

# Contents

<i>Foreword by Colby Sharp</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Chapter 1</i> <b>Teaching Reading in the Upper Primary Classroom</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Part 1</b> <b>Making the Most of Time and Space</b>	<b>13</b>
<i>Chapter 2</i> <b>Being Intentional About Classroom Library Design</b>	<b>15</b>
<i>Chapter 3</i> <b>Preparing for Thoughtful Instruction Before Our Students Enter the Classroom</b>	<b>33</b>
<i>Chapter 4</i> <b>Slowing Down During the First Six Weeks</b>	<b>55</b>
<i>Chapter 5</i> <b>Grouping Beyond Levels</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>Part 2</b> <b>Threads of Learning Throughout the Year</b>	<b>101</b>
<i>Chapter 6</i> <b>Read Aloud to Foster Writing and Conversations That Grow Thinking</b>	<b>103</b>
<i>Chapter 7</i> <b>Intentional Reading Choices Throughout the Year</b>	<b>125</b>
<i>Chapter 8</i> <b>Text Complexity: Scaffolding for Reading Fiction</b>	<b>145</b>
<i>Chapter 9</i> <b>Text Complexity: Scaffolding for</b>	

<b>Reading Nonfiction</b>	<b>161</b>
<i>Chapter 10 The Role of Close Reading in Years 3–6</i>	<b>183</b>
<i>Epilogue</i>	197
<i>Appendix</i>	201
<i>References</i>	215
<i>Index</i>	229



Hawker Brownlow Education

## Chapter

# 1

# Teaching Reading in the Upper Primary Classroom

I've known how to read for almost four years now.  
- Courtney

Early in the school year, we asked Year 4 students to think about their growth as readers and to write about their reading lives. We smiled as we read Courtney's words, but they started us thinking. Courtney wrote, "I've known how to read for almost four years now." Courtney was proud of how far she had come as a reader. In those four years, she had moved from being a non-reader to being a very good reader of many texts. But we know that four years is only the beginning of her life as a reader. Courtney's comment reminds us that students in the upper primary year levels have not been reading for very long. We can't possibly expect them to have learned all that they need to know about understanding complex texts during the first few years of their reading life. Over time, she will learn much more about herself as a reader, her preferences, her strategies for making sense of the text and the tools she will use along the way. We need to consider the many ways we can help students continue to establish themselves as skilled, independent, lifelong readers.

Teachers in the upper primary year levels face realistic fears about teaching reading. First of all, many of us received relatively little training in how to teach reading. We might not feel as capable and confident as primary teachers in this area. Much of the public still believes that in Years F-2 we teach children how to read and in Years 3-6 our students read to learn. The implication is that at the upper primary year levels, we don't need to spend time teaching children how to read. People assume that because stu-

dents in these year levels already know how to read, they should be focused on learning content.

Laura Robb (2002), in an article for *Scholastic Instructor*, questions our past practices and encourages us to rethink the teaching of reading in the upper primary year levels. “For years,” she writes, “many elementary and middle school teachers have shaped their teaching practices around the deeply rooted myth of ‘Learning to Read and Reading to Learn’ . . . Although the myth and the practices associated with it do not by any means tell the entire reading story, they have influenced reading instruction in many classrooms for years. The problem? The myth and its practices aren’t working. What many researchers have now shown is that for all children, learning to read and reading to learn should be happening simultaneously and continuously, from preschool through middle school—and perhaps beyond” (23).

We believed this in 2002, and we believe it even more now. The educational landscape has changed since we wrote the first edition of *Still Learning to Read*. Common Core State Standards were adopted in many states across the US, and the standards seemed to change what was expected for all of our readers. Testing and other mandates have become a bigger part of our world, and some states have even implemented retention laws requiring students to read at level by Year 3 or be retained.

Teachers and students are being asked to meet new requirements and facing more pressures than ever. Digital tools have become a staple in our reading workshops. Students are using digital tools to determine what they read and to respond to reading in a variety of digital formats. Nonfiction reading has become more prevalent in our teaching and learning, and there has been a big push for close reading in the primary year levels. Classroom libraries are expanded to include a broad selection of nonfiction reading materials as well as digital texts. Teachers are intentional about helping students use close reading strategies to become more competent as readers.

Another big change has been the way the world defines what it means to be literate. As technology has entered our world, the definition of literacy has expanded. In 2013, the National Council of Teachers of English published their definition of “21st Century Literacies”:

*Literacy has always been a collection of cultural and communicative practices shared among members of particular groups. As society and technology change, so does literacy. Because technology has increased the intensity and complexity of literate environments, the 21st century demands that a literate person possess a wide range of abilities and competencies, many literacies. These literacies are multiple, dynamic, and malleable. As in the past, they are inextricably linked with particular histories, life possibilities, and social trajectories of individuals and groups. Active, successful participants in this 21st century global society must be able to*

- *Develop proficiency and fluency with the tools of technology;*
- *Build intentional cross-cultural connections and relationships with others so to pose and solve problems collaboratively and strengthen independent thought;*
- *Design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes;*
- *Manage, analyze, and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information;*
- *Create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multimedia texts;*
- *Attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments.*

As we face these recent changes to our educational landscape, we need to remember how important it is to hold on to what we know is best for our students. Strong, thoughtful instruction with children in mind will always encourage the most lasting results. We know that our older readers still have much to learn about reading. It makes sense that students in Years 3–6 need more instruction. The texts, both traditional and digital, that they are reading are becoming much more complex and sophisticated. They are learning to use new tools and strategies to make sense of what they read and become more thoughtful, competent readers. As readers, they will be asked to think through complex themes, analyse characters and respond at higher levels. And we want more for them than just becoming skilled readers.

Students in Years 3–6 begin to build identities as readers and develop into lifelong readers. For these students to grow as readers, they need more instruction. We can't assume that the skills our students learned in Years F–2 will carry them through their lives as readers. They are ready for new skills and more independence. We agree with Donalyn Miller when she says, "You see, my students are not just strong, capable readers, they love books and reading. Building lifelong readers has to start here. Anyone who calls herself or himself a reader can tell you that it starts with encountering great books, heartfelt recommendations, and a community of readers who share this passion. I am convinced that if we show students how to embrace reading as a lifelong pursuit and not just a collection of skills for school performance, we will be doing what I believe we have been charged to do: create readers" (2009, 4).

As teachers of readers in the upper primary year levels, we have learned that students can really benefit from our teaching skills and strategies they can use as they read independently. We also realise that students do not progress at the same rate; therefore, we have students who are still at the early and transitional stages of reading in our upper primary classrooms. Rather than continuing to rely on adults to model and guide them through the reading process, as they have done in earlier year levels, they are now ready to move to more complex texts, learn new strategies, make intentional decisions

about their reading, problem solve, develop reading preferences and become more independent.

## Meeting New Challenges in Reading

The children who enter our classrooms have had support and instruction that built a foundation for their early reading experiences. They are accustomed to reading books that clearly build success for the reader from the first page on. Here, for example, is the start of *Junie B. Jones and the Stupid Smelly Bus*, a book for early readers, by Barbara Park.

*My name is June B. Jones. The B stands for Beatrice. Except I don't like Beatrice. I just like B. and that's all.*

*I'm almost six years old.*

*Almost six is when you get to go to kindergarten. Kindergarten is where you go to meet new friends and not watch T.V.*

*My kindergarten is the afternoon kind.*

*Today was my first day of school. I'd been to my room before, though. Last week, Mother took me there to meet my teacher. (1992, 1)*

It's easy for early readers to understand what they read because the framework for the story is clearly presented on the first page or two. But they meet new challenges in reading as they enter the upper primary year levels. The stories they read unfold more slowly, and readers need persistence and have to be comfortable with some ambiguity until the pieces of the story fit together. New complexities arise in nonfiction as well, as students begin to understand the formats and features of the texts they read.

Several years ago, we worked with a small group of Year 6 students. They were having trouble choosing books and sustaining their reading over time. They were quitting many of the books they started. We watched them, and we realised that they usually chose books based on the cover illustration and the title. They didn't seem to know how else to preview a book for selection. So we led them through a preview of *Flying Solo* by Ralph Fletcher. This book is always a favourite with students in the upper primary year levels: it's about what Year 6 students do on a day when the substitute teacher doesn't show up!

We asked the children to look at the title and illustration on the cover. Then we had them look at the blurb on the back of the book, the review excerpts they found there and the first page of the story. They looked at each of these features one at a time and talked with us about what they learned from each. The students then began to piece together what they knew about the story before they began to read the book. After drawing their attention to each feature, we asked the children whether this looked like a book that

would be interesting to them. After taking a look at the cover, all of the children initially decided they were eager to read the book. They remained eager to read the book after reading the blurb about the story. They were even more eager to read the book after having read the reviews. At this point, we expected that these students would be fighting over the few copies of *Flying Solo* that we had in the classroom.

But then the students read the first page with us. We were shocked. The entire group of children changed their minds and no longer seemed interested in reading *Flying Solo*. The whole group immediately shut down and was ready to abandon the book.

What had happened? We knew that the text wasn't too difficult and that the children had a good idea of what would happen in the story from the previewing we had done. We talked for a while about what had changed their minds. After considerable discussion, we realised that the children had expected the substitute to be a no-show on the very first page of the story. When that didn't happen, they lost confidence, knowing that they would have to get past the "set-up" to get to the "real story". It wasn't until page 26 when the students in *Flying Solo* realised they would be without a teacher for the day. These Year 6 students didn't have the skills and stamina necessary to work through those first pages of a new story on their own. Although the actual text level wasn't too hard for them, the nature of the first few chapters made the book difficult.

For these readers, twenty-six pages was a *lot* of reading – far too much to "get through" before the story became exciting to them. They wanted to read the book, but they didn't have the skills to read to page 26 on their own, to build a story and get to know characters slowly over time. A few students asked if they could just start reading on page 26. Other students begged us to read the first twenty-five pages aloud to them. Because some of the students had not had many successful experiences with reading, they didn't have enough trust in books to know that what they read on the first twenty-five pages would be critical throughout the story. These children were reading the Junie B. Jones books just a few years earlier. Books like the ones in the Junie B. Jones series set up the entire story on the first page. Students who are accustomed to reading books that set up the story on the first page or have had a teacher introduce every book for them are confused and frustrated when the first page of a book does not do that. They need instruction to learn to read stories that unfold slowly and provide the background for the rest of the book.

When we think about our own reading, we recall that sometimes stories start out differently from what we'd expected; yet these are often some of the best books we've read. As is the case with *Flying Solo*, we need to get to know the characters and become familiar with other aspects of the story first. We know that the decisions the author has made about the beginning of the story are deliberate. At the beginning of a book, readers begin to piece

together information that will help them understand the rest of the story. As experienced readers, we know that there will be parts of a book that don't move as quickly as others. But we know how to get engaged in a book we have chosen and how to be persistent. We have also learned that sometimes parts that seem unimportant or slow moving can be critical to the story. We love the beginning of books. We love to figure out how the pieces will fit together and where the author is going with the story. From the start, we come up with questions, predictions and inferences, and we become fascinated as the story unfolds. Our students don't necessarily have the experience to know how to do these things. We need to support them in their reading until they can sustain interest and understanding on their own.

There are several things we could have done to support the Year 6 readers in our earlier example. At first, we thought that maybe *Flying Solo* wasn't the right choice for them, but because they were truly interested in the book, we came to realise that they just needed a bit of support. Their suggestions to skip the first twenty-five pages or that we read the first twenty-five pages to them helped us see that their enthusiasm for the book was still strong. We knew that if we could help these students get to page 26, they would probably be committed to reading the rest of the book. We also knew that experiencing a powerful book that unfolds slowly could help them grow as

readers and help them become more independent. Instead of having them choose another book, we had to find a way to support these students through those first pages *and* give them skills that would help them with similar books that they would read in the future. We didn't want to help them read just this book. After all, imagine how many great books our students would miss if they expected to be hooked on the first page of every one.

The first step in helping our students get through the beginning pages of many stories is to help them realise that all readers face this challenge. We sometimes ask students to interview adult family members and friends about books that took them several pages to get into. Then we have the children share what they have learned. Knowing that adult readers go through the same challenges in their reading often helps our students understand the importance of overcoming them.

We also have students find books that they have read in the past – picture books and novels, books read independently, and books that were read aloud to them. We ask them to skim the books to see if they can remember when and where they became “hooked” on an individual book. Was it on the first page? Was it

**Class Chart Brainstormed by Year 4 Students**

When do you know you are hooked on a book?

- Time goes really fast.
- Can't stop reading.
- Can't put the book down.
- Relaxed – you have a good feeling.
- You are doing a lot of thinking without knowing it.
- You *have* to know what happens next.
- You can see and feel everything that's going on – like you're there.
- You want to buy the book.
- It gets exciting.
- You are trying to figure something out.
- You want to read it again.
- You keep asking yourself questions.

How do you read differently when you are not hooked?  
(Can be at the beginning of the book or in the middle of the book.)

- Hope for exciting times/hope that it gets better.
- Work hard to pay attention so you don't think of anything else.
- More predicting – makes me want to keep reading.
- Motivate yourself.
- Read it like it's a hard book (because it is not interesting).
- Remind yourself that a good part is probably coming.
- Trust other people who have read it.

later? Then we ask the group what they could do to get through the beginning part of the new book.

During a similar discussion in a Year 4 class, Chris reminded us that readers can become unhooked at different times in the book. He and his classmates remembered several places where a book they were reading moved a bit more slowly once they were already hooked. We talked as a class about how and why we'd keep reading when we aren't hooked, and wrote down our ideas. We then posted our list in the room as a reference for future reading.

As adults, we can trust that a book will be worth the energy it takes to read through confusing or less engaging sections because of our past experiences with books. We were talking with Cris Tovani about a book we are planning to read, *The Poisonwood Bible*, by Barbara Kingsolver. The book had been recommended highly by friends whose opinions we trust. We heard that it is a great book "if you can get through the first seventy-five pages." We have all read books that started slowly but hooked us once we got to a certain point in the story. We know there is this magical moment when readers become so engaged that they no longer think of abandoning the book. We found that happened as we read *The Poisonwood Bible*.

For children who have only recently started to read novels or who are encountering a challenging nonfiction genre for the first time, this need for perseverance is difficult to explain. We need to think about ways to teach our students how to get through slow or confusing parts of a book. When we talk to adults about books like *The Poisonwood Bible*, many will say things like, "I am going to read that one when I have a long stretch of time for reading, so I can get into it." As adult readers, we know that with a book like *The Poisonwood Bible*, we won't ever get through those first seventy-five pages if we set aside only ten to fifteen minutes to read each day. We might be able to get through a Danielle Steele book with fifteen minutes each day, but books like *The Poisonwood Bible* require a different approach.

## Supporting Older Readers

When we first started working with older readers, we were tempted to support them in the same ways we supported younger students years ago when we both taught Year 1. As primary teachers we selected the children's books, introduced them to the books before reading, and guided them throughout the reading of the text. We knew the importance of matching kids with

### Books That Offer Quick Engagement

When we know that certain students have difficulty with books that do not hook them on the first page or two, we need to have books available for them that do get them involved quickly until they have developed strategies for reading books that develop more slowly. We don't want our developing readers to be challenged with every book. They need to know that they can still pick up and enjoy a book that is not so difficult to begin. Here are some of our favourites that seem to get readers hooked from the very start:

*The One and Only Ivan* by Katherine Applegate  
*The Terrible Two* by Mac Barnett and Jory John  
*The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* by Christopher Paul Curtis  
*Fig Pudding* by Ralph Fletcher  
*Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key* by Jack Gantos  
*Capture the Flag* by Kate Messner  
*The Fantastic Secret of Owen Jester* by Barbara O'Connor  
*Wonder* by R. J. Palacio  
*Mick Harte Was Here* by Barbara Park  
A Series of Unfortunate Events series by Lemony Snicket  
*Wringer* by Jerry Spinelli

books, introducing each book and guiding them at the early stages of learning how to read. Because we provided constant support, our students didn't always learn how to help themselves. They continued to be dependent on us well past the early stages of reading.

We worry when we see scripted book introductions that are so detailed, they take all the thinking out of reading. Although an introduction provides a scaffold for the book students are currently reading, it doesn't give them what they need to start a book on their own. And we worry when teachers assess to see if students use the scripted introduction in their understanding of the book. By providing too much information before children read a book, we deprive them of opportunities to discover text elements as they unfold and to develop the skills they will need to read independently. With too much assistance, students come to think that good readers never get stuck and never get confused. They never know the joy of putting the pieces of a story together. Instead, they expect someone else (author or teacher) to do it for them. They begin to think that if they do get stuck or confused, it is up to a teacher or an adult to help them. We need to teach students the skills to use when they start a new book, get stuck or don't have sufficient background knowledge. Although upper-primary-level students can read the words, they may not be able to understand the texts they are reading.

In her book *I Read It, but I Don't Get It*, Cris Tovani (2000) cautions us about our students who are "word callers". She writes, "Word callers have mastered decoding and, as a bonus, also choose to read. However, they don't understand that reading involves thinking. They go through the motions of reading but assume all they have to do is pronounce words. When they don't understand or remember what they have read, they quit. Word callers are fairly good students but often don't do well with tasks that require them to use the words they read to think on their own. These readers feel powerless because the only strategy they have for gaining meaning is sounding out words" (15).

As we began to work with older readers, we realised that children are ready to develop more sophisticated strategies on their own, but they need continuous instruction and support to become successful. We know that instead of sending children to the blue basket to find a book at their level, we can help them think about their own reading, learn about authors, understand their own strengths and challenges, and interact within a larger community of readers. Instead of introducing a new book to a child ourselves, we can teach them to preview the book, read reviews and talk to friends before starting it.

## Text Complexity and Close Reading

*Rigor is not an attribute of a text but rather a characteristic of our behavior with that text.*

—Kylene Beers and Bob Probst