

# WHO'S DOING THE WORK?

Jan Burkins  
and Kim Yaris



HOW  
TO  
SAY  
LESS  
SO  
READERS  
CAN  
DO  
MORE

Foreword by  
Joan Moser  
of *"The 2 Sisters"*

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## Chapter 1

# Reading Process: Beginning with the End in Mind

### *Holy Bagumba! A Cautionary Tale*

**O**nce upon a time, there was a third-grade girl, Daisy, who loved to read. She read all the time. While she liked to read about horses and outer space, she especially loved to read stories. She had read every single Magic Tree House, Junie B. Jones, and Amber Brown book ever written. Recently, she had been into reading books about animals and had read *Shiloh* and *Charlotte's Web*. One day, as she browsed through books at the school library, she found a book with a beautiful cover showing a girl wearing glasses holding a comic book. When she saw it, she thought, "That girl looks like me!" She ran her fingers over the letters scrawled grandly across the cover and—after chunking Ulysses into parts—read the title aloud: *Flora and Ulysses*. It was then that she noticed a squirrel tucked up in the corner, which made her wonder if the small animal was *Flora* or *Ulysses* and compelled her to read the back cover. As her eyes moved over the words describing a story about a squirrel who gets run over by a vacuum cleaner, bizarrely causing him to develop superpowers, she opened the book and began to read. Getting stuck for a few seconds on the word *bagumba*, she managed to figure it out and read on to understand that this was a book she needed to read.

Before she knew it, Daisy heard the librarian shouting a last call to check out books. She hurried to have her book scanned and joined the rest of the children lined up at the door to return to class. Ms. Wright, her teacher, walked up and down the line surveying the children's choices. Every now and then she'd murmur things like, "Oh! Great author!" and "You'll love this one." By the time Ms. Wright reached her, Daisy was nearly bursting with excitement. She couldn't wait to tell Ms. Wright how

*she loved what she had read from her book so far. She longed to hear her teacher say what a great choice Daisy had made selecting a book with a medal on the cover.*

*However, when Ms. Wright glanced at the book in Daisy's hand, she looked at Daisy and said, "Oh, sweetheart, you're going to need to return this book."*

*Return this book?! Did she hear correctly? Confused, Daisy looked at her teacher, who kneeled beside her, looked regretfully into her eyes, and said, "You're a level R. This book is much harder than that; it's a level U. Run and give this back. You can choose something from the R bin when we get back to the classroom."*

*Crestfallen, Daisy handed the book back to the librarian. In her head, she heard Flora's words—the words she had just worked so hard to figure out: "Holy Bagumba." As she turned to line up empty-handed, she muttered to herself, "What am I going to read now?"*

*Back in the classroom, Daisy dragged herself to the R bin and, without even looking, grabbed the book that was on top. She returned to her seat and muttered the title: Captain Underpants and the Attack of the Talking Toilets. Grudgingly, she began to read . . .*

We wish schools were filled with students like Daisy. Think about all of the things she does as an independent reader and learner!

- She chooses to read books that require her to work hard.
- She reads for meaning, even when a book is difficult for her.
- She stops to work on words when she has trouble decoding them.
- She chunks long, unknown words into more manageable parts.
- After figuring out an unknown word, she rereads to make sense.
- She is an avid reader.
- She is selective about what she reads and has particular tastes in books and authors.
- She likes to read books with characters that remind her of herself.
- She knows how to preview the book by looking at the cover and reading a bit.
- She knows that medals on book jackets mean that other people who read the book thought it was very good.
- She is very intentional in her book selection.

- Once she has chosen a book, she gets very excited about it.
- When she is excited about a book, she looks forward to telling her teacher about it.
- She sees herself as a reader.

Daisy's skill, interest, and knowledge of books and of herself as a reader all epitomize our goals for students and could translate into her enjoying an agentive identity as a reader across her lifetime. Daisy's current independence, interest, and willingness to work hard are the end that we have in mind—the end of the gradual release of responsibility, that is—after we have engaged students in read-aloud, shared reading, and guided reading instruction.

However, while Daisy's reading enthusiasm and proficiency are our goal for all readers, too often we see, hear about, and read about work in read-aloud, shared reading, and guided reading that does not mirror the work we see Daisy doing. Rather than teach children to preview texts, we take on the introductions. Rather than teach them to wonder and notice, we ask them text-dependent questions. Rather than allow students to truly choose books for themselves, we retain control, confining them to narrow reading-level parameters and placing excessive demands for book logs and written reflection. We are not saying that we should never introduce a text, ask text-dependent questions, give students guidelines for selecting texts during independent reading, or assign reading logs. We are saying, however, that it seems that in many classrooms these practices have reached an extreme and are increasingly getting in the way of student independence.

Accompanying these instructional choices are subtle and obvious messages to students. Think about what Ms. Wright's reaction to Daisy's book selection communicates to Daisy:

- I think of you as a reader almost exclusively in terms of your reading level.
- I trust reading levels absolutely and generally don't consider the nuances of your reading process, the text, or your motivation to read.
- Although you think you know how to select a book for yourself, you really don't.
- You are not as good at selecting books for yourself as the others standing in line.

- The confidence you have in yourself is misguided.
- Don't get excited about the books you want to read until you check with me.
- I'm in charge of your "independent" reading.

Unfortunately, Daisy's well-meaning teacher is shortsighted and doesn't recognize the beauty in Daisy's independent reading choice. Though she cares about Daisy and does not mean to thwart her sense of agency, Ms. Wright is blinded by levels and Daisy's upward movement through them. Consequently, Ms. Wright's instruction in read-aloud, shared reading, guided reading, and independent reading hinges too much on levels, which, too often, actually stand in the way of learning.

## What Do Reading Levels Mean, Anyway?

Levels have become ubiquitous in schools and are almost universally used to describe students' reading achievement. Not only are students directed to select books from lettered bins or Lexile bands, but in many school districts, teachers receive charts that outline where on a text-level continuum children should be reading at quarterly benchmarks throughout each grade. These charts are intended to help teachers know whether children's reading growth is "on track."

So, for example, if it is the end of the school year and Patrick, a first grader, is reading from level J books, his teacher can rest assured that he is exactly where he needs to be. His classmate Kendra, who is exceeding the standard at level L, is also of little concern. Marcos, however, who is finishing the year reading "below grade level" at level H, is a source of great angst for his teachers, his parents, and school administrators.

But what do leveling systems *really* reveal about children as readers? What do we know about how Patrick, Kendra, and Marcos actually interact with text? Reading levels and their accompanying labels can provide *some* information about a student's reading achievement relative to his or her peers, but there is a pervasive sense in education that they communicate something significant about children as readers. We frequently see teachers with large binders full of data and reports on students and their reading levels. Too often, however, when we listen to the same students read independently and talk with them about what they are reading, we find that far too many of them are reading books that don't fit them, despite the binders full of reports.

Knowing that Patrick, Kendra, and Marcos hit a testing ceiling at levels J, L, and G respectively without knowing what each of these readers actually *does* when he or she interacts with text does little to help us know how to support their reading growth and development. Although many systems for determining students' reading levels include opportunities to look closely at how students read—by analyzing patterns of miscues and ratios for self-correction, for example—it remains far too easy to overlook these rich sources of formative data when assessing students. Administrative pressure on teachers, accountability demands, students' familiarity with test materials, marginal assessment resources, and time limitations all contribute to students frequently being placed in levels that do not fit them and where they are likely to plateau, grow frustrated, and lose their sense of agency.

As we have been observing this pervasive pattern of making instructional decisions largely based on levels, we have also noticed a simultaneous and growing countertrend spurred by thinkers and writers—including ourselves—to build student agency, to think deeply about student reading processes, to loosen the grip of leveled-text thinking, and to strengthen the connections among instructional contexts across the gradual release of responsibility. Thought leaders such as Dorothy Barnhouse, Vicki Vinton, Debbie Miller, Regie Routman, Gail Boushey, Joan Moser, Chris Lehman, Stephanie Harvey, Richard Allington, Peter Johnston, Mary Howard, Kathy Collins, Kylene Beers, and even Fountas and Pinnell are calling for less teacher talk, fewer contrived instructional experiences, and more student engagement and empowerment as readers. Fountas and Pinnell explain, “We must go beyond the letter and focus on the process.” They further implore us to “change what you’re noticing and teaching to support self-monitoring, self-regulating systems” (2015).

In contrast to the narrow thinking that forced Daisy to put down *Flora and Ulysses* (DiCamillo 2013) and pick up *Captain Underpants and the Attack of the Talking Toilets* (Pilkey 1999) or the competitive pressure felt by Patrick, Kendra, and Marcos's teacher, next generation thinking considers *how* students read as much as *where* in the text gradient they read.

## Teaching That Focuses on Students' Reading Processes

One of the reasons that the language of levels is so pervasive is that it is compact. Letters, Lexiles, and other reading-level metrics feel objective. They seem to take



the complexity of student reading and magically represent it with a single metric. In contrast, reading processes, particularly as they are analyzed in benchmarks and running records, are messy and don't lend themselves to quick discussions in the hallway or with parents. In fact, whole books have been written about various theoretical models of how children read. But somewhere between the single metric of reading levels and entire textbooks on how students process texts, there lies an accessible vocabulary that can enable conversations about reading process without bogging us down in long descriptions of how—and debates about whether—children are using print, meaning, and structure.

## An Enabling Vocabulary Around Reading Processes

As she studied children learning to read, Marie Clay identified three sources of information that readers use to construct meaning: (1) the context, including the pictures, (2) the print, and (3) the syntax or language structure (1979, 1991). Building on this work, Burkins and Croft combine meaning with context and syntax and explain in practical terms, “Basically, when one thinks of the pragmatics of reading instruction, there are two ‘biggies’: Students have to read the words *and* understand them” (2010, 3). In next generation reading instruction across read-aloud, shared reading, small group reading, and independent reading, our conversations about reading level should rest on how students handle these two “biggies.” Consider the following questions about how individual students use print and meaning to understand text:

- Do students monitor their accuracy and their comprehension as they read?
- How efficiently do students cross-check and self-correct?
- How deeply do students comprehend?
- What do the students do when they get to words they don't know how to decode?
- What do students do when they get to a word they don't understand?
- How do students navigate the nuances of text features at different levels?

Ultimately, the goal is for readers to smoothly and automatically integrate print and meaning in ways that allow them to appreciate text for both the information it provides and the response it evokes. When we are skilled at observing and under-



standing students' reading processes, we become better able to support students' reading growth and development through text selection, direct instruction, conferring, and so on.

## How Do We Read?

To further your understanding of children's reading processes, we have set up a series of three texts that will place specific limitations on *your* reading process. While contrived, these exercises will offer you insight into how reading works.

### *Efficient Reading*

The following passage has a few words missing. As you read it, note what you do to figure out the missing words.

"I'm H\_\_\_\_\_ Granger, by the way, who are you?"

She said this all very fast.

Harry looked at Ron, and was relieved by his stunned face that he hadn't learned all of the course b\_\_\_\_\_ by heart either.

"I'm Ron Weasley," Ron mut\_\_\_\_\_.

"Harry Potter," said Harry.

"Are you really?" said H\_\_\_\_\_. (Rowling 1997, 106)

What did you notice about your reading process as you read the passage above? As a proficient reader, you engaged a host of reading strategies. Read the list below and see which descriptions fit the way you approached reading and understanding the text excerpt:

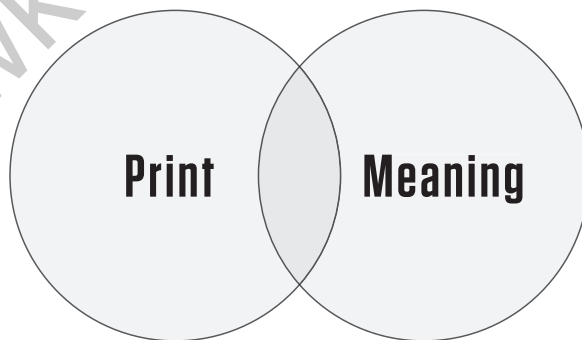
- Looked at the first letter of the missing word, noticing both the letter and whether it is upper or lower case (print strategy)
- Skipped the unknown word to read on and gather information (integrated strategy)
- Eliminated words that don't start with the identified letter (print strategy)
- Looked at the length of the word, as indicated by the number of dashes (print strategy)
- Eliminated words that are too long or too short (print strategy)
- Looked to see if there were other letters available that you knew (print strategy)

- Eliminated words that do not sound right (meaning strategy)
- Read complete sentences to understand the context (meaning strategy)
- Activated background knowledge (meaning strategy)
- Narrowed background knowledge to information related to the Harry Potter books (meaning strategy)
- Thought of words that would make sense *and* begin with the correct letter *and* sound right (integrated strategy)
- Tried possible words out in the blanks and reread to check them (integrated strategy)
- Reread the text to think about any deeper meanings or subtleties you may have missed (integrated strategy)

Notice how many strategies you used for just a couple of sentences! Figuring out the missing words required you to utilize both print *and* meaning and, ultimately, to integrate the two. If you began searching for an “H” word to insert in the first blank, you looked to the meaning to support your efforts to figure out the unknown word. If you began by thinking about a word that would make sense, you checked your hunches against the available print information to make a reasonable guess.

Either way, your flexibility in using the print to support the meaning or vice versa allowed you quickly and easily to figure out the tricky parts and continue reading, which is a hallmark of a smoothly operating, integrated reading process. In terms of representing your reading process, the Venn diagram in Figure 1.1 illustrates your comparable skill with print and meaning. The overlap between the two circles represents your integration of strategies.

Figure 1.1



An Efficient Reading Process