CONFERRING WITH READERS

Supporting Each Student’s Growth and Independence

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HEINEMANN
PORTSMOUTH, NH
To Our Students—
Past, Present, and Future
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Helping Students Move from Reading Level to Level

“The road to the City of Emeralds is paved with yellow brick.”
— The Wizard of Oz, by L. Frank Baum

Marco sat with his head down on the desk, wrapped by his thick fifth-grade arms. The air in the classroom was filled with postrecess, mid-September funk. It was reading workshop, and Marco had just been sent from the meeting area to his reading spot. Students all around him held copies of the books that they had chosen earlier that week from the library and had settled in to read with Post-its and pencils nearby. Marco had no book anywhere in sight.

“I have a special request conference today,” the classroom teacher, Amanda, said to me on a day when I was working as a consultant in her classroom. She led me over to where he was sitting.

“Hi. What’s your name?” I started. No response. I tried a few more times to get him to look up, to speak to me, to nod his head, anything. I pulled away from his desk and asked the teacher what was going on. She told me that she just assessed Marco; his independent reading level was M, and he was resisting. He wanted to read a book from the Animorphs series he had started, a level T. He was refusing to read at his assessed independent level. I finally got Marco to pick up his head by having a friend, another M-level reader, convince him to read the Zack Files series with him because it was really funny, the characters were weird, and maybe they could laugh together. When I talked to Marco later, he told me that he had been at level M since third grade! He said he read all of the books and he was tired of being at that level.
“Marco, I know you want to read the *Animorphs* books,” I started.

“Yeah.”

“The problem is, I don’t want you to use this book for reading workshop. I know your teacher has already talked to you about just-right books, and I know that we both know this is not a just-right book for you.”

“Yes it is! I can read it!” Marco protested.

“Marco, reading is way more than just being able to recognize or say most of the words. Reading means being able to follow what’s happening, keeping track of all of the characters in the story, and having your own ideas. It’s hard to do that when there are many words on every page that are tricky for you,” I replied. “Look—”

At this point, I put the *Zack Files* book on the desk in front of him and one book of each level between M and T. I told him that he would need to read a lot of books at each of these levels before he was able to really *read* books from the *Animorphs* series.

“Each of these books represents one of the levels that you need to get strong at reading before you can move to the next level. It’s like steps on a staircase. One step at a time and you’ll get to your goal. There are going to be hard parts about every book, but I want you to work with me and your teacher to tackle those hard parts one step at a time. Jumping now from *Zack Files* all the way up to *Animorphs* means that there will be so many hard parts for you to handle all at once. I don’t want you to feel like reading is frustrating or hard. It should feel fun and comfortable. I love that you’re so interested in this *Animorphs* book and you should absolutely keep it. Maybe there’s someone at home or a buddy in the class who might be able to read this book with you? I just want to make sure you’re reading books more like *Zack Files* for independent reading in school.”

He looked at me suspiciously. This was a start.

**Reasons for Conferring to Help Students Move to the Next Level**

In my role as staff developer, I work in about fifteen to twenty schools each year and meet thousands of readers, many of them reading below grade-level expectations. There are a lot of possible reasons for this—disengaged readers, students with reading disabilities or language delays, or readers who spend
time trying to read books that are too hard to read independently. But in cases like Marco’s, I often think that the reason some students might be reading below grade level is because they haven’t been given instruction in how to move to the next level. So they just stay in one level, month after month, and when it comes time for teachers to assess them, they aren’t ready to move to the next level because they still need a skill set that the harder level demands.

When I open a copy of a level-K text (say, *Frog and Toad*) and a level-L text (perhaps *Pinky and Rex*), I notice a huge difference. I see more words per page, less picture support, more dialogue without tags, longer chapters, longer overall length, many characters introduced on the page, and so on. By looking carefully at what a new level demands of a reader in relation to the previous level from which he came, I see that it’s no wonder that students are often challenged by making this step to the next reading level.

I find it to be very effective to use conferring to individualize a reader’s needs based on skill and strategy work that a particular level demands. Sometimes, I preteach some content to help a student with prior knowledge in a new book.

In the higher levels (above L), I believe students need to spend a lot of time reading, with strategy instruction as support, not other models of group instruction that introduce the plot. In a series of individualized conferences, I reinforce a set of strategies for a student that the newer level demands. This strategy instruction is more targeted toward resolving potential difficulties when the student reads in this and other books at the new level.

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**Reasons to Use Conferring to Help Students Move to the Next Level**

- Many students need instruction on how to read more a difficult text.
- The strategy instruction that students need is different depending on the strategies the readers are already able to do.
- While many of the skills a reader uses will be the same from one level to the next, the reader will need new strategies and will need to know when to use them in the context of the new level.
- At higher reading levels, students often need strategy instruction or introduction of concepts or time periods rather than book introductions that give away the entire plot.
Researching and Deciding What to Teach

John sat in a bath of sunlight coming through the large windows of his third-grade classroom. Brow furrowed, he held his first real chapter book: *Pinky and Rex and the New Baby*. Until recently, he’d been reading shorter books with chapters that were episodic, where each chapter was a ministory that could be read independently of the rest of the book, not sequentially where the chapters fit together as a whole story. He was excited to be reading at this more advanced level.

“John, how’s your reading going today?” I started.

“This book is good,” he told me, “because I have a new baby sister, too. I know what it’s like to be ignored.” I thought about how excited I was to see him making connections between the characters in his book and his own life, and how engaged he seemed in his reading.

As we continued talking about his book, I started to realize he was talking only about the chapter he was currently reading. I knew from studying the characteristics of each level that level L demanded the ability to connect the story across chapters. I had a hunch that John was treating this new level-L book as he had his level-K book: He thought each chapter was its own separate story. Because I knew something about the way the text was formatted at both his new level and the level that he just moved from, I was able to help him with a really important skill of being able to carry information across chapters in his book.

Having a Knowledge of Reading Levels Helps You to Research Wisely

From the beginning of my teaching in a reading workshop, I dutifully looked up titles in the back of Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell’s *Guided Reading* (1996) and marked the covers of the books with colored dots, knowing that having these books leveled would help my students to choose books that were just right for them. When assessing readers at the beginning of the year, I took running records and knew that I was looking for a book level that allowed the students to read with fluency, comprehension, and above-ninety-seven-percent accuracy. I fully understood the importance of having levels in my classroom library to allow my students to choose the books they would read quickly and easily, and that having them reading at an appropriate level would help them to better comprehend what they read. And then one day I took a look at the first half of *Guided Reading*. In the front of the book, Fountas and Pinnell identify the unique set of
characteristics at each reading level. With this set of characteristics in mind, I was able to level books that weren’t listed in the back of the book, and I started to shift my frame of reference to see each of these characteristics as being a skill that students would have to master before they were ready for a new set of challenges in the next level. For example, if I knew that a characteristic of a level-L book is that the chapters are parts of a larger narrative, and that a level-K book often has episodic chapters, or chapters that can be read in isolation without losing meaning of the entire text, then I knew that a reader who was new to a level-L text would need the skill of being able to connect information across chapters. It is true that some skills are repeated from level to level. For example, readers need strategies for tackling new vocabulary in just about every level.

It helps to study levels of texts (either by looking up what other authors have said about this level or by picking up a few different examples at that level) by asking myself, “What might pose a challenge to a reader who is new to this level?” to first determine the characteristics of that level. Next, I ask myself what skill a reader might need in order to tackle that difficulty. Then, I try to identify what questions I would ask and what behaviors I would look for to assess whether the student has a handle on those skills. Finally, I try to brainstorm a list of possible strategies I could teach if I find through my research that the student needs some further work with the skill. I’ve found it helpful to organize what I’ve found into a conferring menu so that I can carry it with me as I confer (for more help on developing menus like this, see Chapter 10).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions and Prompts</th>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
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| “Tell me how this chapter fits with the ones you’ve read so far.”                              | Accumulating text (carrying the story from chapter to chapter) | ▪ Put a Post-it with a brief summary at the end of each chapter and reread the Post-its when you resume reading the book.  
▪ At the start of a new chapter, think about the transition by asking yourself: Who is in this new part? Where are they? Why are they here? How did they get here?  
▪ Use your knowledge of story structure—expect a rising action, a problem, a solution to the problem, and a result. Pay attention to where the current chapter fits.  
▪ Read the sentence before the hard word, the sentence that contains the hard word, and the sentence after. What would make sense?  
▪ Use your knowledge of prefixes, suffixes, and root words (new, unknown words at this level are often polysyllabic). |
| “Show me a word that was new for you. How did you figure out what it meant?”                    | Figuring out difficult vocabulary           | ▪ Stick in the characters’ names (mentally) where there are none to keep track of who is talking.  
▪ Envision the two characters and watch them take turns talking.  
▪ Use your knowledge of the characters to understand who is talking—ask yourself, “From what I know about the characters, who would most likely be saying this?”  
▪ Create voices for each character and read with those voices in mind.  
▪ Notice the way your character interacts with other characters in the scene. Ask yourself, “What kind of person would act that way?”  
▪ Think about the character’s motivations together with how she is acting in a scene. Ask yourself, “What ideas does it give me about this person?” |
| (turn to a scene with untagged dialogue) “Can you tell me who’s talking here and what they’re talking about?” | Monitoring for sense (during stretches of untagged dialogue) | ▪ Notice patterns in a character’s behavior to allow you to predict how he will act in the future.  
▪ Use what you know about plot (problem, problem worsens, problem gets solved) to predict what will happen next. |
| “What ideas do you have about the kind of person this character is?”                           | Inferring character traits                  | ▪ Notice patterns in a character’s behavior to allow you to predict how he will act in the future.  
▪ Use what you know about plot (problem, problem worsens, problem gets solved) to predict what will happen next.  
▪ Notice the way your character interacts with other characters in the scene. Ask yourself, “What kind of person would act that way?”  
▪ Think about the character’s motivations together with how she is acting in a scene. Ask yourself, “What ideas does it give me about this person?” |
| “What do you think will happen next?”                                                         | Predicting                                 | ▪ Notice patterns in a character’s behavior to allow you to predict how he will act in the future.  
▪ Use what you know about plot (problem, problem worsens, problem gets solved) to predict what will happen next. |
| “Read a little to me.”                                                                         | Reading fluently in phrases                | ▪ Notice patterns in a character’s behavior to allow you to predict how he will act in the future.  
▪ Use what you know about plot (problem, problem worsens, problem gets solved) to predict what will happen next.  
▪ Notice the way your character interacts with other characters in the scene. Ask yourself, “What kind of person would act that way?”  
▪ Think about the character’s motivations together with how she is acting in a scene. Ask yourself, “What ideas does it give me about this person?” |
| (go to part with dialogue) “Read this part to me.”                                             | Reading with intonation                    | ▪ Keep in mind what you know about the character. Read acting like him.  
▪ Pay attention to punctuation, and make your voice match the marks on the page.  
▪ Lower your voice for narration, and make your voice sound like a character talking when you see quotation marks.  
▪ Look for prefixes or suffixes that you know.  
▪ Think, “Does this look like another word I know?”  
▪ Break up the word into manageable parts—syllables. |
| “Did you see any words you didn’t know how to read?”                                          | Reading unknown words                      | ▪ Look for prefixes or suffixes that you know.  
▪ Think, “Does this look like another word I know?”  
▪ Break up the word into manageable parts—syllables. |
Researching
When I have a hunch that a student is ready to move to the next level, I decide to do a “research-only” conference. In this kind of conference, I begin by asking all the questions on my conferring menu from that level. I also ask the student to read aloud to me from his or her current book, expecting a very high (near one hundred percent) accuracy rate and fluency and intonation. I also check the student’s reading log to see that she has read many books at the current level. If the student is able to demonstrate proficiency in all areas (literal and inferential comprehension, an adequate volume of books has been read, and her reading of the current level is fluent), then I make a plan to see the student in a conference soon to help transition the student to a new level.

**Research to Determine if a Student Is Ready to Move to a New Level**

- The student has read many books on his current level (as indicated on a book log).
- The student can demonstrate mastery of most of the reading skills—including both literal and inferential comprehension—that the current level demands.
- The student is able to read with very high (near one hundred percent) accuracy and with fluency, intonation, and expression in his current level.

I may also decide to do this same kind of research with a student about whom I am concerned because he appears to be “stuck” in a level for longer than I expect. For a student who has been reading a level-L text for a while, I ask such questions as, “How does the chapter you’re reading now fit with the chapters that have come before?” because I know that he needs to know how to connect the story across chapters, or “Tell me about the characters in your book” because I want to determine if he is able to keep track of an increased number of characters, and is able to make inferences about who the characters are. I may peek at his Post-its to see if the student is responding to the text in any way that suggests that he is inferring or interpreting, that the student is thinking about a theme or big idea, or that the student is still using his Post-it notes merely to hold onto the information in each chapter. I may watch to see if a reader is using pictures to double-check
his comprehension or if the reader is overrelying on them to make sense of the text.

It is also possible that the research I do one day informs a conference that I do another day. I may look across conference notes for a span of time and realize that the student has mastered most or all of the skills that the current level demands, so I then choose to transition the student to the next level.

Methods for Moving Readers to a New Level

**Strategy Instruction to Move Readers to a New Level**

After researching and determining a student is ready to move to a new level, I may have that student choose a few books at that new level as well as a book or two from the level she is leaving. This student now has what Kathleen Tolan would call a “transitional” collection of books—some from the old level, some from the new. My goal in this conference is to help support a student with one of the demands of this new level. I teach the student one strategy to help with this new skill. Here is one example of how a conference like that might go.

**Research and Compliment**

“So, Shanique, I can see that you’ve chosen a few books from the *Judy Moody* series by Megan McDonald in order to try out this new level. And I can also see that you’ve kept some of your favorite series—*Fox and Friends*. Good. You’ve got some of each in your baggie. I want to give you a compliment,” I said.

“Uh-huh.”

“I like how you’ve chosen a few *Judy Moody* books. That’s a really smart thing to do when you’re moving to a new level. You know so much already from reading a bunch of books from the same series—these *Fox* books by James Marshall—and now when you get to this new level, you can use what you know from one book in the series to help you with the next book, and the next book, and the next book. It’s smart to pick a bunch of books from the same series when you move to a new level.”

This is an example of how a compliment can come from just simply noticing something the student is doing or has physical evidence of, such as things that might be written on Post-its, books in the student’s book baggie, or trends that you notice from looking at the student’s book log. Next, I taught Shanique
something by giving a quick example and explanation and supporting her in trying it out.

**Teach**

I said, “I can’t wait for you to get started in this new series because I think you’re really going to like these characters—Judy and her little brother Stink! Before you get started, though, I want to give you a little tip about something that might help you to feel like this new level is just right for you. You know how in *Fox and Friends* there are only a few characters you need to keep track of? There’s Fox and his little sister, his mother, and a few friends? Well, once you get to this new level, you’re going to come across a lot of characters right away. So one of the things that I like to do is to keep track of the characters by jotting a list of their names and something about them on a Post-it or in my notebook, and then I can refer back to it when I get confused.”

I pulled out a chapter book that I used often for conferring. It had a bunch of Post-its stuck into it with my own thinking from reading, and tabs that indicate places where I could demonstrate strategies from this book in a conference. I always carried this book with me because it helped me feel ready for just about anything I might encounter in a conference. I showed Shanique how I had a Post-it with my characters’ names on it and little reminders like “sister of Russell” and “next-door neighbor” and “tall, skinny teacher.” Then I took a moment to explain how this Post-it came to be.

I chose here just to give an example and explanation as my teaching method, although I also may have chosen to read the first chapter of a book and make the Post-it in front of Shanique, thinking aloud to demonstrate how I stop at the end of a page, ask myself if there are any new characters, model rereading to check to make sure I got it all straight, and record my thinking. The method I chose to use is considerably less supportive than demonstration and I chose it for two reasons. One, I knew about Shanique as a reader, and I knew that she was able to understand an explanation of how the strategy was used from past teaching I’ve done with her. The second reason was that I’ve already shown the class how to make character Post-its during a read-aloud so it wasn’t brand new to her. For students who are struggling and need the opportunity to see me work through the difficulty with the strategy, I would choose demonstration over this method. For strategies that have not been previously
taught in minilessons, prior conferences, or read-alouds, I also recommend demonstration. I began by explaining the strategy to her:

“So, as I was reading, I wrote down the characters’ name as I first saw it and then I read on asking myself, ‘How is this character related to the main character? What can I write down on my Post-it to make sure I remember who she is?’ and then I wrote it down. Do you see that?”

“Yeah. I see you put the characters’ names. You have a lot of characters in your book! Here you put down something about them, like how they look or who they are related to,” she said.

“You’ve got it. Why don’t you try this out? Read the first few pages of your book and take this Post-it to jot down the names of who you meet. Remember to ask yourself, ‘How is this character related to the main character, and what can I write down so I can remember who this person is?’”

As Shanique set off in her book, I opened up my conferring notes to Shanique’s section and recorded what I just did. I jotted down that I taught her a strategy for holding onto the many characters she’s going to meet in her new book. I made a note that I wanted to check in with her soon to make sure she was connecting one chapter to the next as well. I peeked at her book log and noticed that she had read a few books from the M&M series, which are longer level-K books, so I thought she might have had some experience with this important strategy of connecting the chapters that she will need in level-L books. By now, she’d had a few minutes to try the strategy of writing down character names to help her remember, so I peeked over her shoulder and saw that she’d written “Stink = Judy’s brother. He’s annoying to her. She wants him to leave her alone.”

“Shanique—good job identifying a new character. Take a peek at mine again. What do you notice that’s different between yours and mine?”

“Uh, you didn’t write as much as me.”

“Yeah. For the purpose of this strategy, you don’t need to retell the scene. Just jot something to help you remember who the character is in relation to the other characters. What, of all you’ve written, do you think you need to help you to do that?”

“Um, just that Stink is Judy’s brother,” she said.

“Okay. You don’t have to erase this, but for the next character, just jot down a quick note, okay?”

She continued and jotted down, “Rocky—Judy’s best friend.”
I reinforced the teaching point again and sent her back to read independently for a while. “Nice, Shanique. Keep up the good work of jotting down just the characters’ names and a quick reminder of how they are related to the main character, or a note to help you remember who they are. I’ll check back in with you soon to see how this book is working out for you!”

Book Introductions to Move Students to a New Level

Using book introductions as a method is unique to conferences for the purpose of moving students to a new level. Sometimes I feel that a student needs more than just a single strategy to help to transition her from one level to the next. This may be because the text that the reader has chosen has something unique about it in addition to being a new level. One example of this is if a student is moving from level K to L and has chosen the Amelia Bedelia series by Peggy Parish. This is a series that not only is challenging to a new level-L reader because of text density, vocabulary, and untagged dialogue—features typical of level L—but it also demands that readers know idioms. In a book introduction, I may decide to introduce the text so that the student understands the idioms, because without that understanding the whole fun of the book is lost.

Another example where I might want to give a book introduction is when the student has chosen to read a text that is set in a historical time period. In a higher-level book like level-T’s Bud, Not Buddy, by Christopher Paul Curtis, for example, the student needs to have some knowledge of the foster-care system, America in the 1930s, and the Great Depression. In introducing this book, I’d want to highlight a few key vocabulary words and concepts that would help the reader to understand and enjoy the book.

Of course, choosing this method of teaching in a conference requires that I know enough about the book to get the reader started. For this reason, it’s helpful to plan out the conference more than I normally would. I use Fountas and Pinnell’s guide in Guided Reading for a good book introduction to help me with this (Fountas and Pinnell 1996). I try to give away key elements of the plot, use the characters’ names in the introduction, or perhaps point to pictures (if there are any) to give a visual of what I’m saying while I’m introducing the text and to highlight key vocabulary words and concepts. In this kind of a conference, the teacher does a lot of the talking. This conference definitely
requires a follow-up soon after the initial one because I send the reader off to be independent after I introduce the text and coach slightly on only a small part.

The book-introduction conference may start by engaging the student in wanting to read the book. I might ask a question asking her to relate the main theme of the plot to her own life. If, for example, the character is jealous about a new baby sister on the way, I might ask the reader to remember a time when she’s been jealous.

Then, I summarize the plot. When I summarize the plot, I often give most of it away. Depending on the student, I turn the pages of the book as I talk about the story, pointing to pictures that are relevant and might help the student if she gets stuck along the way.

Next, I make sure to highlight particular things that might pose difficulty for the student. I keep in mind the reader might not have prior knowledge about a unique aspect of the text, such as time periods, difficult text features, or content. Here, my teaching method is to introduce the reader to what she’ll encounter in the text through explanation or even through showing photographs or relating it to an experience she has had.

**Balancing Instruction Focused on Levels and Instruction Toward Unit Goals**

It is crucial that this chapter is not misunderstood as a promotion of teaching skills only pertaining to reading level. It’s important that students have access to a rigorous whole-class curriculum through minilessons and read-alouds, and that my conferring not only supports my students in their levels, but also supports their thinking about the unit on which our class is focused.
Classroom Applications

- Study the levels of the books in your classroom. Having a sense of the characteristics of a reading level makes it a lot easier to confer when you aren’t familiar with the text.
- Know difficulties to introduce to help make a student’s transition to the next level smoother.
- Transfer your knowledge of reading levels to a conferring menu. This will help you to have planned out the research questions to assess for particular skills, and will provide you with a menu of possibilities for strategies to teach if you notice they’re not showing evidence of a skill.
- Think about the method of instruction that makes the most sense to help a student move to a new level. If what the reader most needs is instruction around a strategy, consider a research-decide-teach conference. If there is a book that poses some particular challenge that’s unique to the book—for example, it’s written about a time period that the reader doesn’t have knowledge of—you might consider using a method borrowed from guided reading and plan to introduce the text.
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