out is that student writing in the learning material is dominated by drilling task focusing on decoding and word reading, and consequently that the use of writing in meaningful communicative situations is largely ignored. This aspect reflects the finding in the overall study that in general the learning materials are characterised by a lack of meaningful contexts for the students' work with the subject matter. In the quantitative part of the study, this is indicated by the fact that instructional approaches that support context-related practices are very rare in the learning materials for Danish as L1 (Bundsgaard, Buch, & Foug, 2020). It is also apparent in most of the qualitative studies. For example, the study on ICT and media shows that the learning materials do not include the students' (often well-developed) experiences with the use of various media forms, but focus almost exclusively on generic and formal features of media texts (Berthelsen & Tannert, 2020).

The correspondances outlined here between *The first reading* and some of the general characteristics of learning materials for Danish as L1 could indicate that the challenges regarding the production and use of learning materials for primary grade reading that, unlike *The first reading*, support a balanced approach to reading instruction do not originate exclusively from within the field of reading. Possibly, they are also a consequence of the established ecosystem around the production, distribution and selection of learning materials in Denmark. Critical aspects of this ecosystem are discussed in the introductory article of this special issue (Foug, Bremholm, & Buch, 2020).

I now return to primary grade reading instruction and to discussing questions raised by the analysis of *The first reading*. As the analysis has shown, *The first reading*

is inadequate regarding several of the criteria for the evaluation of learning materials for primary grade reading. Consequently, the most immediate question that presents itself is whether a learning material that does not fully meet the criteria may be used to support a balanced reading instruction. This question must be answered with an affirmative. In their extensive study of exemplary reading teachers, Pressley et al. note that these teachers apply a rich arsenal of learning resources in their teaching, and that reading textbooks (basal readers) are a typical part of this arsenal. As a rule, these textbooks are used by the teachers to support and work with the students decoding skills (Pressley et al., 2001a, p. 56). Whether a learning material is worth using for teaching instruction depends on its specific qualities regarding the specific aspects of reading it is supposed to be used for. In the case of *The first reading*, the analysis shows that it has distinct qualities with respect to the technical aspects of reading, and, consequently, it might be appropriate to use it if it is used specifically and with conscious intent for this particular part of reading instruction.

Another question that follows from the discussion above, is how reading textbooks are actually used in teaching, and more specifically whether *The first reading* is actually used by teachers in a reflective and purposeful manner as recommended above. Unfortunately, these are not questions that are possible to answer given the fact that empirical research on the use of learning resources in teaching and classroom contexts is a neglected field of study, as has been shown by two review studies (Knudsen et al., 2011; Tomlinson, 2012). This is the case for learning materials in general and logically even more so for learning material in specific areas such as beginner reading instruction. In a Danish context, there is no empirical research in how primary grade teachers apply learning materials in their reading instruction. However, the quantitative study on textbooks used by Danish teachers presented in another article of this special issue has some interesting results that provide a hint as to the role assigned to *The first reading* by the teachers in their reading instruction (Bundsgaard, Buch, & Foug, 2020). This study shows that around two-thirds of the teachers who have answered that they use *The first reading* (a total of 96 teachers), also answer that they use learning materials produced by publishing houses (in their case presumably *The first reading*) in the predominant part of their teaching (51 – 100% of the teaching time). Although there is an element of uncertainty related to these figures due to the fact that the teachers have answered in quite broad categories, they could indicate, nevertheless, that for a large part of the teachers who use *The first reading*, the learning material has a prominent position in their teaching. In most cases, this will be difficult to combine with a balanced approach to reading instruction (the data from the quantitative study can be accessed at korturl.dk/2ou). As an additional remark, it is worth mentioning that it is not a great surprise if some teachers assign *The first reading* a dominant position in their teaching. As noted in the introduction, the authors and the publisher present it as a universal material that supports all essential aspects of beginner reading instruction, and thus, they assume exactly such a position for it, and teachers might easily accept it unless they are professionally competent and confident as reading teachers.

This problem relates to the general question about the professional competencies needed to be a reading teacher. Several scholars have pointed out that it puts high demands on the teacher's professional knowledge and skills to plan and perform teaching that includes the many different aspects constituting balanced reading instruction (Duke & Block, 2012, p. 66; Hastings, 2012, p. 59; Slavin, Lake, Cheung, & Davis, 2009; Tivnan & Hemphill, 2005, p. 436). How to equip reading teachers with the competences needed is a complex question that lies far beyond the scope of this article, but it probably requires a combination of interacting factors such as a strong teacher education, systematic and substantial professional development programs and a collaborative and development-oriented work environment at the local school level. An important aspect of the reading teacher's professional competence when planning is to be able to assess the quality of learning materials, such as *The first reading*, and, based on this assessment, to decide whether and how to make use of it as part of a balanced and multifaceted reading instruction. This kind of assessment is a precondition for planning reading instruction that is governed by the teacher's professional decision-making rather than by learning materials (Frost, 2003, p. 16). In this regard, I believe that the set of criteria presented in this article, could be a usable reflective tool or heuristic for teachers and student teachers when assessing learning materials for reading, as well as in general when planning reading instruction. As such, it could be a helping hand and a modest contribution to the support and strengthening of the professional competencies of reading teachers.

As a final concluding remark, I will point to the need for further research in learning materials for reading instruction, also mentioned earlier in the article. The research field calls for comparative studies on different learning materials for reading both in national and in international contexts. For instance, how similar to *The first reading* are other Danish learning materials, and to what degree do learning materials for reading differ between different countries and educational cultures? Even more needed is empirical research into reading teachers' actual use of learning materials in their teaching, which up until now has been a largely unexplored field of study. The set of criteria presented in this article could be a valuable contribution to the analytical frameworks for such future studies.

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