ABSTRACT
                Effective literacy programs involve a wide range of reading
and writing activities, all of which are necessary and which support learning
in different ways. An essential part of the language arts curriculum involves
direct instruction in reading. Many teachers are beginning to teach reading
in small groups, a process called "guided reading." Successful implementation
for guided reading depends on selecting appropriate texts every day. Having a
leveled book collection does not take the place of text selection, but it
does make it easier. A leveled collection may be constructed simply by
gathering a large collection of books and working with colleagues to discuss
the characteristics of the texts. By using their experiences in teaching
children, teachers will find that they can place books along a continuum of
difficulty. The book list presented in "Guided Reading: Good First Teaching
for All Children" (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996) was based on several years of
teachers' work with a set of books leveled for classroom use. Another way to
start a leveled collection is to begin with any set of books from a publisher
reliable in the gradient of difficulty presented. Factors to be considered in
placing a text along a gradient of difficulty are: length; layout; subject;
structure and organization of the text; illustrations; words; phrases,
sentences, paragraphs; punctuation; and literary features. The first levels
introduce children to reading print--as the levels increase in difficulty,
there is a wider variety of text. Factors outside a text include the reader's
prior knowledge of the topic and prior experience in encountering texts with
features like this one; the way the text is introduced; and the supportive
interactions between the teacher and children during reading. (NKA)

Effective Literacy Programs.

by Gay Su Pinnell

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Classroom Connections

Effective literacy programs

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Effective literacy programs involve a wide range of reading and writing activities, all of which are necessary and which support learning in different ways. Reading instruction, for example, involves making rich texts available to children through reading aloud to them. As they hear written language read aloud, they internalize new ways of using language, become familiar with more complex syntactic structures, and learn new vocabulary. Children also need opportunities to share books with other children through *buddy reading* or *partner reading* and to have the time to choose and read or look at books for themselves.

An essential part of the language arts curriculum involves direct instruction in reading. Helping readers develop independent, effective strategies, involves engaging them in reading texts that offer just the right level of support and challenge as well as providing skillful teaching. When books are matched to readers, then teaching can be powerful because we are engaging the young reader in successful processing that builds the self-extending system, a network of understandings that work together to help the reader extend his or her skill.

Guided Reading

Many teachers are beginning to teach reading in small groups, a process called *guided reading*. Children in the groups are similar in their reading behavior at a particular point in time, and as they learn, the membership of these flexible groups changes. It makes sense to teach the children as a group because they are reading text at about the same level of difficulty. The teacher selects a text that is just about right for the group and *fine tunes* the text selection with a brief introduction. Then, members of the group read the whole text softly or silently to themselves. They read simultaneously but not in chorus. During reading the teacher observes behavior and interacts with individuals. Afterwards, the teacher makes several teaching points based on observation. All of the instructional interactions are based on knowledge of where the children are and where they need to go in their learning.

Successful implementation for guided reading depends on selecting appropriate texts day after day. If you are beginning to use small group reading instruction in your classroom, you will find it very helpful to have books organized in a gradient of difficulty. Having a leveled book collection does not take the place of text selection, but it does make it easier.

A Leveled Book Collection

A leveled book collection is a large set of books that is organized in levels of difficulty from the very easy books that an emergent reader might begin on to the longer, complex books that advanced readers in intermediate grades will read. In some schools, the collection is housed in a central area. There are multiple copies of many books; there might be about 10 levels for grades K-1, and three or four more levels for each grade after that. A leveled book set has several advantages, including the following:

- An organized set of books makes it easier to select books for groups of children.
- Having a gradient of text provides a way to assess children's progress over time.

A book collection can be established that does not need to be replaced but simply revised and expanded over time.

As the book collection expands, the variety of text will provide many opportunities for children to increase their reading power through experiencing a wide variety of texts.

Starting a Leveled Collection

A leveled collection may be constructed simply by gathering a large collection of books and working with colleagues to discuss the characteristics of the texts. Using your experiences in teaching children, you will find that you can place books along a continuum of difficulty. Of course, your beginning categorizations should be tested with children over a period of time. Gradually, categories will become more stable. Many groups of teachers have worked with their collections over several years, periodically coming together to discuss the books, revise levels, and add new books. As you have conversations about books, you will discover that you are talking about more than the texts. You will be talking about the children and their reading behavior. These conversations can be very rich.

It will *speed up* the process to use a leveled book list as a starting point, although there is no substitute for working with the texts yourself. The book list we present in *Guided Reading: Good First Teaching for All Children.* (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) was based on several years of teachers' work with a set of books leveled for classroom use. This list has been recently revised (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999). A process such as that previously described helped us to begin the collection on which the list is based.

We do not advise using the Reading Recovery book list for several reasons. First, books on that list were selected for readers who are having difficulty; the general classroom population can learn from a wider variety of text than those on the Reading Recovery list. Second,

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the levels for Reading Recovery are very finely drawn because very small steps in level are needed to support the progress of young readers who are having extreme difficulty. When you teach children in classroom groups, broader levels are needed for efficiency in selection and in storage. Most children do not need the narrowly defined levels that have been created for Reading Recovery. Third, variety is needed in levels of books designed for classroom practice. You are selecting books, day after day, that will challenge and engage several children at once. In Reading Recovery, teachers select books for a specific reader; they have very detailed information in mind. In small groups in the classroom, you will be finding characteristics that meet the needs of a broader range of readers. While the children in the group are similar, they will be noticing different aspects of a text on their level and learning in different ways.

Another way to start a leveled collection is to begin with any set of books from one publisher that you have found to be pretty reliable in the gradient of difficulty they present. Don't hesitate to re-level some books if, in your judgment, the book would better match the children you teach. Then, add books from other publishers to the levels. Soon, you will have the beginnings of a leveled set. No one publisher can provide the variety needed for a leveled book collection for guided reading.

Supporting Children's Reading

In teaching children in guided reading, you are constantly balancing the difficulty of the text with the way you support children in reading it. A text is selected for a small group of children who are similar in their reading behaviors at a particular point in time. In general, the text is about right for children in the group. You introduce the story to the group, support individuals through brief interactions while they read, and guide them to talk together afterwards about the ideas and words in the text. In this

way, you can use good teaching to refine text selection and help individual readers, through their reading, to move forward in the development of a reading process. A key to supporting reading is the selection of books that are not too easy, yet not too hard, and that offer a variety of challenges to help readers become flexible problem-solvers.

Good readers employ a wide range of word solving strategies, including analysis of letter-sound relationships and word parts, but they must deal with words that are embedded in different kinds of texts that are organized in different ways. A variety of reading experience is essential if they are to go beyond the reading of individual words to interpret language and capture the subtle meanings of many different kinds of texts.

Factors to Consider in Leveling Books

No one aspect or characteristic of text can be used to determine the level of challenge and support a particular book or shorter story presents to readers. In placing a text along a gradient of difficulty, many factors are considered. A sample list is presented below.

Length
- How many words does the book have?
- How many lines of text are on each page?
- How long is the book?

Layout
- What is the size of the print?
- To what degree are there clear spaces between words and between lines?
- How are print and pictures placed to convey meaning?
- Is text laid out with sentences beginning on the left or does it wrap around so that punctuation between sentences must be noticed and used?
- Is print in standard, predictable places on the pages or used in creative ways that require the reader's flexibility?
- What roles do size and shape of

book, binding, and layout play in text interpretation?

Subject
- Are the concepts or topics familiar to most children or less likely to be known?
- How many different ideas, topics, characters, or events are included in the book?

Structure and Organization of the Text
- Are there repeating episodes that help the reader predict what will happen in the story?
- Is there repetitive language in the text that present children with the same words and phrases over and over?
- How are events and information organized (chronologically or other)?
- How are characters thoughts and actions presented (directly or through inference)?
- How many sections or chapters are presented in the book?
- Are there titles, headings, or side headings that readers must learn to use in order to get information?

Illustrations
- To what degree do the pictures provide clear information to help readers understand the text?
- How much picture support is there throughout the text?
- Do illustrations raise questions in readers' minds to help them interpret the text or go beyond it?

Words
- What is the variety of words in the text (for example, cried, exclaimed, or replied for said)?
- Are there many multisyllable words or that are infrequently used in oral language?
- Are there many high frequency words in the text?

Phrases, Sentences, Paragraphs
- Are there complex sentences joined by conjunctions (and or but)?
- Are there complex sentences with embedded clauses?

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- Are sentences organized into paragraphs so that readers notice lead sentences and main ideas?

Punctuation

- What is the variety of punctuation used in the text?
- To what degree must punctuation be used to understand the syntax of the text?
- To what degree must punctuation be used to understand the meaning of the text?

Literary Features

- What must readers understand about characters and how they develop and change?
- What must readers understand about the setting and plot of the text?
- Are there literary devices, such as *flashbacks* or *stories within stories* that add complexity and challenge to the text?
- Does the writer use metaphor or other literary devices to make the text more interesting, and, therefore, more difficult for the readers?

Variety within Levels in the Collection

The first levels of the gradient introduce children to reading print. While reading these beginning levels, children learn to match word by word, reading left to right, and to begin to check on themselves as readers. For example, they learn that there is valuable information in the pictures, that they have to think about the meaning of the story, and that it also helps to use visual aspects of print. At first, they may simply be noticing a few letters or words, but as they gain experience (and with good teaching) they learn and use phonics skills, develop a core of high frequency words

that they can quickly and automatically recognize, work with print in a variety of layouts, and engage with interesting and varied texts.

As the levels increase in difficulty, there is a wider variety of text. Within a given level, several different kinds of text material may be encountered. At first glance, it may seem strange to have picture books, short informational books, and longer chapter books within the same level. But, we have to think of the challenges and supports to the reader. Longer stories and chapter books may be mostly narrative, that present increasingly complex plots and memorable characters. These longer selections provide an opportunity for readers to sustain their efforts over time, remembering details and getting to know characters as they develop.

Informational books present a different challenges. They may have complex ideas and technical language so that, even though they have less text and more pictures than the chapter books, they present a different kind of challenge. Students will need to discuss the ideas and information and perhaps go beyond the text to perform research. These books provide an opportunity to guide children in gaining information from books.

Another type of text that may be used in guided reading is a more advanced and difficult picture book. Literary texts, presented as complex pictures books, provide an opportunity to expand vocabulary, to interpret stories, and to analyze illustrations and their contribution to the expression of meaning. For advanced readers, difficult picture books provide something like the short story—a piece of complex reading that does not take several days to complete but that can be the basis for discussion and analysis.

You may want to include all of the above types of books—and more—in your collection so that your readers have variety and develop flexibility.

Using Leveled Books with Readers

Factors such as those listed above are considered when assigning a *level* to a text. But, the real test is in using the text with young readers. Factors outside a text include, for example:

- The reader's prior knowledge of the topic, including vocabulary and concepts, as well as the reader's knowledge of particular words.
- The reader's prior experience in encountering texts with features like this one.
- The way the text is introduced.
- The supportive interactions between the teacher and children during reading.

As mentioned above, it is important to have variety within each level. When working with groups in classroom reading, a broad base of text is needed. Readers who experience only one kind of book may develop only a narrow range of strategies for processing text.

Other Resources

Readers may want to refer to the following resources for descriptions of guided reading as well as more books for each level:

Fountas, Irene, and Pinnell, G.S. (1996). *Guided Reading: Good First Teaching for All Children.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Fountas, Irene, and Pinnell, G.S. (1999). *Matching Books to Readers: A Book List for Guided Reading, K-3.*

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