Understanding Text Complexity in Books for New Readers

In the previous chapter, I compared the story of the *Seven Blind Mice* and their attempts to identify the creature they were exploring to the challenge of understanding how features of texts, such as words, sentences, and paragraphs, fit together to create a whole text. Similarly, I think of the process of describing how the many components of texts work together to create a work of literature as “mapping the elephant,” because explaining text complexity and creating a map of an elephant present similar challenges. Where do you begin? How much detail do you include? What are the defining characteristics of the beast? And, when you have finished, will anyone else recognize what you have just described? Furthermore, is the map a useful one? A map, after all, is a two-dimensional artifact showing surface features; a map of an elephant would not be helpful for understanding the mammal’s physiology, social behavior, and dietary needs.

Texts are no simpler to describe. Do you begin with the words, size of the print, or sentence lengths? What about the illustrations or the physical layout of a book? If it is a work of fiction, what is its genre? Are the characters well-developed or unchanging? Does the plot emerge in a linear fashion, or are there twists and turns to confuse the reader? If the purpose of the book is to communicate factual information, does it present a richly detailed close-up of a subject, or does it provide a broader, less detailed perspective? Most importantly, how can such descriptions or maps of books assist teachers and librarians in supporting their children’s development as readers? What makes a book comprehensible and enjoyable for some readers and not others?

Whether talking about elephants or texts, you can quickly see that the possibilities for debate are endless. No wonder many of us have looked to
formulas or levels of one kind or another to help us choose the right book for each reader—they seem so simple, so clear, and so helpful. Many times I have used such indicators as guides in initially selecting books, and I do consider them useful in a limited way. While any book can be assigned a level indicating its approximate position along a text gradient, that alone is not sufficient information for making choices about which books to purchase or recommend for readers, let alone for developing a meaningful literature program for children.

**Readable Texts/Predictable Texts**

When I began my dissertation research in the mid 1980s, most children received their first reading instruction from basal readers with controlled vocabularies and short sentence lengths. Not only were most of these texts leveled by readability formulas; some publishers inappropriately used readability formulas to produce textbooks to match a specified grade level. Ironically, most of these texts were difficult for children to read because they were written in a style that did not reflect children’s natural spoken language nor the literary language found in picture books. Researchers who compared children’s readings of basal reader stories with children’s readings of picture books with rich, interesting language and repeated, predictable language patterns, found that the students were able to read and comprehend the literature stories with greater success, even though the picture books had higher readability levels than the basal stories (Rhodes 1979; Gourley 1984; Bussis et al. 1985).

My own interest in text complexity grew out of my experiences in Reading Recovery, because, at the time, the current research in readable texts or predictable texts was not adequate for understanding what made books easy or difficult for Reading Recovery students. The literature books used in the predictability studies were much too difficult for beginning Reading Recovery students to read. Historically, the research in readability cast a wide net, looking at an array of factors that influence text difficulty, including vocabulary, sentences, subject matter, ideas, concepts, text organization, abstractness, appeal, format, and illustrations. Two factors, however, vocabulary and sentence length, are the foundations of most readability formulas because research has shown them to be most closely associated with comprehensibility of texts (Chall and Dale 1995). Readability formulas, however, are inadequate for evaluating difficulty of the easy texts written for children who are just learning how to read. For example, according to the Dale-Chall readability formula, *Frog and Toad Together* by Arnold Lobel has a readability level of 1, the lowest level on that scale, indicating an easy text (Chall and Dale, 145). Teach-
ers and librarians who work with beginning readers know that a child capable of reading the *Frog and Toad* books independently is well beyond needing beginning reading instruction.

The concept of predictability is a useful one to consider when selecting books for beginning readers because it encourages teachers to think about texts in relation to the knowledge their students bring to the reading. Predictability, however, should not be confused with endless repetition. Keep in mind that our ability to predict helps us to make sense of the world in an efficient manner, whether we are driving across town, eating a meal at our favorite restaurant, or looking for the latest bestseller at the local library. We rely on the organization and routines of traffic, restaurants, and libraries to help us take care of our needs as smoothly as possible. Furthermore, the knowledge and experience we accumulate over time in familiar environments provides a framework for helping us to make sense of new places and situations.

With respect to readers, predictability needs to be thought of as a relationship between readers and texts that changes over time as readers become more proficient. A text can be predictable for a reader who is just discovering how to read a short sentence from left to right and match each spoken word to a printed word. A text can also be predictable for an experienced reader, who knows what to expect, including the unexpected when reading a mystery, for example. Consequently, it is important to qualify discussions of predictability by pointing out which characteristics of a particular text are predictable and understand how those characteristics support a particular reader at a particular time in their development. A book like Bill Martin’s and Eric Carle’s *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* has a lively, repetitive text with bright, bold illustrations and has inspired countless children to become readers, and it has long been a favorite read aloud book for parents, teachers, and children. However, the long sentences and small print make it too challenging for independent reading for a child who only knows a few words in print.

Texts that do not have repetitive sentence patterns can also be predictable, but in different ways from books like *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* The plot of the story *Titch* by Pat Hutchins is predictable to readers because all through the book, Titch, the smallest child, has the smallest toy, while Mary, his older sister, has the medium-sized toy, and Pete, the oldest, has the largest toy. Even the ending, in which Titch’s small seeds grow larger than anything his siblings have, is predictable to experienced readers who are familiar with stories in which the youngest, smallest character triumphs over the oldest, strongest characters. Another predictable element of this story is the cycle of events happening in groups of three, just as they do in many tales of European origin, such as *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* (Galdone 1979; Stevens 1990).
Furthermore, once children have read *Titch* and know about his relation to Mary and Pete, they can make useful predictions about the direction of the plots in *You’ll Soon Grow Into Them, Titch* and *Tidy Titch.*

A book like *Whose Mouse Are You?* by Robert Kraus, illustrated by Jose Aruego, is predictable because it is written in a question/answer format, so readers know that a question (“Whose mouse are you?”) is always followed by an answer (“Nobody’s mouse.”). Merle Peek’s picture book version of *Mary Wore Her Red Dress, Henry Wore His Green Sneakers* is predictable in two ways. First, readers know that each new page will feature a new character wearing a colorful item of clothing. Second, they learn the refrain “all day long,” and know that each page will end with those words.

Longer books have predictable elements as well. The story of *Amelia Bedelia,* written by Peggy Parish and illustrated by Fritz Siebel, develops around the comical way in which Amelia Bedelia misinterprets instructions that are given to her. On her first day of work as the maid at the Rogers’ house, she follows her list of written instructions in a most unusual way. For example, when she reads “Dust the furniture,” she thinks it a silly thing to do because “at my house we undust the furniture.” She solves the problem by finding a box of dusting powder in the bathroom and shaking it over the furniture. Thus, what makes this story predictable is that as Amelia Bedelia reads through the list, she puts her own unique twist on the meaning of the instructions and the actions she must take to complete her jobs. Furthermore, the plot of each of the more than ten books about Amelia Bedelia develops around her “mix-ups,” so her fans begin reading with useful predictions about the kind of language that will follow.

**Research in Emergent Literacy**

Research in readability and predictability influenced how I thought about what makes texts easy or difficult, but it was not adequate for describing the small changes between levels of texts used in Reading Recovery. Research in emergent literacy led me to consider how the life experiences of children prior to entering school might be related to the kinds of texts that supported them as beginning readers. Few teachers believe that children start school knowing nothing, yet it took pioneering work on the part of many researchers to lead the teaching profession to a better understanding of how children’s preschool experiences with language support early school learning. Yetta Goodman (1996) calls these the “roots of literacy,” and I strongly recommend her article of the same name for a more thorough discussion of these concepts. *Literacy Before Schooling* (1982) is a report of Emilia Ferreiro and Ana Teberosky’s sem-
inal work in how children construct their own hypotheses about print. Another excellent source of information is *Emerging Literacy: Young Children Learn to Read and Write* (1989), edited by Dorothy Strickland and Lesley Mandel Morrow. The articles in this book were written to assist and support classroom teachers, but readers who are interested in the academic roots of the underlying research will find abundant references to this research.

I will briefly describe some of the major themes of the work on emergent literacy, because they had a profound impact on my thinking about readability and complexity in books for beginning readers. First and foremost, children have been participants in the world of language and communication since birth. By the time they enter school, they know how to carry on conversations, talk about themselves, ask questions, tell imaginative stories, and use language for a multitude of other purposes. Without instruction, they have learned to speak in the grammar of their language and use a host of words to express concepts they are familiar with. For the most part, they do this by talking in phrases and sentences they construct from their own thinking, not by copying or repeating the precise words they hear spoken by others. They draw pictures, make letters or letter-like forms, and most know the difference between writing and drawing. Immersed in a world of print, they learn to recognize some words in print, such as the names of family members or favorite foods. Many can write their names and write down some of the sounds they hear in words. Some know that print contains a message and is read from left to right (in some languages). They observe adults using print for a variety of purposes, such as checking schedules, writing messages, getting directions, and reading for pleasure. They learn the language of stories from books, movies, and family story-telling traditions. They also know quite a bit about the people and places around them.

Moreover, children who come to school after having countless books read aloud to them and exploring these books on their own have additional resources to help them with the prediction that supports reading. They encounter different styles of language sometimes referred to as literary or book language. For example, when my own children were young, one of their favorite books for me to read aloud to them was Virginia Kahl’s *The Duchess Bakes a Cake*, a lively story in verse about a duchess who sends the cook off for a day so she can make a “lovely light luscious delectable cake.” This memorable phrase appears several times in the story and became a part of our conversational repertoire, so that whenever we made a cake together, it was always a “lovely light luscious delectable cake.”

My favorite example of a child internalizing book language comes from my grandson Andrew at the end of his kindergarten year. He had been trying
to read the *Nate the Great* books we had given his older brother, but he had already heard them being read aloud many times by his parents and brother. They are a series of 48-page mystery books written by Marjorie Weinman Sharmat and illustrated by Marc Simont. The title of each one begins with *Nate the Great* and ends with a phrase describing the case facing Nate the Great, such as *Nate the Great and the Sticky Case*. They are written as first-person narratives in the voice of Nate, and several times throughout each story, he refers to himself as “I, Nate the Great.” He says those words fourteen times in *Nate the Great and the Sticky Case*. Here are two examples of how the phrase is used.

I, Nate the Great,
    was drying off
from the rain. (7)

“Good thinking,” I said.
“[I, Nate the Great,]
will go to your house
and look at your table.” (12)

Andrew was writing about *Nate the Great* in the computer lab at school, and this is what he wrote. Notice how he refers to them as the *I, Nate the Great* books, an indication of how the stories worked their magic on him. One of the books is called *Nate the Great and the Halloween Hunt*, which might have inspired Andrew to write about being Nate the Great for Halloween.

I like to read *I Nate the Great* books. They are not that easy. The beginning of the book is easy. I sometimes need help. Some pages, I don’t need help, but most pages I need help reading pages because they are hard-to-read books. I am going to be *I Nate the Great* for Halloween.

Children who have heard books read aloud over and over also know that stories unfold in certain ways, and that some characters behave in predictable ways. They also learn to look for surprises at the end. When children listen over and over to books about subjects they are interested in, they hear how writers present information, and the framework and organization of a descriptive text becomes familiar to them. They learn, also, to pay attention to the illustrations, both for pleasure and for their role in telling the story or conveying important information. Thus, by the time they start to read independently, most children have had five or six years of experience with language and stories that support and contribute to the success of their new endeavor.
Emergent Literacy and Books for Beginning Readers

How does this information help us think more closely about books that support beginning readers? Children use the grammar of their language and expect a message to make sense; thus, a good beginning reading text will tell a meaningful story or convey interesting facts in language commonly used by a five- or six-year-old. Children have had many life experiences and use the vocabulary of those places and events; thus, a good beginning text will make connections with real-life experiences, even when it is an imaginative story (for example, books about childhood nighttime fears, such as Mercer Mayer’s *There’s a Nightmare in My Closet*). Children are watchers and observers of their environment; thus, a good beginning text will provide clear illustrations to assist readers in interpreting the written message. Children have learned something about print from their own writing and observing others write, but they may not realize that going from left to right is essential or that there are spaces between words in print, which are often different from the spaces between spoken words. For example, when speaking, many people say “gonna,” not “going to,” and “an apple” often sounds like one word in speech—“an apple.” A good beginning text will have the print set in the same place, using a clear type face and large print to help readers learn about the conventions of print.

Characteristics of Texts for Beginning Readers

Books in Reading Recovery are organized into twenty reading levels to guide teachers in introducing children gradually to a variety of stories and features of print. The easiest texts in this range are books such as Eric Carle’s *Have You Seen My Cat?*, composed of two brief sentence patterns repeated alternately from start to finish, and the most challenging books in this range are books such as Arnold Lobel’s *Frog and Toad* stories. This hierarchy was developed in New Zealand based on teachers’ observations of their students’ progression through the *Ready to Read* books, a graded series of little books read by all beginning readers in New Zealand. Thus, these books came to serve as benchmarks for comparison in assessing levels for new books. Reading Recovery teachers in the United States used this twenty-level framework, but had many questions about the criteria used to assign a level to a book.

These questions, plus my own curiosity about why some books were easier or harder for readers, led to the research for my dissertation, *Characteristics of Texts That Support Beginning Readers* (1988). There were two phases to this study—the first phase focused on books and the second on students’ reading of some of those books. First, I selected 88 of the approximately 400 books in use at the time for Reading Recovery and evaluated them with respect
to six categories: text and illustration layout; sentence length and text length; content and theme; illustrations; narrative form; and language patterns.

Once I completed that process, I focused on how students read 22 of those books by studying running records (Clay 1993a 2000) of their readings taken during Reading Recovery lessons. A running record is like a map of a reading, showing accurate reading, errors or miscues, self-corrections, and other reading behaviors. By analyzing miscues and self-corrections, teachers can see evidence of how a reader is using visual information from print, the structure or syntax of the language, and the meaning of the story to make sense of the text. An accuracy rate between 90 and 94 percent is considered an instructional level text for a particular student, while an accuracy rate between 95 and 100 percent is considered an easy level text for that student (Clay 1993a, 23).

After spending countless hours reading and examining all aspects of those texts, I decided it was impossible to write a description that would clearly define the characteristics of each level of text. However, it was possible to describe shifts in text complexity along the continuum of twenty levels, and to describe features common to groups of levels. I used the phrase “sources of predictability” to describe the shifts across levels. The easiest books, those in levels 1–4, have vocabulary and syntax that is very similar to young children's spoken language, as well as repetition of sentences with only one or two words changed. Books in levels 5–8 are similar to those in lower levels, but with less repetition of phrases and a gradual introduction of literary, or book language. Books in levels 9–12 exhibit a great deal of variation in sentence patterns, and a literary style of language becomes more prominent. Books in levels 13–15 contain a greater variety of words or a more specialized vocabulary than easier books. In the highest group of levels, 16–20, narratives are developed in greater detail. These categories will be more fully explained in the following chapters.

Words About Words

You might wonder why I did not establish a separate category for words. There were two reasons. First, writers and publishers who create books for beginning readers generally use words that are part of young children's vocabularies. Second, and more important, observations of my own Reading Recovery lessons and those of others demonstrated to me many times that words that look easy are sometimes difficult, and words that look challenging are sometimes easy for readers. Consequently, I considered words within the context of language patterns and content and theme. Words do not work alone, but in combination with other words to form ideas, descriptions, and actions.
In all of my years as a librarian and a teacher, I have never heard a child or an adult say they like books made up of words they know how to read. Even children who are just learning how to read will tell me they like books about dinosaurs or fairy tales or the Magic School Bus books, written by Joanna Cole and illustrated by Bruce Degen. Yet, words are the part of language that most often come to mind when adults think about texts for newer readers. Having a large core of known words and being able to decode and analyze patterns in words in order to solve unfamiliar words is certainly an important part of reading, but understanding the meaning of a text is a more complex process than identifying all of the words in the text.

To illustrate, I will give an example from my own reading. Recently I came across the phrase “Sailor Plots the Revenge of the Tomatoes.” Although I know the definitions of each of those words and can read the phrase accurately and fluently, I was baffled as to its meaning. Gradually I was able to figure it out. The phrase was a headline in a New York Times article (May 2, 1999) that appeared in the Sports section under the subheading of “The Boating Report.” Below the text is a photo of a lone sailboat in rough seas. From those context clues, I surmised that “revenge” must have something to do with a competition the sailor lost.

The first paragraph of the article was also composed of words I know, but other than confirming my guess that the article was about racing, I was still confused as to what it was all about.

For Hans Meijer, a multihull sailor from Virginia Beach, Va., a tomato is anything but a piece of fruit. It has gotten him into trouble twice now in ocean racing, and both times, he has had to head for the beach. Not a good place for tomatoes.

The first sentence of the second paragraph, also composed entirely of words I recognize and understand, let me know that writer Barbara Lloyd was having a bit of fun with readers. “So what is this circuitous connection between a tomato and sailing?” Then she confirms my guess by naming the event, a 1,000 mile catamaran race called the Worrell 1000. In her third paragraph, I learn that Meijer’s catamaran is named Pomodoro, the Italian word for tomato. While it was necessary for me to read ploddingly to the end of the article to “get the whole picture,” a sailor, particularly a catamaran racer, reading the same article would have gotten the meaning in a fraction of the time.

Being able to identify words quickly and knowing their meaning is an important part of reading, but I used far more than my knowledge of words to understand the article. I have already mentioned two aspects of text that helped—the photograph and my familiarity with the format and style of newspaper reporting. I was also able to draw on the very little knowledge I have...
of sailboats and racing. As an experienced reader, I expect a piece of writing to be organized into paragraphs of several sentences and that each paragraph will provide more detail about the topic. I also expect the paragraphs to be arranged in a such a way so that ideas lead to a logical conclusion. I also know that newspaper writing must be concise and that each paragraph will begin with a topic sentence identifying its purpose to the reader. And, speaking of sentences, I, like all other language users, know how sentences in English are put together. This I know intuitively from hearing and speaking the language all of my life and from school studies in reading, writing, grammar, and foreign language study.

Words and Learning to Read

Readers who agree with my point that reading involves much more than word identification, however, may believe that new readers are different from experienced readers. In some respects they are, because beginning readers need to learn how to decode unfamiliar words, as well as develop an expanding core of words they can quickly and easily identify during reading. They are helped by learning how the alphabetic system works, the relationships between sounds and letters, and more sophisticated ways of analyzing print to solve “unknown” words. They also need to learn how to interpret the conventions of written language, as well as make sense of the syntax and organization of book language, which differs from the language of conversation. Children come to school knowing many words, and continue learning new words throughout their school years. According to one study, most six-year-olds have mastered a speaking vocabulary of 14,000 words (Carey 1978, cited in Smith 1994).

Pioneering research by Marie Clay (1968, 1982, 1991) and Ken Goodman (1965, 1996) provided a critical perspective for understanding the reading process by systematically observing children reading and making sense of their reading. By analyzing children’s reading behaviors, each documented that when readers substituted one word for another, their errors, or miscues, often were meaningful and grammatically acceptable in the passage they were reading. Ken Goodman describes miscues as “windows on the reading process” (1996, 61). For example, suppose a reader comes to the sentence I like to race in the yard and misses the word race. It is more likely that this reader would substitute the word run than the word rainbow, because I like to run is a meaningful sentence in English, whereas I like to rainbow is not. The reader who substitutes run for race is using several sources of information to make sense of the text. First, he is reading for meaning, because the words can be used interchangeably; second, his substitution resulted in a grammatically correct sentence; and third, the two words are visually similar.
Moreover, both researchers observed that many readers spontaneously corrected, or attempted to correct, their errors. Each stressed that children have more opportunity to develop useful reading strategies when they read from texts that reflect the language they speak fluently. The children Marie Clay observed were five-year-olds learning how to read, and the self-correction behavior she observed suggested these readers had developed ways of learning from their errors. Based on these observations, she called for providing children with texts rich in cue sources.

Words in sentence structures which mirror the syntactic and semantic forms of the language which the child speaks fluently will increase the child’s opportunities to detect errors and develop error-correcting strategies (1982, 46).

A good example of a book that fits this profile is *The Ghost*, written by Joy Cowley and illustrated by Robyn Belton. On the cover is a picture of a child wrapped in a white sheet looking in the mirror, and on the floor is a paper bag with eyes and mouth cut out. Most young children have made costumes or played dress-up, and most have played peek-a-boo games with their parents, so readers of this book could draw on their own experiences to predict that this ghost is about to surprise someone. Below is the text, only twenty-six words.

```
I see the door.
I see the window.
I see the table.
I see the cat.
I see the chairs.
I see Mum and Dad.
Boo!
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There are many ways this book connects young readers with the new world of print. I mentioned the dressing-up image on the cover; if that is familiar, so is the image of the child sneaking up ever so slowly on her parents. The sentence structure, or syntax, is simple, but one that a young reader would probably use in conversation. The objects the “ghost” encounters on her travels are likely to be recognizable to young readers as well—*door, window, table, cat, chairs,* and *Mum and Dad.* The illustrations on each page clearly show the object “the ghost” sees, providing a way for the reader to confirm the identity of the word in print.

The print is centered at the bottom of each page and there is ample room between words for the young reader to see the space between them. This space between words is sometimes called a “finger space,” because it is wide enough to accommodate a child-sized finger, and it helps new readers clearly see the boundaries between words. Although *The Ghost* is a simple book, it takes new
readers into a world that is both imaginary and real, allowing them to remember a similar personal experience and to read about another character doing the same thing.

Moving into Literary, or Book, Language

While students who have just learned to read *The Ghost* are engaged in the same reading process as more experienced readers, they still have much to learn about written language. As Frank Smith (1994) emphasizes, written language is not talk written down. While spoken and written language share the same grammar and vocabulary, there are different conventions for each. In part, this is because during conversations, the participants usually discuss a topic of common interest. They communicate not only through what they say, but also through gesture and intonation. Listeners can interrupt and ask the speaker to clarify a point. Speakers can respond to puzzled facial expressions by rephrasing a statement, then checking to see if their meaning was then understood. Certain forms of writing, such as letters, have characteristics of spoken language. And, print that appears in the environment, such as the word *stop* on red octagonal signs, can be interpreted by seeing where it is placed.

In contrast, writers cannot stop their writing in order to determine whether or not readers understand their message. Nor can readers look up from the text and ask the writer what was meant by the statement on page twenty-four. Writers must use different techniques so that their intended ideas and the relationships between them are expressed entirely through their use of language. Written language is grammatically more complex than spoken language. Writers have time to carefully construct their thoughts and arrange them according to the conventions of the kind of document they are preparing, whether it is a report, a set of instructions, or a story. Of course, some forms of spoken language, such as a formal speech, have certain characteristics of written texts.

That was a very cursory discussion of a complex subject, but adequate for thinking about new readers who need to move on from books like *The Ghost* to those that are more in the style of written, literary language. To illustrate, let’s take a small leap to the book *The Carrot Seed*, written by Ruth Krauss and illustrated by Crockett Johnson. A little boy plants a carrot seed and those around him keep telling him it won’t come up. First his mother, then his father, and finally his big brother tell him. Then, the three of them look him in the eye and point to the ground. The texts says:

Everyone kept saying it wouldn’t come up.
It does, of course, and the story closes with these words:

And then, one day,  
a carrot came up  
just as the little boy  
had known it would.

It is not unusual for a speaker to use the phrase “everyone kept saying” in the context of a conversation. In fact, I have often heard children begin a sentence with this phrase. However, the syntax and phrasing of the closing sentence of the story are much more book-like. This is the kind of language readers meet in stories and not in casual talk.

A Sense of Story

In writing about The Ghost and The Carrot Seed, I focused on language at the sentence level. However, there are other ways in which knowing the language of books helps children learn how to read. Say the words once upon a time to a group of young children, and they know immediately that someone is about to tell or read them a story. Ask children about pigs or wolves or a young woman named Cinderella, and most can tell you who those characters are and how they act. In the words of Arthur Applebee, “Children gradually develop quite firm expectations about these story characters” (1978, 48).

Children also learn how stories unfold. Consider the story of “Little Red Riding Hood.” Little Red Riding Hood’s mother sends her to grandmother’s house in the woods. On the way, she meets a wolf and tells him she is on her way to visit her sick grandmother. The wolf is a dangerous character who causes plenty of trouble, but with help from a woodsman, the story ends happily. The story of Wiley and the Hairy Man, retold and illustrated by Molly Bang, begins with a young boy getting ready to go into the swamp to cut some bamboo. His mother warns him to watch out for the Hairy Man. Like Little Red Riding Hood (Hyman 1983), Wiley meets a frightening creature on his journey, but unlike Little Red Riding Hood, Wiley outwits his adversary. These two stories are not identical, but they share similar plots and characters.

I use the phrase “literary partners” to describe stories that are similar in some way. There are many books for new readers that can help them develop a “sense of story,” or understanding of the many different ways stories can be framed and plotted. The Ghost is a very simple story, one that I call a “sneaking up” story because readers do not see the “whole picture” until the very end. Similarly, Ruth Brown’s A Dark Dark Tale, begins in a dark, dark moor, and takes readers on a slow journey through a wood, and into a house, where
they meet a surprise on the last page. Books like *Titch* and *The Carrot Seed* can be thought of as literary partners because they each feature characters who, although they are the youngest and smallest, triumph in the end.

**Learning from Students’ Readings of Books**

In the second phase of my dissertation research, I wondered if there were some places in texts that led to more errors than others. I selected twenty-two books used in Reading Recovery and compared running records of students’ readings of those books taken during Reading Recovery lessons. Every day, Reading Recovery teachers select a new book for each of their students, choosing one that will support the individual student’s current knowledge and strengths and provide a small amount of new challenge. The teacher carefully introduces the book, drawing the child’s attention to the important ideas in the text and one or two new words. With support from the teacher, the student reads the book once or twice. The next day, the teacher takes a running record of the student’s reading of the book introduced the day before.

Running records are valuable because they capture many observable reading behaviors, and teachers can study them to see how children are using meaning, the structure or syntax of the language, and print or graphophonic clues in their reading (Clay 1993a 2000; Johnston 1997; Taberski 2000). There are two kinds of calculations from running records, error rate and self-correction rate, that serve as a quick shorthand for showing how well a student read a particular text. The error rate is usually converted into a percentage of words read accurately. Roughly, a text read with an accuracy of 95 to 100 percent (not more than one error for every twenty words read) is considered easy for the reader. A text read at between 90 and 94 percent (not more than two errors for every twenty words read) is considered to be at an instructional level for the reader. Peter Johnston uses the phrase “learning text” to describe a text read within the instructional range, “because children actually learn from it” (1997, 213). Michael Opitz uses the phrase “just-right” to describe books that children can read with good understanding (1998, 66). When a book is read with less than 90 percent accuracy, it is generally too difficult for the reader to manage without assistance. Opitz calls these “challenge books.”

When children self-correct their errors during reading, it is an indication they are learning from their mistakes. The self-correction rate is calculated by adding together the number of errors and the number of self-corrections (self-corrections start as errors, before they are corrected). This total is divided by the number of self-corrections. Self-correction rates are expressed as ratios. For example, a self-correction rate of 1:4 indicates that the reader corrected one out of every four errors. Clay notes that among good readers between the ages of five and eight, self-correction ratios of 1:2 to 1:5 are typical. “When
children read texts of appropriate difficulty for their present skills (i.e., at or above 90 percent accuracy) this gives enough support from familiar features of text, enough time for reading work, without losing the meaning” (1991, 337).

Here are some examples of students reading texts rich in cue sounds, taken from my research. The first book I looked at was The Ghost, written by Joy Cowley and illustrated by Robyn Belton, one of the easiest books used in the program. Although this is a simple book, it nevertheless takes new readers into a world that is both imaginary and real, allowing them to remember a similar personal experience and to read about another character doing the same thing.

I had thirty-two running records of readings of The Ghost to compare. Twenty-seven of these readings were above 90 percent accuracy, indicating the text was in the instructional or easy range for those students. Five of the readings were below 90 percent, indicating the text was too difficult for those students. First, let us take a look at the errors and self-corrections on readings above 90 percent. There were two places in the text that resulted in the highest number of errors. One was the very first sentence, “I see the door.” Two readers began, “I like,” and then promptly self-corrected and changed “like” to “see.” One began, “I is,” and immediately self-corrected, while another read “I can,” and corrected her response after reading the entire sentence as “I can the door.” Note that two of those initial substitutions, I like and I can, are the beginnings of acceptable and common sentences. The first two readers were able immediately to correct their errors, probably by noticing visual information from the printed word see. The third reader needed to work through the whole sentence to make the self-correction. It seems likely that the child who began I is noticed right away that the phrase did not sound right, and used both her intuitive knowledge of the structure of English and the visual information of the print to self-correct. (Note: While running records of children’s readings provide teachers with helpful information, they can only record observable behaviors, not everything a child knows or can do.)

Self-Corrections in the First Sentence of The Ghost

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>First Reading</th>
<th>Self-correction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I like</td>
<td>I see</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I like</td>
<td>I see</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I can the door</td>
<td>I see the door</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I is</td>
<td>I see</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Now, let us take a look at the two readers who did not self-correct on the first sentence. Note that each of these substitutions results in an acceptable English sentence and one that is meaningful in the context of the entire book.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>First Reading</th>
<th>Self-correction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>This is</td>
<td>no self-correction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>I saw</td>
<td>no self-correction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now, let’s shift our perspective from the readers’ actions to the book itself and consider how the features of the text supported them. Each sentence begins I see, which provides a predictable framework as the beginning of the sentence on each page. Once the first four readers corrected their initial error on see, they finished reading the book without further errors. Student number 5 substituted this is for I see on the first sentence, but read the remaining sentences accurately. Student number 6 read I saw on the first two sentences, but thereafter accurately read I see on the remaining four sentences. Each of the readers made these changes independently, without prompting from the teacher. The repetition of the pattern supported their problem solving by providing them opportunities to revisit and look more closely at the letters and words before them.

The errors in the running records of students who read the book with an accuracy below 90 percent reveal that the text was supporting the learning of those readers. For example, one student read I saw for four of the five sentences, resulting in an accuracy of 84 percent. Nevertheless, the repetition of the I see pattern allowed her to do some valuable sorting out. This is how she read the text.

I saw the door.
I saw the window.
I saw [repeats this phrase] I saw the table.
I saw the cat.
I saw the [repeats this phrase] I saw the chairs.

Finally, on the last page, she read the entire sentence accurately.

I see Mum and Dad.

Learning of any kind involves exploration, tentative behavior, and making errors. Experienced teachers know it is much easier to teach students who are risk takers than students who are afraid to try something new because they might not be right.
Increasing the Challenge

When someone is learning how to drive, they might begin by cruising a shopping center parking lot after hours when there is little traffic. In order to learn to be a good driver, a bit more challenge is needed—quiet neighborhood streets, for example. Similarly, most beginning readers quickly master books like *The Ghost* and are ready to try their developing strategies out on more difficult texts. The next book I discuss, *Look for Me*, written by June Melser and illustrated by Lynette Vondruska, can be thought as the move that puts the student driver on neighborhood streets during the morning rush hour.

*Look for Me* is the story of a simple hide-and-seek game in which Mum looks for her son David in several places. Like *The Ghost*, it is a story set in the familiar environment of a child’s home, and the plot develops as the main character, the mother, moves through the house. And, like *The Ghost*, it ends with a surprise. The structure, or syntax, of the sentences and the vocabulary are well within the range of five- and six-year-olds, but there are several ways in which the book provides readers with more challenge than *The Ghost*. There are almost three times the number of words in *Look for Me* than in *The Ghost*, and each sentence is a few words longer. Also, there are three lines of print on all but one of the pages, so readers must be secure in their control over following the print from left to right and making the return sweep to the left. Instead of one sentence pattern being repeated throughout the book, there are two sentence patterns that alternate. The illustrations show where Mum is looking, allowing readers to check them to confirm the identity of words such as *chimney* and *clock*; however, readers must be able to read most of the words without supporting picture clues. Here is the text from the first two pages.

Mum looked for David
in the toy box.
“No, he’s not here,” she said. (2)
She looked for him
up the chimney.
“No, he’s not here,” she said. (3)

As you can see, the structure of the first sentence on each page is the same, but with small variations. Throughout the book the first sentence tells where Mum looked. Readers must be able to make the shift from the proper nouns—*Mum* and *David*—to the pronouns *she* and *him*; they must pay close attention to the print. They are supported, however, by their intuitive use of language they have used for many years, because in speaking we generally switch to pronouns once the subjects of conversation are clearly understood by the speakers. Readers must also pay close attention to the print in order to
notice the change in the prepositions from *in the toy box* to *up the chimney*. Again, however, they receive support from their intuitive use of English phrasing. While it would not be wrong to say *in the chimney, up the chimney* is more likely to roll off the tongue of children whose first language is English. These are good examples of how students draw on their experience as speakers of the language to assist them in noticing the details of print, which in turn, supports their developing knowledge of how letters are combined to make words, and how words are used to make stories.

When I studied the running records of *Look for Me*, they were more interesting than those of *The Ghost* because there are many more examples that showed children engaged in productive reading work. The phrase “No, he’s not here,” is used four times. This is how one student sorted out some confusions on that phrase.

On page 2 she read:

“No, he’s he’s [repetition of the correct word] not here,” she said.

On page 3 she read:

“No, he No he’s [repetition from the beginning and self-correction on *he’s*] not here,” she said.

On page 4 she read:

“No, he he’s [self-correction] ain’t not [self-correction] here,” she said.

On page 6 she read:

“No, he’s not here,” she said. [accurate reading, no self-corrections]

Not knowing this student, I can only speculate that in conversation she used the phrase “he ain’t,” and in the course of working on this book, she learned to check the print closely to read the exact words on the page. Another student’s readings of this same phrase demonstrate how a mismatch between a child’s oral language and printed book language prompted a close search of the text that led to self-correction.

On page 2 he read:

“No, he’s not *in the toy box*, he’s not here [as if starting to read *not in the toy box*, then returning to the beginning of the sentence and self-correcting his errors],” Mum she [self-correction] said.

On page 3 he read:

“No, he’s not *in* here not here [return to *not* and self-correction],” she said.

On pages 4 and 6 he read the sentences accurately, without repetition or self-correction.
One miscue that I found very interesting focused on the word *mat*. The story concludes with Mum finding David. On page 7 there is a picture of David hiding under a small rug on the floor. His head and shoulders are peeking out. Mum has one foot on the rug, clearly positioned on top of David. She is looking up in the air, saying “Where is that boy?” Those words are not printed like those in the rest of the book; rather, they are encased in the kind of speech bubbles often used in comics. Next to David is a speech bubble that says, “Giggle giggle.” The text on the last page follows the pattern of text on the previous pages, with the exception of the variation in the language, because David has been found.

Mum looked for David under the mat.
“Here he is,” she said.

When I compared running records of *Look for Me*, I made an interesting discovery. The little word *mat* received the highest number of miscues, far more than the longer word *chimney*. I examined a total of seventy-five running records of students who read *Look for Me* with an accuracy of 90 percent or higher, and there were twenty-six miscues on the word *mat*. Of those twenty-six students who miscued on *mat*, only one miscued on *chimney*. In the whole group of seventy-five running records, there were only four miscues on the word *chimney*. How could that be? *Mat* is such a simple word; furthermore, it is very much like cat, sat, hat, and many other common words that are easy to spell.

Here are the words readers substituted for *mat*: cover, covers, carpet, rug, quilt, mattress, sheet, and cushion. Five readers used the word rug, the most frequently used substitution. Each of these words is a meaningful substitution for the word *mat*, although none visually resemble *mat*. Some readers made substitutions that were not meaningful, however the substitution resembled *mat* in some way: snap, mit, mar, him, mom, and map. Why should so many readers who read the rest of this book with such ease have trouble with such a small word? Not knowing those children I cannot say for sure; however, I think the key to understanding the problem is that the word *mat* is not a word commonly used in the United States to refer to a small rug. Consequently, I suspect that readers substituted words they knew to describe what they had seen in the illustration. *Look for Me* was written and published in New Zealand, where I assume the word *mat* is frequently used to describe a small rug.

A similar phenomenon occurred with the word *hose*, in a book called *Saturday Morning*, a Ready to Read book from New Zealand written by Leslie Moyes. In this story, a family of five and their dog spend their Saturday morning having breakfast, cleaning the car, and watering the garden. *Saturday Morning* is far more challenging for readers than *Look for Me* because there
are several characters interacting with each other and the sentence patterns are varied, with little repetition. There are ten sentences using the words hose or hosed. Hosed is used four times and hose six times. It is used as a verb nine times, with three different meanings. In the first example, Mum is washing the car. In the second example, Mum is going to water the garden. In the third, the children ask to be sprayed with water.

Mum hosed the car.
I’m going to hose the garden now.
“Please will you hose me,” said Helen.

Only once, at the end of the story, is hose used as a noun.

“Look, he’s playing with the hose,” said Mum.

While hose is probably a familiar word to most children in the United States, it is typically used as a noun and not as a verb. In a sample of thirty-two running records at 90 percent or higher accuracy, there were eighteen miscues on the first use of hose, “Mum hosed the car.” The most common substitutions were washed or cleaned. In the second instance, however, when the garden was the object of hosing, the substitutions were words such as spray and water. As you can see, these miscues fit both the meaning of the story and the syntax of the sentence. Seven of the readers who miscued the first time hosed was used, read the word accurately throughout the rest of the book. At most, readers miscued three times on the word hose or hosed. Thus, the number of miscues on hose decreased as readers moved through the text, suggesting they engaged in problem solving as they progressed, visually analyzing the print to come up with the precise word in the text.

**The Right Book for the Right Child at the Right Time**

Throughout this book, I continue to write about books and children who have read them. By reading widely and closely observing how children read and interact with books, we can learn a great deal about how to support and encourage them in becoming better readers. The more we know and the more closely we observe, the more effective we become as their teachers. I cannot stress strongly enough, however, that there is no one book or set of books that will transform a new reader into a voracious reader. Librarians have often used the phrase “the right book for the right child at the right time” to describe the care with which an adult should place a book in a child’s hands.

To help beginning readers find just-right books in the library, I put baskets of easy books in English and Spanish that I have grouped by levels of difficulty on shelves that are easy for them to reach. The baskets are close to tables,
and I encourage the children to take the baskets off the shelves and spread books on the tables to get a closer look at them. I separate the English and Spanish books and keep them in different colored baskets to help readers find the language they are looking for. Colored dots on the books and the baskets help students and teachers find books they can read “right now.” Often called “little books” by many teachers, they are similar to books like *The Ghost*, *Look for Me*, and *Saturday Morning*. In each basket there are books from several publishers’ series, both fiction and nonfiction. If I sort through the baskets, I can quickly tell which books are most popular. I call them “wrinkled books” because their worn appearance shows they have been read over and over again. If I place a few wrinkled books side by side, I notice how different one is from another, even though they are not too far apart with respect to difficulty. Selections include both fiction and nonfiction. Some, like *Animal Homes* by Peter Sloan and Sheryl Sloan, provide factual information about animals and are illustrated with photographs. Others, like *Fix It, Fox*, written by Patricia Ann Lynch and illustrated by Jane Caminos, are comical stories with cartoon-like pictures.

Books about cats are often wrinkled books. *I Am a Cat*, written by Teresa Chin and illustrated with photographs by Graham Meadows, is written in the first person, like a biography. *The Cat Who Loved Red*, written by Lynn Salem and Josie Stewart and illustrated by Holly Pendergast, is a short narrative that begins like an old, old story, “Once there was a cat who loved red.” Each page after the introduction begins with the phrase, “She loved to . . .” Here are some of the things she loved to do:

- She loved to eat from a red dish. (3)
- She loved to play with a ball of red yarn. (4)
- She loved to sleep on a red pillow. (7)

Most of the time, I do not know which students connect with which books, but Melissa is an exception. In the spring of her first-grade year, she asked me to help her find a book she could read. As I had done with many students before her, I took her to the baskets of books, pulled out a few titles and asked her to give them a try. She ultimately selected *The Cat Who Loved Red* and read it with minimal help from me. The broad smile on her face revealed all—she had found the book! Several times during the next few weeks, she would bring the book to the library, wait patiently until she could have my full attention, and show off her newly discovered ability to read an entire book.

Many wrinkled books are not little books that fit in baskets, but popular children’s literature books. When first grader Emanuel asked me to listen to him read *Bears in the Night* by Stan and Jan Berenstain, I could tell he had made the passage from seeing himself as a learner to being a reader. For Kathleen,
the magical book was Dr. Seuss’ inimitable *Green Eggs and Ham*, which she read to me a little bit at a time over the course of several weeks. Popularity, however, is not the only indicator of a book that has launched a child into reading. When Amy was in kindergarten, she found *Amy Goes to School*, written by Jenny Harris and illustrated by Phyllis Pollema-Cahill, and read it over and over with her mother until she could read it all by herself. Although she could have learned to read with many other books, finding one with her name in the title was magic for Amy.

Each of the books I just mentioned have several features in common, most notably a story or information that draws children inside and keeps them turning the pages. Some are serious in tone, and others are funny; some illustrated with photos, others with drawings or paintings. All have short sentences written with sentence structures, or syntax, used by most five- and six-year-olds. While there may be an occasional word or two that may be unfamiliar to a reader, most words used in these books are found in the spoken vocabulary of most five- and six-year-olds. Each of these books is rich in cue sources that assist children with reading the print and understanding the story or information in the book.

Only one of these books, *Fix It, Fox*, is composed of words that most people would call “decodable.” The word study page on the back lists eight words: box, fan, fix, fox, pen, pig, pot, and put. These words, including repetitions of them, are used a total of thirty-one times in the text. There are ten other words used in the text: said, it, the, in, mouse, pan, cat, dog, we’ll, and help. The author, Patricia Ann Lynch, has written a clever and engaging story with these words in which several characters bring in something for Fox to fix—a pot, a pan, a pen, and a fan. “‘Fix it, Fox,’” each character says, putting the item needing repair on the counter in Fox’s fix-it shop. Jane Caminos’ humorous pictures are essential for readers to follow the story line, and young readers respond especially to the changes in Fox’s facial expressions. He starts out with a smile as he puts each object in his collection box. As the box starts filling up, Fox looks worried, and by the time everyone has given him their items to repair, he looks completely overwhelmed. Fortunately, his friends understand his dilemma, and the story concludes with their offers of help.

*Fix It, Fox* is a well-loved book in our library, and I have no doubt that it has launched more than one young reading career. However, a reader’s success with reading the text is not dependent on the almost exclusive use of short words that can easily be sounded out and decoded. Children who become good readers learn to draw on several sources of information to read and make sense of a book, and graphophonemics is one useful source of information. To become good readers, however, children also need texts that are meaningful and written in language familiar to them. *Fix It, Fox* fills all of
these criteria, but so do many other more complicated books. Just as there is no one food that provides all the nutrients required by the human body, there is no single style of writing that will transform all learners into readers.

**Decodable Texts**

There is nothing inherently wrong with a book filled with words having some alphabetic or phonetic features in common. Such texts may be useful in helping some children sort out some of the letter-sound relationships and spelling patterns they will encounter in their reading. However, as Regie Routman points out, decoding is not useful for finding out the meaning of words students have never heard of or do not know the meaning of (1996, 94). Teachers strive to find books that support their students, and sometimes the best choices are decodable texts, as Heidi Anne Messmer (1999) determined when tutoring a second-grade student who had not learned how to read in first grade.

Teachers and librarians should be wary of sweeping generalizations, asserting that decodable texts are necessary or advantageous for all beginning reading instruction. This simply is not true. To demonstrate, I will return to *The Ghost*. As “the ghost” moves through the house, she sees several things: the door, the window, the table, the cat, and the chairs. With the possible exception of cat, these are not easy words for a beginning reader to decode. However, in the twenty-seven running records I examined, all readings above 90 percent accuracy, there were very few miscues on these words. They are summarized below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Miscues</th>
<th>Miscues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>door</td>
<td>window/sc</td>
<td>windows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>window</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>table</td>
<td>cat/sc</td>
<td>kitchen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cat</td>
<td>no miscues</td>
<td>no miscues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chairs</td>
<td>couch/sc</td>
<td>furniture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>white furniture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>door</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>couch</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In twenty-seven readings of *The Ghost*, there were very few miscues on the words door, window, table, cat, and chairs. Furthermore, each of those substitutions was meaningful in the context of the story. Undoubtedly, readers were assisted by the illustrations, and had they been asked to read the same
words from a word list or flash cards, it is probable that their accuracy rate would have been much lower. This brings me back to the point I have made several times, and will continue to make throughout this book: Reading is much more than word identification. Well-written books given to the right child at the right time contribute to the learning of new words. When new readers know they can check illustrations to confirm the identity of a word or two, they can use that information to learn how letters are arranged to make those words. The examples I gave were running records from each student’s second reading of the book. In subsequent lessons, it is likely they read it several more times, thus having more opportunities to learn from the text.

In some respects, the notion of decodable texts is as vague a term as predictable texts. Two researchers, Richard Allington and Haley Woodside-Jiron (1998), attempted to clarify the definition of decodable texts by analyzing many of the various policy and advocacy documents that call for the use of decodable texts in beginning reading. In all of the documents they reviewed, they found two features that seemed to distinguish decodable texts from other kinds of texts. First, decodable texts are composed of phonetically regular words, and second, those texts are composed of words constructed from phonic elements previously taught to students. More ambiguous, however, was whether or not a decodable text was defined as one composed exclusively of decodable words, or a text with a few sight words was also considered decodable. Compounding the problem of defining decodable texts is the matter that, in English, a sequence of letters may have different pronunciations in different words, so decoding is not always a simple matter. For example, consider the following word pairs: how and show; read and read; love and move; put and shut.

Children Need Books

Far more important than trying to characterize the best books for beginning readers by using ambiguous phrases such as decodable texts or predictable books is the necessity of making sure that all classrooms and school libraries are filled with an abundance of books that meet the diverse needs and interests of all students. There is no single book or series of books that will be perfect for all children, and children are best served when teachers have a wide selection of books to choose from for reading instruction. Jeff McQuillan, in the last chapter of his book The Literacy Crisis: False Claims, Real Solutions (1998), reviews and synthesizes many research studies on children’s reading achievement. While each of these studies focuses on a different group of students, a key ingredient for high reading achievement in each situation was access to a wide range of books. Stephen Krashen (1995) analyzed data from forty-one
states on the fourth grade reading test of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and found that one of the best predictors of scores was the number of books per student in school libraries.

Access to books, however, is not equal among school children. As Krashen (1997/98) points out, there are vast differences in the numbers of public, school, and classroom library books available to students from affluent communities in contrast to students from high-poverty areas. In another study designed to investigate literacy instruction in high-poverty schools, Sherry Guice and her colleagues “were especially disturbed by the lack of books provided to these children” (1996, 197). Furthermore, they discovered that 40 percent of the teachers in their study used personal funds to purchase the majority of the books in their classroom collections. Imagine going to work for Microsoft® and finding out you needed to purchase a computer for your office so that you could do the job you were hired for. You might argue that Microsoft® is more flush with cash than most school districts, but I would counter that if making readers of all of our children were truly a priority in this country, policy makers would rush to see that all classrooms and school libraries were well stocked with large collections of books.

The Books Children Need

Currently, there are thousands of wonderful “little books” created especially for children who are learning to read, and there are thousands of children's literature trade books for readers of all ages. Children who are learning to read need access to a great many books. They need picture books with exquisite illustrations in a variety of artistic styles. They need poetry and stories written in rich, imaginative language. They need poetry and stories that will make them laugh. They need poetry and stories that feature characters of many races and cultures. They need nonfiction books about a wide assortment of subjects. Children need books that are too difficult for them to read on their own, and they need books they can read independently. Most of all, they need books they love so much that they want to keep reading more and more and more.

Good books are an important component of a successful classroom literacy program, but good teachers also provide their students with a whole range of reading and writing lessons that support their growth as readers (Morrow, Tracey, Woo & Pressley 1999). From the beginning, children need texts that foster the development of a range of strategies simultaneously. They learn best from texts that reflect the grammar of the language they speak and the vocabulary they use in conversation. Good teachers provide their students with books that will teach them something new. That something new might be language that is more book-like than talking, a less predictable text where
the identity of an unfamiliar word cannot be found by checking the illustration, or a text about a subject new to the reader.

One concern of mine has been the lack of a large core of books for new readers featuring characters from the diverse cultural and ethnic groups in this country. Slowly, this is changing for the better. The “Piñata Books” published by Celebration Press have long been popular with the students at my school because the stories in many of the books reflect events from their personal family stories. The “Visions™” series of emergent reading books from The Wright Group features African American families, and a brand new series from Lee & Low publishers called “Bebop Books” features books about children from Latin American, African American, Asian American, Native American, and other diverse backgrounds. Multicultural libraries are important for all of our students. Violet Harris’ book *Using Multiethnic Literature in the K-8 Classroom* (1997) is an excellent resource for teachers and librarians.

*Literary Pathways* is a book about selecting and evaluating books for independent reading. The pages of this book are filled with descriptions of many, many books, but please keep in mind that for every book I write about, there are scores of wonderful books I have no room to mention. Many of the books I discuss are not the most recently published, because the examples come from several years of my own teaching. In general, the date a book was originally published should not be of concern to teachers if it is a story of enduring quality that appeals to contemporary readers. My goal in writing *Literary Pathways* is to provide a foundation and starting point for continued exploration and discovery of books that will turn new readers into eager readers.

**Summary**

Understanding text complexity is an important consideration for teachers and librarians who select books for new readers. While readability formulas can be effective for organizing books along a gradient of difficulty, they are not finely tuned for analyzing books for beginning readers. The concept of predictability is useful because it guides teachers and librarians into thinking about texts in relationship to their readers. However, it is important to keep in mind that texts can be predictable on several levels. At the word or sentence level, predictability may mean a repetition of words or phrases, with a change of a word or two. At the story level, predictability may indicate a story such as a cumulative tale that follows a particular pattern. Predictable texts may be those constructed around a pattern of days of the week or number sequences. Thus, a predictable text is not necessarily an easy text, and the notion of predictability is not adequate for explaining why a particular text is easy or difficult for readers.
Research in emergent literacy has been very helpful in understanding readability in texts for beginning readers because this research is rooted in extensive observations of how children learn language and how they learn to read and write. Research in miscue analysis has provided powerful insights into the reading process, and has provided an important foundation for research into how texts support beginning readers. There is no research evidence showing that any one kind of text is superior to another for teaching children to read. Most important is having large and varied classroom and school library book collections so that teachers and librarians can always choose the right book for the right child at the right time.

**Closing Points**

- Any book can be assigned a level.
- A book with a level is no guarantee of its quality or appeal to children.
- Levels do not provide sufficient information for purchasing books for a meaningful reading and literature program.
- Texts can be predictable in several ways, including repetition of a sentence pattern; repetition of a cycle of events; use of familiar sequences, such as numbers or days of the week; or characters who act in unique ways.
- A predictable text is not necessarily an easy-to-read text.
- Children’s early experiences with stories, language, and writing influence the types of texts that support their learning to read.
- Children need books they love so much they want to keep reading.
- Classrooms and school libraries should be filled with great quantities of books to meet the reading needs and interests of all students.

**Bibliography**

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