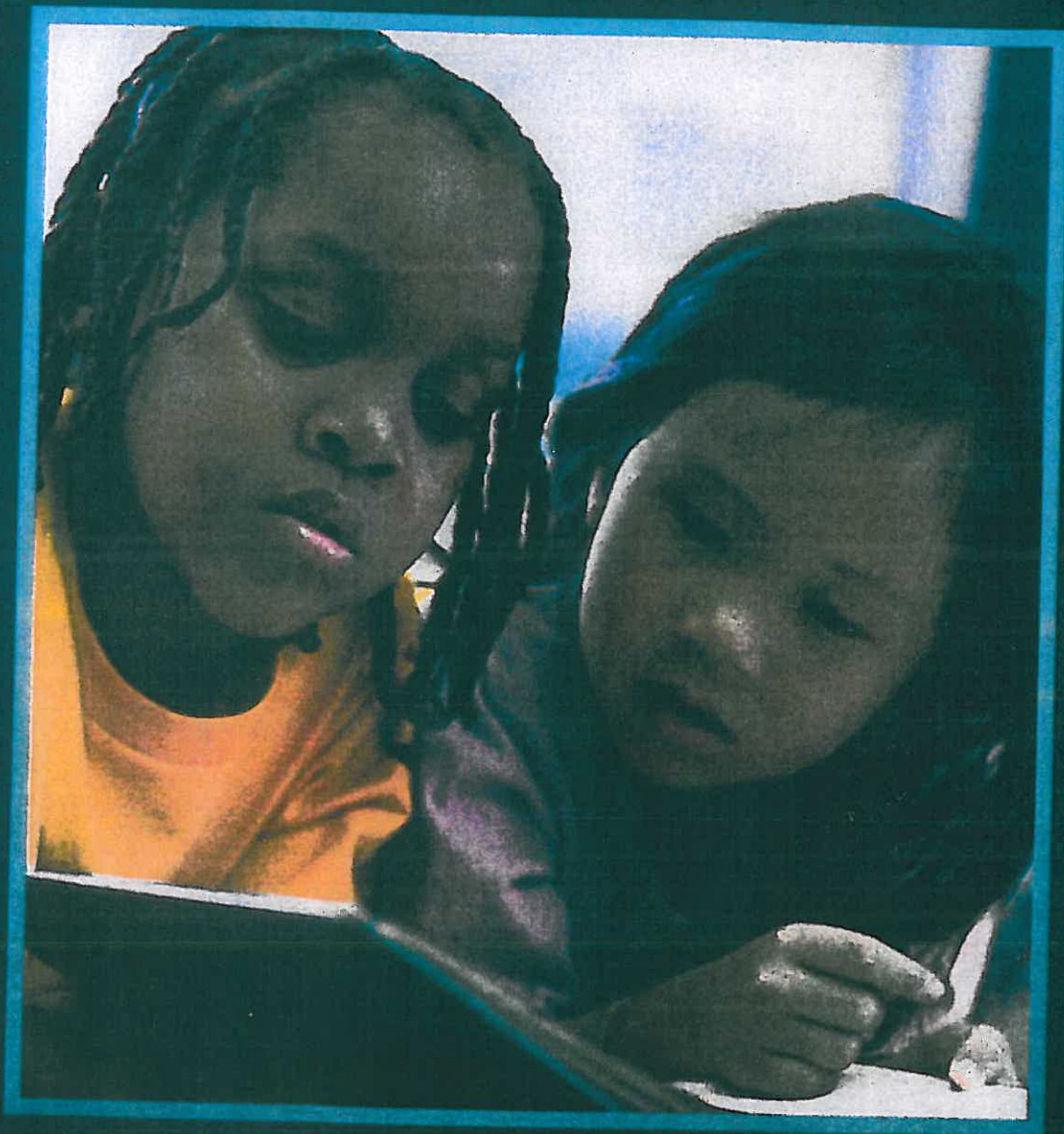


The Art of Teaching Reading



Lucy McCormick Calkins

Teaching Readers Within a Leveled Classroom Library

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When we talk about independent reading and the importance of children choosing books, we necessarily bump up against the question: Choosing from what? For years I was against any notion of leveling or arranging by reading level our classroom libraries. I didn't want them turned into the SRA reading kits of my childhood, with green readers plugging away at the bottom rung of the reading rat race while purple readers strutted above them. I abhor the idea of structuring libraries to support one-upsmanship and competition.

I had other reasons for being against leveled libraries. I argued that the difficulty level of a text isn't a fixed, static thing; instead, the difficulty of a text varies in relation to the reader's background knowledge, interest, and familiarity with the genre and subject. Then, too, I felt certain that because life is not leveled, it is important for readers to learn to find appropriate texts for themselves, and to monitor as they read, asking themselves, "Is this book right for me?"

Several years ago, Jerome Harste visited us. Talking about the importance of professional inquiry, Jerry said "You must always assume that one of the pillars of your thinking is dead wrong." At the time, I wrote down Jerry's advice and tacked it on my bulletin board. Little did I dream that within a year I'd feel convinced that my opposition to a leveled library was "the pillar of my own thinking" that was dead wrong. I am now convinced that most teachers are well advised to level about a third of the books in their classroom libraries.

The turning point for me came one May day when I visited the classrooms of six teachers from our Leadership Project. These teachers were each

apprenticing to be a mentor teacher for us in the teaching of reading, and they each knew how essential it is that readers read the books they can read with comprehension and relative ease. In one classroom after another, I marveled at the wonderful tone and values and at the overlay of literate conversations. But when I pulled in close to listen to children as they actually read their independent reading books aloud to me, an alarming number of children stuttered their way through sentences that seemed almost impenetrable. Often I watched as readers let all sense of the story break down. In classroom after classroom, I said to the teacher, "What's up with that child's book choice? The book seems too hard." And in classroom after classroom, these smart, dedicated, knowledgeable teachers said to me, "I've talked to that child fifty times this year about choosing appropriate books." As I walked away from the day, I couldn't help but think, "Who are the slow learners here, the children or us?"

Imagine all the work those teachers *could not* do with youngsters because their every interaction during reading time dealt with the issue of book choice! Imagine all the growing and all the thinking those readers could *not do* because their days were spent reading at frustration level.

With great trepidation then, my colleagues and I began several years ago to slowly make our way into the terrain of leveled books. Our goal has been to reap the advantages and avoid the risks. We know there is a thin line between leveling books and leveling children, and we've been resolute in our determination to avoid the latter. We've tried especially to avoid the well-documented risks of classifying readers into long-term ability-based reading groups. Ability-based reading groups are equally problematic whether children are explicitly named "great readers" and "bad readers" or "green dot readers" and "purple dot readers" (Pierce, 1993, p. 99). We have also tried to steer clear of an inappropriate emphasis on accuracy. If children are matched with books on the basis of accuracy counts only, we know this might put too much emphasis on reading as calling out words and not enough emphasis on reading as understanding. We want to match readers with books while still allowing children to make the miscues good readers make when they read for comprehension.

Now, after several years of developing and refining our work, we are quite enthusiastic about the ways in which leveled lending libraries have enabled our students to grow as readers. This does not mean I now believe that all uses of leveled libraries are helpful. I do not. But I have come to believe that, like so many other structures, leveled libraries can be used in ways that enable or in ways that limit.

The Big Picture: How Book Levels Work in Our Classrooms

In most of our classrooms, we put dots representing the book's level on about a third of our books. We hold off putting dots on some to encourage children to make their own decisions about whether these books seem just right for them. If we've put a dot on two *Junie B. Jones* books, we may deliberately leave another two books in that series unlevelled, in this way scaffolding the children's act of judging against the template of the books they know. There is no substantial difference between the books we level and those we don't, but we're less apt to level the books that readers of all levels study, such as the Eyewitness Series of nonfiction books.

Once we've assigned books to levels—and I'll talk more about how we do this later in this chapter—we select a few representative books from each level to be our assessment books for that level. We keep these books out of classroom circulation, using them as tools for a very informal sort of assessment. If I have six leveled bins in my classroom, each representing progressively more challenging texts, I'll have at least two sets of six assessment books that are matched to these six levels. I use my observations of children reading these assessment books or more informal observations of children's successes or difficulties with their independent reading books to steer them toward “just right” books.

I can imagine some teachers' protests. Yes, it is true that readers profit from reading a range of books and sometimes need the opportunity to struggle and persevere. And yes, the level of difficulty a book poses will vary depending on the reader's background with this kind of book. And yes again, the truth is that *I* can't always recall the details of the novel I'm reading; does this mean my books are beyond my reach and should be kept from me? I understand these and other arguments against book leveling, but my experience in classrooms has convinced me that a judicious and flexible system for pointing children toward a fairly broad range of texts can help them develop an internalized, felt sense of what reading should feel like. I think too many children have become so accustomed to reading at frustration level, they don't even know what they are missing. This is a big enough concern for me that I'm willing to swallow my own doubts about leveled libraries and systems for matching kids to book levels, and proceed cautiously forward.

Earlier, I mentioned that we observe children reading either our assessment books or their own book choices in order to determine a level that seems right for them. How can one tell? First and most important, we notice if

children are reading with engagement and responsiveness. If a child laughs at the funny parts or brings the book to recess in order to continue reading, we have a pretty good indication that this is a just-right book. But I also recommend asking a child to read aloud and listening to the child's phrasing and fluency. Does this *sound* like language? Can I tell from intonation or side comments or our book talk that this reader is making sense? It is also worthwhile to notice the child's miscues and to roughly calculate whether the child is reading with at least 90 percent accuracy. There is nothing magic about these figures. There *are* times when a child's accuracy is below 90 percent and the reading experience nevertheless seems to be valuable. Substitutions of *a* for *the* and *in* for *at* will probably not affect meaning, and some children have a higher tolerance for word-level errors than others. Nevertheless, error rate is not a bad indication of difficulty if we use it cautiously. Marie Clay (1997) suggests that an error rate of one in twenty words suggests an easy text and an error rate between one in twenty and one in ten suggests an instructional level or a learning text. An error rate of greater than one in ten suggests a hard text. (p. 21). In general, we are wise to recall Marie Clay's caution that when children read below 90 percent accuracy, the supportive context of meaning tends to fall away.

When I find a child reading a book that seems "just right," I'm apt to say, "This book really fits you, doesn't it?" And I'll tell this reader, "There's a whole basket of books at just about this level of difficulty at the end of the bookshelf. Look for the green dots and you'll know which books have a good chance of being about right for you." If we begin the year emphasizing reading just-right or even easy books, most children eventually become accustomed to reading fluently and with understanding, and soon they are making wise book choices, unconstrained by assigned levels. We still keep an eye on this and are ready to hold a reader to a particular course when this feels necessary, but it is also exciting for a reader who has a palpable sense of what reading should feel like to venture toward more difficult texts. Marie Clay says it this way: "... at the heart of the learning process there must be the opportunity for the child to use a gradient of difficulty in texts by which he can pull himself up by his bootstraps: texts which allow him to practice and develop the full range of strategies which he does control, and by problem-solving new challenges, reach out beyond that present control (1991, p. 215).

At the start of the year, when we're especially determined to firmly and decisively move readers toward just-right books, we tend to highlight the leveled bins in the classroom library. The countertop of our library, for example, may feature these bins, each coded with a colored dot. We'll still organize books by topic and author: within a "Basketball Bin," for exam-

ple, half the books may have a variety of leveled dots and the others are left for readers to assess for themselves.

At the start of the year, we talk up the value of picking books to read in which we feel strong as readers. We steer kindergarten, first and second graders' book choices more firmly and spend less time talking with them about how to choose just-right books, because we're wary of too much metacognitive talk at these levels. But with all our readers, we talk up the importance of reading books that make sense. We role-play how reading feels when it's too hard, hoping to show children that it's not a good thing to be stymied by every fifth word. The language we use in this work is very important.

WE TRY NOT TO SAY:

WE TEND TO SAY:

Don't read this book because it is too hard for you.

Find books that make you feel strong as a reader.

You can't read that. It's too hard.

Put that book aside for now. You'll probably be able to read it by January. For now, your reading muscles will grow best if you read green dot books.

Is this book beyond your level? Then put it down. You need to stay within your level.

Is this book sort of a confusing one? Then put it aside for now. You want to read books that make lots of sense.

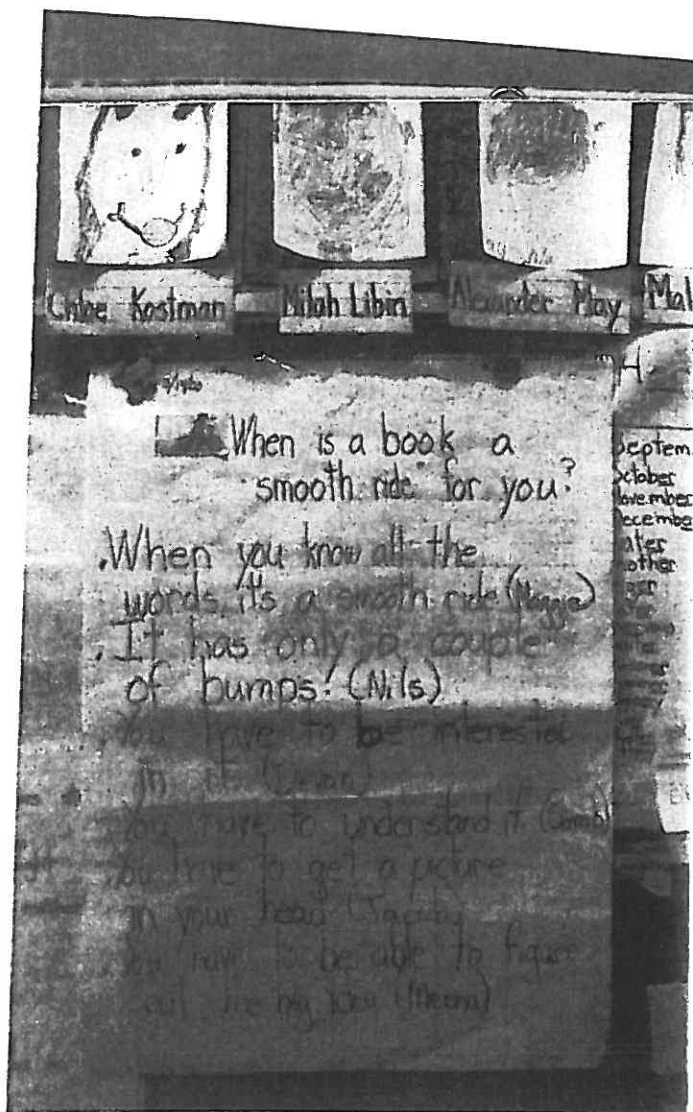
You are a green-level reader (or you are in the green group). You can't read blue dot books.

For now, why don't you read books with a green dot on them. I think they'll make you feel strong as a reader (or they'll be a smooth read for you).

You and Bob are both in the Level Two reading group so you'd be good partners.

You and Bob like to read the same kinds of books so you'll be good partners.

Let me be clear about this. We are not forming leveled groups. We do not speak of children as the green readers, and it would be rare for us to convene all green dot readers. We certainly don't envision that children reading green dot books will all move in unison on a specific day to the next level. We have no requirements for what every child who is reading a green dot book must do. We would *never*, for example, say, "You must read twenty green dot books



before you can move to blue dot books," nor would we say or imply that readers must pass a test before they can move to more difficult books.

Children will want to follow their friends or their interests to books in higher levels, and I'm hesitant to make any blanket statement about whether or not this is okay. It certainly is *not* okay if that worry about social acceptance regularly leads a child to attempt books she cannot read with comprehension and relative ease. The answer to this lies in changing the social climate and the mores in our classrooms. It helps to find and talk up "quick reads," to bring in a new series of especially accessible books and expect that even our strongest and most experienced readers will want to choose them. It also helps to read aloud the books we're trying to promote and to do promotional book talks that do not emphasize the fact that these books are easier. In these ways we may succeed in luring children toward easier books. If I can't entice children toward these

books, I am willing to tell a reader straight out that for now he needs to read a particular level of book in order to become stronger as a reader. We don't help matters any by allowing children to pretend to read books they can't read. In fact, after we help a child abandon a difficult text in favor of a more appropriate one, we've been known to unabashedly tell the class about the smart, brave work this reader has done.

Designing and Adapting a Leveling System

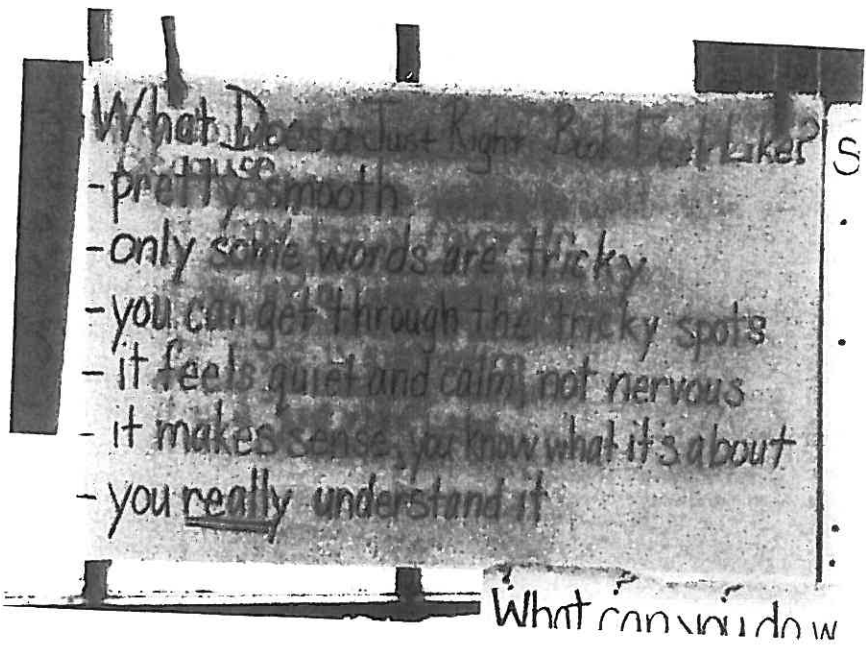
The current conversation about book levels grows out of a long and divided history. Americans have long tried to quantify factors that make for difficulty in texts. Historically, these attempts to assign levels of difficulty to texts have been grouped together under the term "readability." Basals have been written

to match predetermined readability formulas, which took into account a limited number of factors such as word difficulty, word frequency, word length, and sentence length. The Dick and Jane books of my childhood and many controlled vocabulary books since then were written to fit the characteristics of early readability levels, and the texts are as odd as they are—"Come Dick! Come Jane! Come, come, come!"—because the

goal was to conform to a formula, using short choppy sentences and regular one-syllable words rather than language that made sense, was interesting, and sounded like the language children speak fluently. (Cullinan and Fitzgerald, 1984). Many researchers have found that students read and comprehend literature storybooks with greater success than they have with books which have the controlled vocabularies which fit these old understandings of factors contributing to text difficulty, (Rhodes, 1979; Bussis et. al. 1985).

When Marie Clay and Barbara Watson came to Ohio State in 1984, they brought an absolutely different understanding of factors which create text difficulty and of levels with them from New Zealand. At that time, the Ready to Read series of books was foundational to all New Zealand classrooms. Teachers across New Zealand knew Ready to Read books so well that they had an intuitive, tacit understanding of what challenges particular Ready to Read texts were likely to present to readers and of the indicators they could watch for to suggest readers were ready for new challenges. They tended to describe other books in reference to these touchstone texts, and so Marie Clay and Reading Recovery teachers began to think about American books in similar ways.

It was Barbara Peterson (1988) who first examined how real readers in authentic classroom contexts actually experienced these levels of text complexity. This research was groundbreaking in its attention not only to texts but also to readers and the learning they do at various text levels. Since then, Gay Su Pinnell and Irene Fountas (1996, 1999) have created broader categories of book levels for use in guided reading groups, and these categories are now being combined and brought into many classroom lending libraries.



When Peterson first did her research, there were very few of what we now call "little books." These have since mushroomed. They have often been written-to-order with predetermined, but new, descriptors in mind. Authors of "little books" tend to keep in mind that beginning readers can use high frequency words to anchor their progress through a line of print. When we know that readers "draw on a variety of resources to support their reading and understanding of the author's message, we can supply those resources. Barbara Peterson (1988) found that factors such as the match between the illustrations and text, and the predictability of language patterns and story episodes influenced the quality of reading in ways not accounted for by readability formulas which stress the number of letters and syllables in words and words in a sentence. When Reading Recovery teachers began their work toward the levels we have today, people were quite relaxed about them. If many Reading Recovery teachers felt a book needed to be moved up or down, it was moved. Levels were regarded as approximations, and decisions about a books' level of difficulty belonged in the hands of teachers.

Finding Our Own Way

For me to feel comfortable in this realm of leveled books, I needed a guide. My husband travels the world looking for whitewater rivers to paddle. When John journeys to particularly remote places, he goes with a tour guide who can warn him of the waterfalls and hydraulic holes. Lynn Holcomb was one of the early Reading Recovery teachers in our region, and she's since helped Scholastic and the Wright Group level their books. Now a staff member at the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, Lynn has functioned as my guide. Above all, she has demystified published book levels and the gradients of difficulty for us, and helped us feel at home in this human and fallible system.

I have a better sense now of just how fallible many published leveling systems are, because a dozen of Project teachers I work with do freelance work as levelers for publishers. These teachers don't have access to some special scientific formula. They are simply good teachers who devote a Saturday to being trained and then are regularly given several hundred books to categorize by levels. Determining a book's level is approximate, messy work and it is tricky because every reader in the world is different and will find particular texts easy and particular ones difficult for reasons that are hers and hers alone. Kids born and bred in the city may have trouble with the simple word "silo." Kids who live on a farm may be confused by passages about subways. The reasons reader

experience difficulty are far more numerous, complicated and human than any over-arching system can accommodate.

My point isn't to devalue book levels, because in fact I've found them to be extraordinarily helpful. But it is crucial that we, as teachers, do not accept book levels as if they are endorsed by a Higher Authority. Levels are only approximations of gradients of difficulty. It's crucial to understand that if a book seems misplaced in one level, we can move it to another level. In Project schools, children as well as teachers regularly question the placement of a particular book in one leveled bin or another. The important thing is that we trust ourselves and our children more than we trust published levels, and also that the challenge to level books lures us to read *more* (not less) children's literature and to talk *more* (not less) about books with our colleagues and our children. If we find that book levels distance us from books and silence our voices, then the levels are doing more harm than good.

How valuable it has been to have shoulders to stand upon in our efforts to level our K-2 classroom libraries. Like everyone else, my colleagues and I have made efforts to coordinate published lists of book levels. Many publications and publishers have charts that roughly correlate Reading Recovery levels, guided-reading levels, and levels from an assessment known as *The Developmental Reading Assessment* (DRA). Although the Reading Recovery system assigns numbers to levels and other systems assign letters, it isn't at all hard to decide how levels from one list mesh with levels from another list. What *is* hard, impossible even, is to correlate levels that have been established by readability formulas or the Lexile formula (which tend to be based on formulaic counts of syllables per word and words per sentence) with the levels one finds in *Guided Reading* or Reading Recovery, which are based on studying the sources of information books provide for readers.

Sometimes teachers assume that because a published list divides books into a certain number of categories, this must be the number of categories which we bring to our classroom. This is far from the truth! The Reading Recovery scale, for example, was designed to scaffold readers who are failing to thrive, and for this reason, Reading Recovery levels provide a series of very small steps. Dividing books into so many bins, each representing a very small step forward, doesn't pose a risk for Reading Recovery children. They won't end up lingering too long at any one of these levels because they are guided by a vigilant teacher who is always ready to advance the child to the next level. Because the leveled libraries that I'm describing support independent reading, however, the teacher will not always be at a child's elbow to move that child along from one level to the next. If the levels are too discrete, there is a

risk that children will languish at one level for too long while they wait for us to move them along to new challenges. Another risk is that children may not have the diverse range of books they need and want as readers. Even the Guided Reading levels, which are less discrete than the Reading Recovery levels, were designed with a particular function in mind. These books are meant to be introduced in guided-reading sessions, and again, a vigilant teacher makes book choices for children, and does so by giving special attention to the importance of moving children along toward books that will stretch them.

In designing levels for a classroom lending library rather than for Reading Recovery or guided reading, we need to realize that children will be making choices without us necessarily being at their side, and we need to give them room to read books that are a bit easier one day and a bit harder another day. It is helpful, therefore, to have less discrete divisions in a classroom lending library, with approximately two guided reading levels within one bin. We often use a plus-sign to convey to children which books in any one bin will be especially challenging so they can choose or shy away from these books.

Among Project classrooms, we use a system of levels that we speak of as Groups, and each of the emergent and beginning reader Groups contains several Guided Reading levels and even more of the very discrete Reading Recovery levels.* Staff members of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project have worked in a think tank led by Lynn Holcomb to create these Groups and they can be found in the appendix. Within each of the these Groups, we have listed several assessment books we keep out of our classroom libraries, and we have also named benchmark books. The latter are well-known books we use as a shorthand way to refer to the level. For example, many Reading Recovery teachers in America regard *Pat's New Puppy* as a benchmark for their Level 7 (our Group 3) books. Because of the challenges in this text, the book has come to be trusted as litmus paper, signifying which children are and are not ready for the challenges of other similar books. If a child can read *Pat's New Puppy* with ease, this has become a signal that they'll fare well with a whole set of other Reading Recovery Level 7 books. We've chosen benchmarks for each of our Groups.

Many thousands of books have not been leveled by a publisher yet. This is just as well, because it means that teachers in a school need to make their own decisions. In Colonial America, people used to gather together for barn-raising and quilting bees. In Project schools, we gather for Leveling Parties.

* I discuss leveling books for more proficient readers later.

Somehow the endeavor becomes vastly more manageable when it is a shared one. We rope in everyone and anyone—high school students, parents, paraprofessionals, principals—and set to work categorizing books.

When working with books for emergent and early readers, there are so many resources that the work is almost clerical at first. We grab a book, and then use references—the Reading Recovery leveling list, publishers' levels, the levels from *Guided Reading* and *Matching Books to Readers*—to slot the book into its bin. After a bit, we pause to review these bins and decide which to combine to create a classroom lending library. By this time, we tend to have six or so books in a bin, and we find that this gives us a sense of the books at that particular level so we can begin to make decisions on books that have not been previously leveled. We rarely feel absolutely certain, but our rule of thumb is that when we're not certain, we put a book in the higher level (which means it's more likely to be too easy than too hard).

Usually we soon notice that our library has large gaps. I recently worked with some first-grade teachers in a nearby suburb who found, through the process of leveling their books, that they had almost no books easier than Level 20 (which is generally thought of as early second grade) in any of their first-grade classrooms! No wonder their children were having a hard time sustaining an independent reading workshop. The Director of Reading in a large urban district in the Midwest recently told me that when she arrived in the district, she inherited a basal in which the preprimer contained only two stories which were easier than Level 15. When the first rungs in the ladder of difficulty have been sawed off, no wonder some children find it difficult to progress.

Once we've tentatively leveled books, the work really begins. We now take books to our children and begin adjusting the categories so they "ring true" for our readers, and using the categories to inform our teaching.

Thinking About the Features of a Particular Book Level (Group One): An Example of How Levels Can Affect Teaching

As we work with children and leveled books, we think about the features of particular books, cull out descriptions of levels, and anticipate the reading work children will tend to do at these levels. I cannot put the descriptions of all our Groups into this book, but let's look at Group One books and readers

as a case in point. We describe our Group One books (which generally corresponds to Reading Recovery Levels 1 and 2 and *Guided Reading* levels A and B) like this:

- *The font is large and clear*, even in the captions. A Group One book will tend to have black letters against a white background.
- *There is exaggerated spacing between words and letters*. In some books, we find that publishers have enlarged the print size but have not adjusted the spacing accordingly. The exaggerated size of the font, if spaces are not equally exaggerated, can create difficulties for readers who are still learning to distinguish between one word and the next. Group One readers rely on the spaces between words to signify the end of one word and the beginning of another. These readers need to read the spaces as well as the words. While working with Group One books, a reader travels the journey from regarding words as black blobs on white paper to noticing some features of words.
- *There is usually a single word, phrase, or simple sentence on a page, and the text is patterned and predictable*. In the book *I Can Read*, once a child knows the title (which is ideally read to a Group One reader) it is not hard for the child to read “I can read the newspaper,” “I can read the cereal box.” A Group One reader, for example, is regarded as a pre-conventional reader because this child relies on the illustrations (which support the meaning) and the sounds of language (or syntax) and not on graphophonics (word/letter) cues to read a sentence such as, “I can read the newspaper.” The reason that the number of letters or syllables in the word *newspaper* is not the primary means of determining the gradient of difficulty of *I Can Read* is that Group One readers won’t yet have the skills to work with print in a word such as *newspaper*, they will instead use picture cues and the meaning of the sentence to form their hypothesis.

Often we find books that seem to belong to Group One but do not use common language structures. This is especially apt to happen with these books, because they’ve usually been written on demand to match a formula. Sometimes authors were so intent on using high frequency words as a pattern that they sacrificed the normal sounds of language. We recently found a text, for example, in which the repeating sentence was, “Come, come here. Come, come here.” Children enter school with a strong sense of how language tends to go, and Group One readers rely on that strength. The sentences children hear don’t tend to go, “Come,



come here.” Because of this unusual language structure, we moved that book out of Group One in our libraries.

- *Two or three anchor words (sight words) are usually used on each page, and often these come first, providing readers a way into the text. A Group One book may be a labeling book containing one illustrated word on a page (such as Mom, Dad, sister, cat) but it tends to be easier for a child to read “I see my Mom. I see my Dad. I see my sister. I see my cat ...” because the repetitive sight words give the reader an easy way into each new page.*
- *The words are highly supported by illustrations. No one would expect a Group One reader to word-solve the word *newspaper*. We would, however, expect a child at this level to look at the picture and at the text and to “read” “I can read the newspaper.” When we are assigning levels to books, sometimes we *think* the illustrations provide strong support because once *we’ve* read the print, it seems to us that the picture matches the print. But it’s not always the case that the picture alone is enough*

to help a child read the print. For example, in *The Fox on the Box* (which actually is an end-of-Group-Two book) one page says, "The fox played on the box." The accompanying picture shows a fox standing on top of the box. *If a child could read the print* then it would be easy for that child to look at the picture and confirm that yes, indeed, the picture shows the fox playing on top of the box. But if that child couldn't read the word *played* in the first place, what in the picture could possibly tell such a reader that the unfamiliar word was *played*?

Once we've described and studied books in a certain level, it's helpful to begin to think about the kind of reading work readers at that level will probably be doing. A child who is working with Group One books, for example, is likely to need us to help her locate known words (*I, the*) and to use these words as anchors, pinning down her one-to-one matches between what she says and the blob of letters representing a word. "I," the child will say (if this is a known word to her), pointing to the first word on the page that says, "I can read the newspaper." Now the child moves on to read the next word, *can*. Again, if this is a known word, the child will read, "I can . . .," and although she has never seen the word *read*, she's heard the title of the book, and her progress along the line of known words has anchored her reading so that she can match the letters *read* with the oral reproduction of "read." Luckily, the next word is a familiar one, *the*, and she knows her matching efforts are on track. She uses the picture to guess at the final word, *newspaper*. She will be pointing to the correct string of letters (*newspaper*) because the known words at the start of the sentence got her off to a strong start matching spoken and written words. Because the reader of Group One books does not yet have consistent control of one-to-one matching, this child will sometimes continue orally "reading" words even though her pointing finger has reached the end of the line. Typically, her finger will hover at the end of the line of print as she continues to say words from the sentence. "Did you run out of words?" we'll say to this Group One reader. "Go back and try again." Perhaps this time the child will point correctly. "Did it match?" we'll ask. "Did it come out just right? Try it again!" We ask questions such as these when the child's pointing is right and not simply when it is wrong.

Group One readers will tend to be ready to move to Group Two books once they can read one-syllable words with one-to-one correspondence. I am convinced that a Group One reader need not necessarily read Group One books *with total accuracy* before moving on to Group Two books. The child

can move to these less supportive books when the requisite concepts are under control. Recently, Lynn Holcomb and I listened as a child read the Group One book *I Paint*. One page shows a child painting stripes onto a snake. The print said, "I paint stripes." The child pointed to the words and read, "I paint snakes." Although the child had substituted *snakes* for *stripes*, she had, nevertheless, demonstrated the competencies necessary for us to move her to Group Two books, and these more challenging books will be better suited to teaching her to check her hypothesized text against the actual print, looking all the way across words. The child showed us a command of one-to-one matching, she generated words that made sense, she matched the picture and the print, she generated text that sounded syntactically right, and she may have even checked her wise hypothesis—*snakes*—against the initial consonant. If we are looking to see whether this reader seems ready to take on new challenges, I think the answer is yes.

This description of a Group One reader really describes only how such a reader processes text. I've said nothing about the reader's attitudes as a reader, her sense of herself as a reader, her ability to think or talk in response to texts, her life habits in relation to books, and so forth. All of these are important dimensions of a reader. But it is a reader's ability to process print especially that allows a teacher to match a particular reader with a particular level of text difficulty.

Levels in the Upper-Elementary Grades

Upper-elementary teachers face an especially challenging job. This is partly because there are no published lists of book levels for the upper grades with the same credibility as the Reading Recovery levels (or the levels derived from their lists). There are and will continue to be published lists that attempt to level books for upper-elementary readers, but it is important to keep in mind that these categories have not been field-tested like the Reading Recovery categories or those that stand on the shoulders of Reading Recovery's work. It is also important to keep in mind that most chapter books can be read at a wide variety of levels. When a teacher evaluates the complexities in a book, is that teacher considering the challenges inherent in getting through the print enough to comment generally about a text or is the teacher evaluating the difficulties inherent in grasping the significance and nuance of the text? MacLachlan's novella, *Baby*, could conceivably be grouped with books the level of Dahl's

Matilda, but because the book has depths worth exploring, I'd instead regard it as a challenging book for many proficient middle school readers.

A grant from Alan Levenstein has established a Books for Children Project within the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project community. Each week this project brings fifty of our mentor teachers together in small groups to work toward the challenge of providing New York City children with the classroom libraries they deserve. As part of this Books for Children Project, a group of teachers led by Kathleen Tolan and Anne Marie Powers have begun to develop and use a gradient of difficulty with our upper-elementary level books (see the Appendix). These still tentative levels have been helpful to us, especially in defining some of the features that make for difficulty in chapter books, because knowing this allows us to anticipate the ways particular books will tax our readers and to tailor our teaching not only to the child but also to the book. These are some of the features that make for difficulty in books:

- Books with self-contained episodic chapters are easier than cumulative books in which the plot unfolds across a sequence of chapters.
- Books with a lot of dialogue are easier than books with a lot of exposition. This is especially true if the dialogue is free standing rather than embedded into paragraphs. Inexperienced readers sometimes get bogged down in the descriptive details.
- In the most accessible chapter books, line breaks show phrasing and all sentences stop at the end of each page. There are double spaces between the lines.
- As books become more challenging, they begin to include compound sentences.
- As books become more complex, background knowledge is required. Readers may need to know about dinosaurs, museums, or soccer.
- When there is one or perhaps two characters that move the story along, the story is easier to follow than if there are multiple central characters.
- Books with characters that stay the same, or are static or flat, are less challenging than books that contain complex, dynamic characters.
- As books become more and more reliant on figurative language, literary voice, and humor, difficulty increases.

Earlier, I wrote that I have needed a guide through the complex terrain of leveled books. But I am not the only one who needs a guide. Our children

need one as well. The best guide, of course, is a knowledgeable teacher who can sit at a child's side, hear the child's interests and tastes, know the child's strengths, and steer that individual to the right book at the right moment. But we're not always there for each child at each juncture. Our children need guides they can carry with them as they negotiate their own pathways. Just as a trail guide lets prospective hikers anticipate the gradient of difficulty among trails, and the black diamond signs on my map of the ski mountain warn me of moguls and ice, a leveling system can help young readers find their way to books they can handle with assurance and finesse. The levels can also signal them, "Look alert. This will be a challenge," and help all of us gear ourselves up for anticipated difficulties.