Leveled reading: The making of a literacy myth

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Among opponents of the Common Core, one of the more popular targets of vitriol is the standards' focus on improving literacy by introducing higher levels of textual complexity into the instructional mix. The move to challenge students with more knotty, grade-level reading material represents a shift away from decades of general adherence to so-called "instructional level theory," which encourages children to read texts pitched at or slightly above the student's individual reading level. New York public school principal Carol Burris, an outspoken standards critic and defender of leveled reading, recently published **an anti-Common Core missive** on the *Washington Post*'s *Answer Sheet* blog that was fairly typical of the form. Where, she wondered, "is the research to support: close reading, increased Lexile levels, the use of informational texts, and other questionable practices in the primary grades?"

The blog post, which has already been **intelligently critiqued by Ann Whalen** at *Education Post*, expanded on remarks delivered by Burris earlier this month at an **Intelligence Squared U.S. debate** with Fordham president Michael Petrilli and former assistant secretary of education Carmel Martin. There, too, she demanded evidence of literacy improvements arising from the use of complex texts.

A fair request and one that warrants a thorough response. But first, for the benefit of readers who are neither teachers nor literacy specialists, a quick explainer on how these **two theories** of reading work: In leveled reading, a teacher listens as her student reads a piece of text at a given reading level. If the child makes two-to-five mistakes per one hundred words, that is considered her "instructional" level. Zero or one mistakes means the book is too easy; six or more mistakes and that level is deemed her "frustration" level. Children are then offered lots of books at their "just right" level on the theory that if they read extensively and independently, language growth and reading proficiency will follow, setting the child on a slow and steady climb through higher reading levels. It sounds logical, and, as we will see, there are definite benefits to getting kids to read a lot independently.

By marked contrast, Common Core asks teachers to think carefully about what children read and choose grade-level texts that use sophisticated language or make significant knowledge demands of the reader (teachers should also be prepared, of course, to offer students support as they grapple with challenging books). Instead of asking, “Can the child read this?” the question might be, “Is this worth reading?”

Leveled reading is intuitive and smartly packaged (who wants kids to read “frustration level” books?), but its evidence base is remarkably thin. There is much stronger research support for teaching reading with complex texts.

What’s the source of the blind faith that Burris and others have in leveled reading instruction? “In the decades before Common Core, an enormous amount of the instruction in American elementary and middle schools has been with leveled text,” says David Liben, a veteran teacher and Senior Content Specialist at Student Achievement Partners. “The generally poor performance of our children on international comparisons speaks volumes about its effectiveness. To become proficient, students need to have the opportunity to read, with necessary support, rich complex text. But they also need to read—especially if they are behind—a huge volume and range of text types just as called for in the standards.” Students could read many of these less complex texts independently. “Instruction with complex text at all times is not what is called for, even by Common Core advocates,” Liben takes care to note.

Burris and others, however, offer a reflexive defense of leveled instruction. At the Intelligence Squared event, **she claimed that** “We know from years of developmental reading research that kids do best when they read independently with leveled readers.” Such surety is belied by a surprising lack of rigorous evidence. Literacy blogger Timothy Shanahan, a Distinguished Professor Emeritus of urban education at the University of Illinois at Chicago, **recently detailed** his discovery of the inauspicious origins of instructional level theory as a young scholar.

Made famous in Emmett Betts’s influential, now-little-remembered 1946 textbook *Foundations of Reading Instruction*, leveled reading theory actually emerged from a more obscure study conducted by one of Betts’s doctoral students. “I tracked down that dissertation and to my dismay it was evident that they had just made up those designations without any empirical evidence,” Shanahan wrote. When the study—which had in effect never been conducted—was “replicated,” it yielded wildly different results. In other words, there was no study, and later research failed to show the benefits of leveling. “Basically we have put way too much confidence in an unproven theory,” Shanahan concluded.

Experts have spent much of the last four decades unraveling elements of Betts's thesis, as Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey **recently demonstrated in *The Reading Teacher***, a popular journal. The authors, who work closely with the International Reading Association (IRA), were longtime advocates of leveled reading. Reexamining the published research in light of the new standards, however, they found that the use of leveled text beyond the very first years of primary school yielded no achievement gains in students. The belief that young readers should only be taught from texts that they understood to a level of 95 percent or higher—a stringent notion of comprehension first envisioned by Betts—has been found to be erroneous. Researchers William R. Powell and C.G. Dunkeld, as early as 1971, said that the 95 percent–cutoff was too high; and, **more recently**, academic Juliet Halladay condemned it as "somewhat arbitrary."

Even more striking to Fisher and Frey was the abundance of support for the use of more difficult reading material: "Surprisingly, we did find studies suggesting that students learn more when taught with texts that were above their instructional level." One such prominent study, though unheralded in their review, was that of the Science IDEAS model put forward by researchers Michael Vitale and Nancy Romance. The program, **which replaces eight weeks** of English Language Arts lessons with a regimen of complex science instruction for a group of third- to fifth-graders, was shown to not only enhance scientific aptitude among the group, but **also accelerate reading comprehension** through the use of complex science texts.

Another trial, **organized by specialists at Brigham Young University**, divided a swath of struggling students into three groups of "paired readers," each furnished with texts of a set difficulty level. Paired reading, a method by which two pupils read aloud together, has proven broadly successful in generating literacy gains among children; indeed, all three groups improved through the use of the paired system. But the greatest advance was made by the group using text that was two years above its instructional level. Burris has dismissed paired reading and the study as "idiosyncratic"; her meaning here is obscure, but she might have more simply described it as a proven, effective, and inexpensive way of helping children learn to read.

In addition to these studies, Shanahan, in the IRA journal *Reading Today Online*, lists twenty studies showing the efficacy of instruction with more complex text. Thus we have a significant and growing body of research providing support for this initiative.

> To be emphatically clear, none of this is data should be taken to advocate for a total phasing-out of texts students can read independently, many of which would be at lower levels of complexity. “Nowhere in the Common Core standards,” Liben concurs, “or in the work of these experts is it recommended that we abandon this practice. This is why the Core standards call for all students to read ‘widely and deeply.’ Not doing so would make it impossible to grow the vocabulary and knowledge essential to success.”

Russ Walsh, a teacher and curriculum director, making the case for leveled instruction in another *Answer Sheet* post, finally concedes that the best approach “is to balance our instruction between independent level, on-level, and frustration level texts.” On this we agree. But before Common Core, such balance was far less likely, too often denying our most needy students the opportunity to read, enjoy, and benefit from a full range of rich texts. As Alfred Tatum noted in the Fisher article cited above, “Leveled texts lead to leveled lives.”

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Tricia · 4 days ago

So, where does that leave/put Reading Recovery/Literacy Collaborative that is all about leveled reading, which schools have spent gobs of money on buying thousands of little booklets in both color (for classroom use) and black and white (to take home) and high salaries for teachers and coaches trained in this "intuitive and smartly packaged" theory?

Amily Demler · 3 days ago

As a current graduate student in a Reading and Literacy program, I am surprised to hear that educators relied so heavily on the Leveled text format to help struggling readers when there was so little evidence based (empirical) research done to support its efficacy. However, many teachers, in the past, have taken their district's or state's approach for Reading instruction at face value without questioning its usage or research due to a lack of time: and, for the mere truth that they wholeheartedly believed in what their administrators were advising them to use. I agree that students should not be reading books at levels that promote frustration in learning to read, because this will steer them away from the desire and motivation to read. But the 95% success should be re-examined as being too high or "easy". As long as the Common Core supporters realize that finding a balance between richer, more difficult texts and on level texts is necessary for students to make gains in their reading achievement w/o abandoning or omitting either type of reading instruction, then I see no problem with encouraging students to read beyond their years/levels. In fact, given the recent research findings about students' improved reading achievement using more complicated and meaningful text, I feel more

encouraged to have students read and enjoy a fuller range of text. As an ESL teacher, most of my students have no choice other than to read beyond their comprehension level - especially in the middle and high school grades. Their success depends on how well I can synthesize their reading material across the curriculum. If I can invoke prior knowledge, fill in their vocabulary gaps with images and graphic organizers, and draw meaning from what they are reading, then I feel confident in promoting their reading achievement.

Peter Fisher · 2 days ago

Levelled readers did not start with Fountas and Pinnell. There
have been graded readers since the McGuffey Readers of the 1830's. The move to having book bins with levelled texts was prompted by criticism of basal readers as being boring, and as not catering to students' interests.
Many elementary school teachers may limit their students to
only their instructional reading level, but many do not. They engage them in "book clubs" or "literature circles" where students can, and do, talk about important ideas in literature. The Common Core focus on complex texts asks us to extend this practice of reading meaningful literature by focusing not just on ideas, but on the author's craft – a welcome addition. However, the CCSS have often been interpreted as being all about complex text (ignoring their important descriptors of foundational skills), and in doing so suggested a dichotomy (levelled readers v. complex text) that no teacher should take seriously. We have been in a period where the focus has been on balanced instruction in literacy, and continued balanced instruction should be practiced. It is like the false debate about phonics – it is generally agreed that it is not about phonics or no phonics, it is about how much phonics and when. Similarly, we should be talking about how much complex text and when …
The focus on "scientifically-based" research ignores what many of us recognize as being another source of evidence … years of practice. Many teachers have found the Betts'

criteria useful for over 50 years, which is as an important piece of evidence as any carefully controlled study. (By the way, no-one argues for 95% comprehension – the 95% criterion is for reading accuracy. Instructional level for comprehension is 70-80%.) In addition to the cited articles, there are several that uphold the criteria as being useful and accurate (for most students).
I wish we could get beyond taking sides in education, and begin to listen to each other and respect the professional knowledge that we bring to the discussion.

Christine Calabrese Peter Fisher · 2 days ago

Indeed basal readers are boring and lack luster. They are not at all necessary if we teach our kids with good reading programs. The problem as you probably know, with "phonics" in a balanced literacy classroom is that it is NOT correlated to reading instruction. You have teachers, teaching a phonics skill and then reading in readers that are not at all connected. This produces weak readers. In addition, spelling is crucial and must be part of a good reading program. The homeschoolers are using programs that work and teaching their kids to read at ages 4 and 5. Put a parent in front of a kid and they will intuitively find what works and use it.

Christine Calabrese · 2 days ago

Presently, "Leveled Libraries" are the norm in every classroom I know of; teachers are instructed to “Level”

their books with baskets properly marked. The lists of books we have to level is enormous. I'm told there's an app now for teachers to do so and Irene Fountas & Gay Su Pinnell, who worked on Reading Recovery, have made a nice business out of this whole leveling problem, they have guidelines and tests which are widely used and accepted in our country. The levels range from A-Z+. Level A is the least difficult and Level Z+ the most.

Students must pick "Just Right" books to read as they go, "Shopping" in their classroom libraries. Teachers must "Conference" with students about the books they are reading. Each student must read independently at their "Level." Teachers question students individually on their reading. Cute and catchy phrases to disguise a grossly misleading and poorly constructed classroom reading curriculum. It is understandable that educators who are instructed in constructivism in ed schools, adhere quickly and easily to this. The problem with this whole production, is that teachers do not teach students to read, write and spell properly with this type of system.

We see struggling readers, remain struggling, or sent to the "Reading Recovery" teacher to recover, from a faulty program. "If your slow group is not learning to read with your program, your reading program doesn't work!" states author and reading expert Sue Dickson. I would add, "Throw it out and use something that works." All students in our classrooms can learn with direct, systematic, explicit instruction that is correlated with the following: phonics, spelling, writing, reading, reading comprehension, using decodable readers that are systematically and methodically introduced. Teaching phonics in isolation, as we were told with Leveled Libraries, does not work! Practice reading outloud in small group instruction must return to our early childhood classroom. That's it. Once students learn how to read we can have them read anything and much content with vocabulary development is very important. Leveled libraries are boring our bright students, who can already read, while slowing down our

non-readers by not teaching them how to read.
I suppose, to the unschooled reading instructor, "Leveled Libraries", seem logical; after all, they are graduated, they get more and more difficult as the reader becomes more and more fluent. It turns out, however, that these libraries are NOT at all following essential protocol to what years of reading research emphatically states. Our reading libraries DO need to be leveled, however, they must be DECODABLE, providing practice for the correlated phonics instruction in the classroom. This builds and strengthens reading ability. The reading material in a good program must get gradually harder, incorporating decodable words, however, the opposite occurs with the “Leveled Library” system we are using. Take an “A” book which is in a typical "Leveled Library," there you will find “sight words” and pictures with very difficult words to read. Good readers NEVER look at pictures to read words, they read words and use pictures to enhance understanding. After all, there can be a myriad of words to describe a picture. As the books advance in each level of the "Leveled Library" system, you will see that there is absolutely NO rhyme or reason to their decodability. Even at the lowest level you will find hard words that the most advanced reader might have difficulty decoding. Practice is crucial in learning to read, but Leveled Libraries do NOT provide the proper mix of practice. So we end up with kids guessing, using pictures and other problems to discover words. This is the antithesis of good reading instruction.
The Common Core Foundational Skills are clearly listed to admonish and instruct classrooms to teach reading properly. They are appropriate. The content in our texts is not a problem for students who have learned to read, however, let’s be very clear, students MUST LEARN TO READ before they can READ TO LEARN. Leveled Libraries are part of a system that is not working and will never work because it’s premise is essentailly flawed.

Natalie Wexler · 3 days ago

The problem with giving readers who are below grade-level reading that is on grade-level is that they may need a LOT of support, especially if they're in high school and have fallen far behind. They may lack the vocabulary and background knowledge to make sense of "rich, complex text." I agree that ideally, someone would work with them to help them access that text, but I don't see that most teachers these days will have the time or the resources to do that.

PL73 · 4 days ago

Good piece. I found leveled reading odd. One of my children felt compelled to lie to the school librarian by making false mistakes so she could read books her peers were reading because the librarian didn't want her to read books that were too easy. I have never understood why children shouldn't be reading most of what they want to at any level. Leveled reading seems too limited.

BeckY PL73 · 4 days ago

Books in library should should not be levelled. Levelled text are for instructional purposes. You don't want to tke the fun out if independent reading. Feel sorry for your

daughter!

PL73 BeckY · 4 days ago

Thank you. The librarian is actually very nice but was young. My sense is that she was trying to behave as she had been taught.
With electronic books so prevelent now, it is easy for students who use them to look up definitions so it might make reading more complex material easier for some who don't strive for it.

HERE IS THE ARTICLE REFERENCED IN THIS PIECE. WHAT I'M CURIOUS ABOUT IS WHY DID WE NEVER HEAR ANYTHING ABOUT SHANANHAN'S 2011 STATEMENT REGARDING LEVELED READING BEING "ALL MADE UP"?

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Content Area Literacy

Scaffolded Reading Instruction of Content-Area Texts

Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey

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Abstract

In this column, we focus on increasing text complexity during scaffolded, small group instruction. We begin with a discussion about the need to adjust expectations for leveled texts for older readers and then focus on the ways in which teachers can accomplish this.

When Alfred Tatum said that “leveled texts lead to leveled lives” at the 2013 Michigan Reading Association conference, we were shocked. After all, leveled

texts have become commonplace. Another shock to our understanding of reading instruction came from Timothy Shanahan, who suggested that the leveling system that most teachers use was “made up” (2011, np). What if the percentages that we use to identify frustrational, instructional, and independent texts were wrong? As documented by Shanahan, Betts (1946) simply estimated the accurate rates required for understanding, suggesting, for example, that students needed to be taught from texts they could read with 95% to 98% oral reading accuracy and with a reading comprehension of 75% to 89%. Others disagreed with these levels and recommended much lower rates of accuracy when instructional scaffolds are provided (e.g., Powell & Dunkeld, 1977).

In fact, there was an unheeded call for evidence to confirm that the criterion used for instructional and independent levels were accurate: “Research is needed to show that using materials at a certain instructional level does indeed bring optimum gains in children's ready achievement” (Powell &Dunkeld, 1977, p. 641). Citing the assumptions that underpin this leveling system (coupling decoding with comprehension, requiring near-perfect accuracy to advance, and equating oral to silent reading performance), Halladay (2012) cautioned that “teachers need to be aware of the somewhat arbitrary nature of the leveling criteria” (p. 57). What if the leveled texts teachers are using do not require much instruction and thus students fail to extend their reading repertoires? Could it be that instruction with more complex texts would result in improved student achievement?

Faced with some cognitive dissonance, we thought we had better do some investigating for ourselves. We could not find any compelling studies suggesting that leveled texts beyond the primary years resulted in significant gains in achievement. We did find a lot of articles describing guided reading using leveled texts, but not outcome studies.

Surprisingly, we did find studies suggesting that students learn more when taught with texts that were above their instructional level (Morgan, Wilcox, & Eldredge, 2000). Stahl and Heubach (2005), in their study with second graders, stated, “The results of this study suggest that children can benefit from reading material well below the 95% accuracy rate traditionally recommended for instruction. In fact, students appeared to benefit from reading stories in the first sampling even though they were reading them with an average accuracy rate of 85%, which would be considered frustration level” (p. 54).

We had to ask ourselves, should there be instructional times when students struggle with text? There is evidence that school texts starting in grade 3 have been getting easier (Hayes, Wolfer, & Wolfe, 1996). Have our expectations been lowered? Should we focus on scaffolding of complex texts rather than leveling texts, especially in content areas such as social studies, science, and art that require complex thinking about information?

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Inviting the Struggle

The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts included a game changer that has implications for all of the other standards: Anchor Standard 10 on text complexity. Its seemingly simple message—"to read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 10)—has proven to be difficult mainly because the supporting documents have defined for the first time what grade-level texts actually are. Gone are the days when teachers and curriculum writers could determine grade-level appropriate texts. The Common Core State Standards define appropriate quantitative levels for grade-level difficulty and acknowledge that qualitative factors, such as levels of meaning, text structure, language conventions, and knowledge demands, should be used to place texts within a grade as well as to identify teaching points.

Interestingly, the expectation that students read and understand increasingly complex informational text is not limited to states directly affected by the standards. Conversations about increasing expectations for readers, especially in the area of informational text, are occurring around the world. For example, the Reading to Learn project in Australia focuses on students' access of complex text (Rose & Martin, 2012). Teachers everywhere are increasingly expected to support students as they progress through increasing levels of text complexity.

The issue of raised expectations for students has distinct implications as it relates to teaching with and about content-area informational texts. The Common Core State Standards emphasize knowledge building through language and literacy, and texts about the physical, biological, and social worlds are the premier source. As well, there has been laudable attention to the issue of increasing exposure to informational texts upon entry to school (Duke, 2001).

However, the practice of limiting access to complex texts is built on a shaky foundation that may oversimplify what readers are able to do even when decoding accuracy and comprehension are not nearly perfect. As well, instruction with leveled texts for older readers assumes that the text should serve as the primary scaffold, even in the presence of a skilled teacher working in an ideal teaching arrangement—the small group—which is a prominent feature of guided reading instruction. This raised another question for us: Shouldn't the teacher, rather than the text, serve as the primary source of scaffolds?

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Instruction of Complex Informational Texts

Teaching students to read and understand complex informational text requires a wide range of instructional routines. Teachers should read aloud to students, modeling their thinking about such things as text structure, word solving, and comprehension strategies so that skills are built and habits are formed (Regan &

Berkeley, 2012). Students should be expected to read widely from texts that they want to read, building their background knowledge and vocabularies while developing morally, emotionally, and intellectually (Ivey & Johnston, 2013). And students should read collaboratively with their peers, discussing the information found in the texts that they read (Clark et al., 2003). These are common practices that will serve students well as new expectations for text complexity are implemented. It cannot be overstated—learners need a host of experiences with rich informational texts and a sliding scale of scaffolds and supports to access the information contained within them.

Close reading is a comparatively newer instructional practice in K–12, although it has long been used at the college level. The intent of this analytical reading approach is to promote careful inspection of complex, rather than leveled, text to extract meaning, build knowledge, draw conclusions, and formulate arguments that are supported by textual evidence. Close reading, which is often done with the entire class, relies on a degree of scaffolding, especially through the use of repeated readings, text-dependent questions, annotation, and extended discussion (Fisher & Frey, 2012).

However, teachers can unintentionally create a major gap in supporting the learning of students if a close reading is followed with small-group instruction with leveled texts. During close reading students engage with a complex piece of informational text. But in conventional small-group reading instruction, the text is selected to match the reader, often applying the questionable decision-making model suggested by Betts (1946).

There is nothing sudden about this release of responsibility; instead students fail to develop the habits necessary to access complex text from the very structure that was intended to provide that access. The gradual release of responsibility framework suggests that the process is more intentional. Having implemented close reading, we have been asking ourselves: Where is the opportunity for students to work through a challenging piece of informational text while benefiting from intensive teacher contact? In other words, can we level up the text during small-group, scaffolded reading instruction?

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Level Up During Scaffolded Reading Instruction

Scaffolded reading is an important component of the reading instructional day, as it affords teachers time to observe and interact with a small group of students for an extended period of time (usually 20–30 minutes). This may be the most valuable real estate in the school day, as teachers can attest to the limited opportunities to customize instruction to address the needs of an individual student. A small-group reading arrangement such as this further provides students and the teacher with the opportunity to talk at length about the learning, especially to pose questions, engage in speculation, support and challenge claims, and draw conclusions.

So doesn't it follow that this is exactly the time to ramp up the complexity level of an informational text? Keep in mind that the central practice of guided instruction is to provide scaffolds as needed in the form of questions to check for understanding, prompts to trigger cognitive and metacognitive thinking, and cues to shift attention to salient information when the prompts are insufficient (Fisher & Frey, 2010). The opportunity to closely observe students in the act of reading and thinking is still there. However, we believe there is value in observing what a learner does when confronted with informational text that challenges his or her thinking, and not just his or her ability to decode and comprehend at a surface level. We want to watch how students construct knowledge and schema, as this is the linchpin for reading analytically.

This is not to say that the sky is the limit and that every child should be able to read any text given the proper teacher scaffolding. Scaffolded reading is a time to stretch students to grapple with text that is more difficult than they can access on their own. This principle of scaffolding is at the heart of Vygotskian pedagogy. Reasoned selection of informational text should involve consideration of the content, the process students will engage in to interact with the content, and the product that will result (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010).

These principles of differentiated instruction provide a decision-making framework for adjusting each to stretch, but not break, learners. They also make it clear to us that the text alone doesn't need to be the only instrument of differentiation. Fourth-grade students learning about electricity aren't expected to read *Electrical Principles and Theoretical Constructs* (we made that title up). But *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* (Kamkwanba & Mealer, 2012) can offer them a suitably challenging read that extends their vocabulary, critical thinking skills, and scientific understanding. By attending to the type and number of scaffolds needed (process), an observant teacher can make decisions about products, instead of simply discarding the text in favor of an easier one (content).There are at least three ways to scaffold reading instruction with complex informational texts: as an extension of a close reading, as a preview for later reading, or as an opportunity to address the skill needs of specific students.

Sometimes, scaffolded small-group reading instruction is used as an extension of the close reading students have done. For example, after a close reading of the Silly Putty chapter from the book *Toys! Amazing Stories Behind Some Great Inventions* (Wulffson, 2000), fourth-grade teacher Marla Henderson met with small groups of students and guided their development of text-dependent questions. Her class had already learned a great deal about questioning, including the relationship between questions and answers (Raphael & Au, 2005), and her scaffolded reading instruction focused on students reading at or above grade level so that they could develop questions they could use in their collaborative discussions with their peers. For example, Devon said that they should ask about the text structure, saying “The structure is chronological and that's important because each step was important for the invention. We should

ask a question about that so that we reread the text looking for the all of the events that created Silly Putty." Alea added, "And we should ask about the roles that different people had because each person is important in the success of Silly Putty."

At other times, scaffolded small-group reading instruction is used to prepare students for close reading or collaborative reading tasks. In his fifth-grade class, Bart Hopple meets with small groups of students, scaffolding their reading with a text that serves to build students' knowledge for the reciprocal teaching they will do with primary source documents. With a group of students who perform below grade level, Mr. Hopple used a complex text (810L), *The History of US* (Hakim, 2005), to guide their thinking. As they read and discussed the chapter "Plains Indians are not Plain at All," Mr. Hopple asked students to describe the living conditions of the Plains Indians and discuss their traditions and beliefs and the changes these people experienced over time. As Seyo says, "They used to be poor, but when they traded buffalo skins for guns, they could get more food and live better." Arturo adds, "Yeah, and then they didn't farm so much because they could live on the buffalo. Their way of life changed a lot."

Scaffolded, small-group reading instruction can also be used to address the assessed needs of specific students. For example, sixth-grade science teacher Jorge Cabrera noticed that there were several students still having difficulty with comparing and contrasting. He met with them to provide scaffolded reading instruction. In this case, he used a selection from a science textbook, specifically a section about three major rock types. He asked the students to read the first section, focused on igneous rocks. When they finished the couple of paragraphs, he asked them to discuss the text and summarize their discussion on a compare and contrast graphic organizer. He noted that his students were able to do this successfully. The students were then asked to read the section on sedimentary rocks, which they did.

Then Mr. Cabrera asked them to update their graphic organizers before talking with their peers. They had difficulty with the similarities, but successfully identified a number of differences. He focused their conversation on the ways that these two types of rocks were similar. As he noted, "Remember we have to both compare and contrast, meaning that we have to think about how two things are similar and how they are different. Let's focus for now on the similarities. Let's look back at the text and see what we can find." This process continued, as students read a complex piece of text, with the support of their teacher, practicing the skill that they needed to develop.

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Using Small-Group Scaffolded Reading Instruction Wisely

Our review of the research, not to mention our direct experiences, suggests that

instruction with leveled informational text beyond the primary grades has not paid the dividends promised. As students are learning to read, practice with highly decodable books filled with high-frequency words, sight words, and patterns is important so that students develop automaticity (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). However, the practice of routinely using leveled texts with students in the upper grades has been problematic, and there are far too many students who are in leveled texts all the way through school, until they drop out. We can change that.

But we're not suggesting that everything change. Implementation of the Common Core State Standards continues to require expert teacher modeling, small-group instruction, formative assessments, and attention to all aspects of literacy (e.g., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension).

It's just that small-group scaffolded reading instruction should not rely on the text as a primary scaffold. With the new emphasis on text complexity, all students should have access to complex informational texts and opportunity to learn with texts beyond what we have incorrectly considered their instructional level. It's time to ramp up the text complexity levels as part of the scaffolded instruction that teachers provide. Hopefully, this will allow for increased expectations for students' such that they think critically about the information contained in the texts they read. When that is done, students will no longer be sentenced to reading texts that are far below their grade level, essentially independently, in the presence of their teacher. Instead, the teacher will serve as a primary scaffold, assisting students up the staircase of informational text complexity.

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