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Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publications Data

Fountas, Irene C.

Leveled Books (K-8): matching texts to readers for effective teaching / Irene C. Fountas, Gay Su Pinnell
p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-325-00818-3 (alk. paper)

1. Book Leveling. 2. Reading (Elementary) 3. Reading (Middle school) 4. Children-Books and reading. 5. Classroom libraries.

6. Effective teaching. Pinnell, Gay Su. II. Title.

LB1573.F643 2005

372.41-dc22

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

10 09 08 07 06 ML 1 2 3 4 5 6

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INTRODUCTION

Technology has made important differences in just about every aspect of our work as educators and we, as book lovers, are no exception. When faced with the need to update our leveled book lists for primary, intermediate, and middle grades, we realized that just the first update would approach a list of about 20,000 books; and it would grow from there. The volume would be massive and the list would take up all of the space, leaving no room for information on readability, the text gradient, and suggestions for creating and using a leveled book collection. At the same time, we knew that constant updating would be more useful to teachers than waiting for a new list every five or six years. We had the additional problem of storing thousands of books!

With those concerns in mind, we created the website called *fountasandpinnellleveledbooks.com* to serve the ongoing needs of teachers in kindergarten through grade eight who are using leveled books for guided reading instruction. This website currently stores a searchable list of over 18,000 leveled books, A to Z, and more are added each month. Additionally, we have placed a variety of professional development resources on the website: DVD clips of guided reading, frequently asked questions and answers, analysis of running records, and recommendations of books to read aloud. While the list is available in hard copy, the

website is a convenient way to access materials and other information.

Over the years, we have found it extremely helpful to work with our colleagues to level books. When we are analyzing texts for ourselves, we are actually thinking about the demands texts make on processing. We find that performing this analysis, talking about it with others, and tentatively assigning a level provides a strong foundation of information when we plan introductions to texts for guided reading lessons because we have already thought about the potential demands. So, while it would be a huge job to level all of the books used in guided reading, we have always encouraged teachers to level some books for themselves. In the two previous books, there are prototypes, descriptions, and page layouts for each level that can be used as a guide.

In addition, both volumes provided background information about the gradient of text and described its role in a literacy program. Factors related to readability and accessibility were also included, as well as some practical information on creating classroom and school collections and ways to acquire more books, including grant writing.

We made the decision to update the information in both volumes, including information on grades kindergarten through three as well as providing more detail for grades four through eight.

The result is *Leveled Books (K-8): Matching Texts to Readers for Effective Teaching*. In chapter 1 you will find a rationale for matching books to readers, and in Chapter 2 the gradient of text is described. These two chapters gave us an important chance to clarify our perspective of the use of leveled texts in classrooms; for example, we describe what a gradient is and what it is not. Chapter 3 presents a picture of comprehensive approaches to language and literacy teaching, kindergarten through grade eight.

In Chapter 4, we examine the “text base” that is needed in a classroom for effective language literacy instruction. If they are to become proficient citizens who use reading and writing for both professional and personal goals, year after year students need to engage in reading, listening to, discussing, and writing about a rich array of books. Leveled books have their place because they offer a ladder of support for intensive small group instruction; however, we also describe other components of the text base, for example books to read aloud and to read independently. In Chapter 5, we explore the concept of readability and the various ways it is calculated, and in Chapters 6 and 7, we present ten factors related to accessibility and readability, as well as examples of text analysis at many levels.

Chapter 8 provides guidelines for creating a high-quality leveled book collection. Chapter 9 focuses on how to match books to readers by using benchmark assessment and ongoing analysis of reading. This assessment is an important base for effective teaching in guided reading because if books are too hard or too easy, it is difficult to help students expand the systems of strategic actions they need to develop. Once you find the right levels for instruction, you can then easily place stu-

dents into small groups and select texts that will make it possible to do effective teaching in guided reading. In Chapter 10, we discuss using leveled books in guided reading from kindergarten through grade 8.

Chapters 11, 12, 13, and 14 will help you understand the gradient and text factors in detail and to analyze and level books for yourself. We present level by level descriptions and include prototypes and page layouts for both fiction and non-fiction texts, A to Z.

In Chapters 15, 16, and 17, we return to descriptions of the kinds of texts teachers need in primary, intermediate, and middle school classrooms and resource rooms. In Chapter 15 we discuss the classroom library, including the collections from which students choose books for themselves. Chapter 16 focuses on the classroom collection for guided reading. In Chapter 17, you will find guidelines for creating and using a school bookroom. In all of these chapters, there are guidelines and cost estimates for building the needed collections over time.

In the last two chapters, we focus on ways to increase your collection of books. Chapter 18 provides practical information on cost-effective planning as well as how to acquire books free through book clubs and gifts. In Chapter 19, you will find examples of letters, concept papers, and proposals that you can use to seek funding. In the Appendixes for this book, we provide ordering information on publishers and addresses.

We hope you’ll find our book an important resource for developing your understanding of texts and their implications for effective teaching.

—I.C.F. and G. S. P.

WHY MATCH BOOKS TO READERS?

Good readers read regularly, voluntarily, and voraciously. They read a wide variety of material with confidence and enjoyment. They read for many purposes—to become informed, to improve their lives, to escape to other worlds, to learn about themselves, to revel in adventures, and to understand others who are distant in time, space, and culture. They collect books, talk about books, and recommend books to their friends. They have favorite books and favorite authors. They know their tastes and preferences but are willing to try something new. They remember what they read, reflect on the ideas and experiences they've gained from books, and make connections between and among books. They read actively, bringing their imagination and past experiences to bear on their reading; and they read critically, evaluating what they read for objectivity, completeness, authenticity, and quality. All of these characteristics are part of being a reader, and developing those characteristics is the goal of the language and literacy program throughout schooling.

As teachers, we want our students to lead literate lives and discover for themselves the adventure, knowledge, and wisdom readers experience. Not everything about learning to read comes easily, but we want the dream to be always within reach. For many children, it will take repeated efforts on their part and ours to reach the necessary levels of competence. We want these efforts to be successful, the kind that become their own reward.

In this chapter we discuss the importance of matching books to readers and the role of leveled books in literacy programs.

Matching Books to Readers

Matching books to readers depends on three inter-related sets of understandings, all of which are critical to effective teaching:

- Knowing the readers.
- Knowing the texts.
- Understanding the reading process.

In this book we will provide information that will help you know the texts that children read as part of an effective instructional program in literacy. But we must always consider these texts in relation to the readers and the processes they are learning. We refer you to our other publications for detailed explanations of readers and the reading process (Fountas and Pinnell 1996, 1998, 2006).

Why Is Matching Books to Readers So Important?

Much has been written about providing simple, suitable texts for beginning readers. Matching books to readers is critical for children who are beginning to build a reading process; and it is also important to use a gradient of text to be sure that older readers have the support and challenge they need to expand their reading powers as they engage with more complex texts over time.

PRIMARY STUDENTS

The young children we teach are building a network of strategic actions that make up an early reading process. They develop successful processing

strategies as they learn to read for meaning and use the language and print of texts. When children are reading a book that they can read with success, they are able to use many different sources of information in a smoothly operating processing system. While focusing on the meaning of the story, they might:

- Make predictions about what will happen next.
- Interpret characters and form opinions about their nature.
- Notice and use word groups or phrases and language patterns to anticipate what will follow.
- Recognize a large number of words quickly and easily.
- Take words apart efficiently to read them.
- Notice a word that is unfamiliar or that they don't see very often and solve it—that is, think about its meaning or how to pronounce it (often ignored in silent reading).
- Reread part of the text to confirm information that is essential to understanding the rest of the text.
- Notice how the information is organized.
- Connect the text to others they have read or to their own life experiences.

INTERMEDIATE AND MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

Older students continue to expand their network of strategic actions as texts become more challenging. They need to broaden their experience with texts, becoming more sophisticated in reading a wide range of informational texts. As they do so, they will acquire content knowledge; but the goal of reading instruction is to help them learn *how* to read more complex nonfiction texts that require integration of information from increasingly complex graphics as well as using readers' tools such as indexes, pronun-

ciation guides, glossaries, and many different kinds of headings.

More proficient readers will explore difficult social issues in realistic fiction, and they also take on difficult works of fantasy that require entering entire worlds where the struggle between good and evil is symbolically portrayed. Historical fiction requires readers to consider the customs, attitudes, and perspectives of people living in former times. Across narrative texts, even though the settings are different from reality or distant in time and geography from their own, readers need to use ideas from texts to gain insight into the human condition and to apply them to their own lives. We want to assure that intermediate and middle school readers learn to understand, analyze, and think critically about this wide range of texts.

Texts in Relation to Readers

Terms like “hard” and “easy” are always relative. “Hard” for whom? “Easy” for which readers? When we use those terms in reference to books, we are always thinking from the perspective of the readers. A book is easy or difficult only in terms of a particular reader or even a group of readers. So, when we know the readers, we can think of any text as “hard,” “easy,” or “just right.” Each kind of text has important implications for the behavior of the reader and the potential to “learn on the text.”

HARD TEXTS

Think about reading a text that is very difficult for you as an adult. It might be a legal document, a technical manual (such as the tax code), or a novel by an author with an unusual style completely unfamiliar to you. How would reading that difficult text limit your ability to bring what you know to the process of reading? Your understanding might be impaired; if you attempted to read it aloud you might even stumble over some words or use expressions in awkward ways. You might find yourself reading some sections over and over in an attempt to make sense of them. You might even

skip some words altogether because you are unsure of pronunciation, of meaning, or of both. If you have to skip too many words, you may become confused. Chances are, after a while you would not continue to read. You would simply discard the text or seek the information in some other way.

Elementary students are in exactly the same position with the too-hard texts they encounter in school. If they are struggling, they cannot use what they know in efficient, strategic ways. In fact, forcing students to read too-hard texts has devastating results:

- They begin to think that reading is simply a matter of saying one individual word after another. Reading may, in fact, sound like a laboriously pronounced list of isolated words.
- They lose the meaning of the text. Older students spend so much energy on word solving that they have little attention to give to remembering details, following a plot, thinking beyond a text, and other critical aspects of comprehension. Young children may even conclude that reading doesn't have to make sense and will "tune out" deeper thinking altogether as they focus on figuring out each word.
- They find it difficult to bring their knowledge of language structure to the process and may not recognize larger units, such as phrases. They cannot anticipate the next word because they are unaware that reading should sound like language.
- They practice inappropriate reading behaviors, such as the laborious "sounding out" of words in a way that makes no sense. As they grow older, they may even give up searching for meaning.
- They become frustrated with reading and avoid it altogether. Motivation is severely undermined. Reading becomes a task to be avoided.

EASY TEXTS

What about books that readers find easy? How do such books fit into a reading program? Easy reading is actually beneficial for elementary age readers, just as it is for adults. Reading a book that is very easy for you requires less intensity and energy. Most of what you do is fully automatic. You read quickly and easily. You feel in control. You are probably in a very relaxed state, and you can simply enjoy the reading experience. You are able to enjoy faraway places—almost as though you are there. You can anticipate events in the text; you enjoy thinking about the plot and characters. You may become completely engaged, blocking out everything around you. You meet few problems in terms of words, and you understand the text with little effort. Many of us use this "easy reading" to while away the time in airports or to help us fall asleep at night.

Easy reading allows students to enjoy the process and to use what they know in a smoothly operating system. With harder books, children may be reading a text accurately but not processing it in a smooth, fluent way. With easy books, they are unhindered by the demands of reading because they automatically—or almost automatically—use the skills they control.

Easy books also allow readers to focus on the meaning of the text and enjoy humor or suspense. They can ask questions and find answers. They can think in a deeper way about aspects of text such as characters, settings, or plots. They may encounter challenging issues that offer a foundation for discussion after the reading.

Easy reading gives students "mileage" as readers and builds confidence. They process a great many words and build up rapid word recognition as well as fluency in processing. Easy reading frees them to attend to new aspects of print and thus engage in new learning. They can read for meaning and use language in an orchestrated way.

So, texts that are easy to read are appropriate for some aspects of literacy learning. We recommend that in the classroom children have the

opportunity to engage every day in a large amount of easy reading. But to help readers learn more about how to read increasingly challenging texts, they need more than easy reading.

“JUST RIGHT” TEXTS

Our purpose in literacy education is to help readers learn more as readers—to nudge them beyond their current development and help them expand their processing systems. We want to support their efforts to stretch as they successfully meet the challenges of more demanding texts.

To help readers build an effective network of reading strategies, you will want to select texts that allow individuals to read for meaning, draw on the skills they already control, and expand their current processing strategies. In other words, the text used for learning “how to read” must have the right mixture of support and challenge.

The reader must be able to process or read the text well with the support of the teacher. That means:

- Using knowledge of what makes sense, sounds right, and looks right—simultaneously—in a smoothly operating system.
- Knowing or taking most of the words apart quickly with a high level of accuracy (above 90 percent).
- Reading at a good rate with phrasing and intonation (that is, putting words together in groups so they sound more like oral expression) but also slowing down occasionally to engage in successful problem solving (independently and/or supported by the teacher).
- Grasping the literal meaning of a text by searching for and using information and remembering details.
- Using prior knowledge to understand the text.
- Thinking beyond the text, making inferences.
- Synthesizing new information learned from the text.

- Noticing the way the text is organized or the way the writer has used language to craft the text.
- Thinking critically about any aspect of the text.

The texts you choose for new learning must both support and challenge your students because children—like adults—learn best when the task is achievable. By matching books to readers, you make it possible even for young children to use their strengths and extend their control of the reading process.

The instructional level text should be just demanding enough to provide a few opportunities to work out problems so they can expand their reading systems. The goal is not just to learn new words and add them to a reading vocabulary, although that will inevitably happen. It’s about the processing, the “working out,” that helps readers develop the skills and strategies that will make them independent—strategic actions that they can apply again and again as they read other texts. The “just right” book provides the context for successful reading work and enables readers to strengthen their “processing power.”

Readers in Relation to Texts

As teachers we encounter a wide range of readers, from those who are just beginning to learn about print to those who can read just about anything we give them. Meeting students where they are developmentally requires that we assess their understandings of what reading is and how they go about it. We analyze reading behaviors to assess what they control, almost control, and do not yet control.

As we observe readers’ behaviors, we need to keep in mind a broad continuum of learning. As we accompany and guide their literacy development, we need to be ever mindful of definitive characteristics and behaviors. Our goal is to support them in using what they already know to get to what they do not yet know. That means knowing our students and working “on the cutting edge” of their learning.

In Figure 1–1, we have described general characteristics of readers at five levels so we can think broadly about how readers change over time.

The “advanced” category encompasses another continuum of progress. Advanced readers continue to expand their processing powers across increasingly demanding texts in terms of:

- Complex structures.
- Demanding content.
- Literary features.

These categories are generally useful in helping us think about the broad characteristics of readers. No one child will exactly fit one of these categories, and many students will evidence behaviors in more than one.

This is the art of teaching: we observe and describe children’s reading behaviors and, in so doing, build a working understanding of each child as a reader at a particular point in time. In this way, we can trace changes in behavior as students learn and grow, and we can plan sensitive instruction that supports them every step of the way.

Books, Readers, and the Reading Process

The purpose of matching books to readers is to find the right books—those that provide reading opportunities that will help students develop an effective reading process. There are many opportunities in the school day for students to choose their own books, for example during independent reading, but in instructional reading the teacher does the matching so that the learners can expand what they know how to do. Our goal is to help them develop the kind of processing system that makes it possible to learn a great deal more—a system that extends itself (Clay 1991).

As indicated in Figure 1–1, “self-extending” and “advanced” readers use many different sources of information in an orchestrated way. A competent

reader reads the words and does so with high accuracy, but processing a text involves much more. It means engaging in a set of strategic actions for picking up text information, working on it, and putting it together while reading.

Since reading is a complex process that brings together a reader and a text, competent readers must bring everything they know how to do as readers to the process, including:

- The use of language knowledge (an aural and reading vocabulary, the structure or syntax, and the subtle nuances of language and how they are interpreted).
- The use of background knowledge (from life experiences that include both direct and vicarious learning through books, film, television, etc.).
- The use of literary experiences (the books and other print materials they have read throughout their history as readers).

Readers are active in that they are constantly accessing information from this experiential base (invisible information), which they connect to the information in the text at hand (visible information) (Clay 2000). Effective readers put together the two kinds of information in a smooth processing system that expands or extends with the increasing demands of text.

Moreover, a proficient processing system means that you are using strategic actions in flexible ways. You gain the information or content of the reading material, and simultaneously you learn more about the reading process itself. In other words, you extend the knowledge and skill of the reading simply by engaging proficiently in the act. Most adults control a proficient system; children are developing the system. From the moment we hand a young reader a book, our teaching goal is to help the reader engage in successful processing which will build an effective system. Not

Characteristics of Readers: Change Over Time

EMERGENT

Emergent readers rely on language and meaning as they read simple texts with only one or two lines of print. They are just beginning to control early reading behaviors such as matching spoken words one by one with written words on the page, recognizing how print is arranged on pages, and moving left to right in reading. They are just figuring out what a word really is, how letters go together, and how letters are different from each other. They may know a few high frequency words that can be used as anchors as they learn to focus their attention on specific aspects of print. As they read, they notice aspects of print such as first letters of words, and they begin to pay closer attention to letters and sounds. They are learning how to use picture information to help them learn about print. They point under each word to develop word-by-word matching.

EARLY

Early readers have achieved control of early reading behaviors such as directionality and word-by-word matching. Their eyes are beginning to control the process of reading, so they do some of their reading without pointing. They have acquired a small core of high frequency words that they can read and write, and they use these words to monitor their reading. They can read books with several lines of print, keeping the meaning in mind as they use some strategies to solve unfamiliar words. They have developed systems for learning words in reading and can use simple letter-sound relationships in conjunction with their own sense of language. They consistently monitor their reading to make sure that it makes sense and sounds like language. Early readers use several sources of information to check on themselves. They use language structure along with the text meaning and are able to check with the print.

TRANSITIONAL

Transitional readers have early reading behaviors well under control. They can read a variety of texts with many lines of print. While they notice pictures and enjoy them, they do not need to rely heavily on illustrations as part of the reading process. They read fluently with some expression, using multiple sources of information while reading for meaning. They have a large core of frequently used words that they can recognize quickly and easily. They are working on how to solve more complex words through a range of word-analysis techniques. They can use language structures to anticipate the text and can begin to make sense of some literary language structures. They can attend to the meaning of texts that are longer and contain a few episodes.

SELF-EXTENDING

Self-extending readers use all sources of information flexibly in a smoothly orchestrated system. They can apply their strategies to reading fiction and nonfiction texts that are much longer and more complex. They have a large core of high frequency words and many other words that they can quickly and automatically recognize. Self-extending readers have developed systems for learning more about the process as they read so that they build skills simply by encountering many different kinds of texts with a variety of new words. Self-extending readers can analyze and make excellent attempts at new multisyllable words and can attend to and use more literary language structures. They are still building background knowledge and learning how to apply what they know how to do as readers to longer and more difficult texts.

ADVANCED

Students who are advanced in reading have moved well beyond the early “learning to read” phases of literacy learning. They are still learning and developing a complex network of strategic actions while they have varied experiences in reading a wide variety of fiction and nonfiction texts. Through using reading for many different purposes, they acquire important tools for learning. There is virtually no text that an advanced reader cannot “read,” but using prior knowledge, sophisticated word-solving strategies, and understanding the nuances of a complex text are still under development. Advanced readers sustain their interest and understanding of long texts over extended periods of time.

Figure 1–1. *Characteristics of Readers: Change Over Time*

surprisingly, independence and confidence are highly related to the development of such a system.

Knowledge of the reading process is a critical element in matching books to readers for guided reading lessons. This knowledge helps us examine texts from two perspectives: (1) we note the demands of the text on the reader or what the reader will need to be able to do to process the text well; and, (2) we consider what the particular reader knows how to do with a text. With this information we can begin to make a match:

- If we know the challenges in a text and we understand the reading process, then we can think about what this particular text requires the reader to do.
- If we know what readers control and we understand the reading process, then we can also think about what they need to learn how to do next.
- Finally, we can intervene and teach to support new learning before, during, and after students read a text.

When we match books to readers, we become more effective teachers. A good match enables readers to engage in the successful processing that builds the self-extending system—the network of understandings that all competent readers control.

Suggestions for Professional Development: Observing the Characteristics of Readers

Work with colleagues to explore the difficulty levels of texts in relation to students' diverse needs.

1. Select a book that students at your grade level typically read.
2. Observe three to six different children as they read this text (or about 250 words of it). For primary children, take running records. For older children, note the error behavior on a photocopy of a section of text. For all ages, make notes on fluency and phrasing. Have an informal conversation with each student about the text after reading and make notes about fluency and comprehending from your observations and discussion.
3. Bring your notes and a copy of the text to a meeting with colleagues. Discuss the challenges in the book. It will be an easy text for some students, a “just right” text for other students, and a hard text for still others. Talk about text difficulty in relation to the individual readers.
4. Using the Characteristics of Readers chart, discuss what you have learned about each reader. Ask:
 - Which readers did you learn the most about?
 - What specific reading behaviors did you notice?
 - From these behaviors, what can you infer about the strategic actions the reader controls?
 - What are the implications for the level of the text for the particular reader?
 - What happened when the text was too hard? too easy? just right?
5. Talk, in general, about applying your knowledge of individual readers to the creation and use of a gradient of text for instructional reading.