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What kind of text—For whom and when? Textual scaffolding for beginning readers

You can use text as a teaching tool for scaffolding. The effective uses of simple predictable text, transitional text, decodable text, easy readers, and authentic literature are highlighted here.

Which kind of text is best for beginning readers? Growing numbers of teachers are asking this question with increasing urgency. In response, supporters of particular types of text often square off in acrimonious debate, with each side touting its choice as most appropriate for beginning readers. Some advocate predictable text that emphasizes rhythm, rhyme, and repetition. Others advocate decodable text with its emphasis on common letter-sound relationships. Still others contend that beginning readers should read primarily authentic literature. When the question is framed this way, it sets up a forced choice: If one text is chosen, then the others must be rejected.

However, if one considers the robust body of research on emergent literacy and beginning reading, it becomes clear that this choice is neither necessary nor helpful. Research indicates that learning to read is a developmental process during which students make predictable, gradual, *qualitative* changes over time (Adams, 1990; Biemiller, 1970; Bissex, 1980; Chall, 1967, 1983; Clay, 1987; Ehri, 1991, 1998; Juel, 1991; Mason, 1984; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Sulzby & Teale, 1991). That is, young readers' interactions with text change as they move from learning about print, and how it works, to the labors of learning to decode, and on to the growing independence that fluency brings. As young readers make these changes, teachers need to change their instruction to nurture students' new abilities and promote continued progress. I suggest that we view text in a similar way. As students make progress as readers, teachers should provide text that supports and extends that progress.

Viewed this way, text becomes an instructional tool known as scaffolding. Scaffolding has theoretical roots in both cognitive psychology and social constuctivism (Bruner, 1986; Gavelek, 1986; Langer, 1984; Palincsar, 1986; Scardamalia, Bereiter, & Steinbach, 1984; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). In the classroom, scaffolding may take the form of modeling, thinking aloud, reminding, and coaching (for a review of these teaching actions, see Roehler & Duffy, 1991). For example, a teacher may think aloud in front of the class to demonstrate how she (or he) revises her predictions when she gets new information from a story. Later, she reminds students to use this strategy as they read independently. When some students experience difficulty, she coaches them in small groups and one-on-one as needed. Each of these teaching actions is an example of scaffolding because it helps learners accomplish what they are almost, but not quite, able to do independently. Vygotsky called this working in the "zone of proximal development" and believed it to be the "only good kind of instruction [because it] marches ahead of development and leads it" (1962, p. 104).

As students make progress, teachers gradually withdraw scaffolding until it is no longer

  (pp. 292–307)

needed (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). From there, they develop new scaffolding appropriate for the new proximal zone of development and the process is repeated (Gavelek, 1986; Greenfield, 1984; Vygotsky, 1978).

The use of text as scaffolding

Although instructional scaffolding is usually verbal, the idea can be extended easily to text. That is, using particular types of text at particular times in readers' development is a material way to support their progress. Just as teachers reduce verbal scaffolding when students become more able, textual scaffolding also can be reduced gradually—until it is no longer necessary. For example, simple predictable texts are well suited for helping children develop awareness of how books work. As young readers gain control over the English alphabetic system, other types of textual scaffolding, such as transitional and decodable text, become more appropriate. Eventually, these texts can be replaced with more challenging, less controlled "easy readers" that support young readers' growing fluency, background knowledge, and independence.

This idea of textual scaffolding allows us to reframe our original question about text for beginning readers. Rather than asking "which is best," we can ask, "Which *type* of text is best suited to achieve *what* purposes with *whom*, and *when*?" Framing the question this way helps teachers address the wide range of student abilities that are not likely to be met by "one-size-fits-all" text. By matching different types of text with students' development, teachers are able to work in young readers' changing zones of proximal reading development—the bridge between what they know about the reading process and what they still need to learn.

The remainder of this article uses a vignette to explore some concrete ways teachers can use textual scaffolding in their classrooms with beginning readers. The vignette is based on dozens of conversations with elementary teachers whom I have come to know in my capacity as a teacher educator and researcher. The content and spirit of these conversations are represented collectively through Barbara's and Linda's voices—the two main characters in the vignette. All names used in the article are pseudonyms. These conversations have informed my own thinking about the theory and practice of teaching beginning readers. I hope they prove helpful to other teachers and teacher educators as they think about these issues in the course of their work.

Textual scaffolding in the classroom

Barbara and Linda have taught first grade for more than a dozen years at High Meadows Elementary School. High Meadows is located in a U.S. metropolitan area in the intermountain west. Its students come from middle and working class families whose ethnic backgrounds may be Caucasian, Hispanic, African American, or Pacific Islander. For the most part, High Meadows students tend to make good progress as readers during their first formal year of schooling. However, every year some students leave first grade without experiencing the reading success they, their parents, and their teachers expected.

Rather than asking "which is best," we can ask, "Which type *of text is best suited to achieve* what *purposes with* whom, *and* when?"

In ongoing efforts to help all their students succeed as readers, Barbara and Linda have developed a comprehensive, research-based literacy program. Both teachers read aloud to students frequently, drawing on a wide variety of text types and genres (Cullinan & Galda, 1994; Hiebert & Raphael, 1998). They systematically and explicitly teach students how to use their knowledge of letters and sounds to identify words (Adams, 1990). They stress that reading is about constructing meaning and model the kinds of comprehension strategies successful readers use (Pressley et al., 1997).

Barbara and Linda also facilitate reading and writing workshops (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1994). During workshops, students personally respond to the texts they've encountered in journals, discussions, story writing, and cooperative projects. The 6-year-olds in these teachers' adjoining classrooms are thoroughly involved in reading, listening to, discussing, and writing about books for a significant part of the school day.

Barbara and Linda are pleased with their literacy program. However, like all good teachers, they are not content to rest on their laurels. "Teachers are like sharks," Barbara laughed, "We have to move forward, or we die!" Their most recent effort to move forward involved thinking about how to best use the texts they have collected for their classrooms. Both teachers have invested considerable time and expense in making these rooms literacy rich. In addition to out-of-pocket expenditures, Barbara and Linda have held fund-raisers, scoured garage sales, and scavenged school dumpsters. The result of these efforts is an impressive assortment of texts—big books, little books, award-winning picture story books, poetry, fairy tales, alphabet books, nonfiction picture books, chapter books, old basals, wall charts, and magazines. Barbara explained,

> We've made enormous strides in the past 10 years, simply in the number and variety of books our students have access to *in the classroom.* We've come a long way from the days when our classrooms were dominated by basal readers and a few dog-eared discards from the public library.

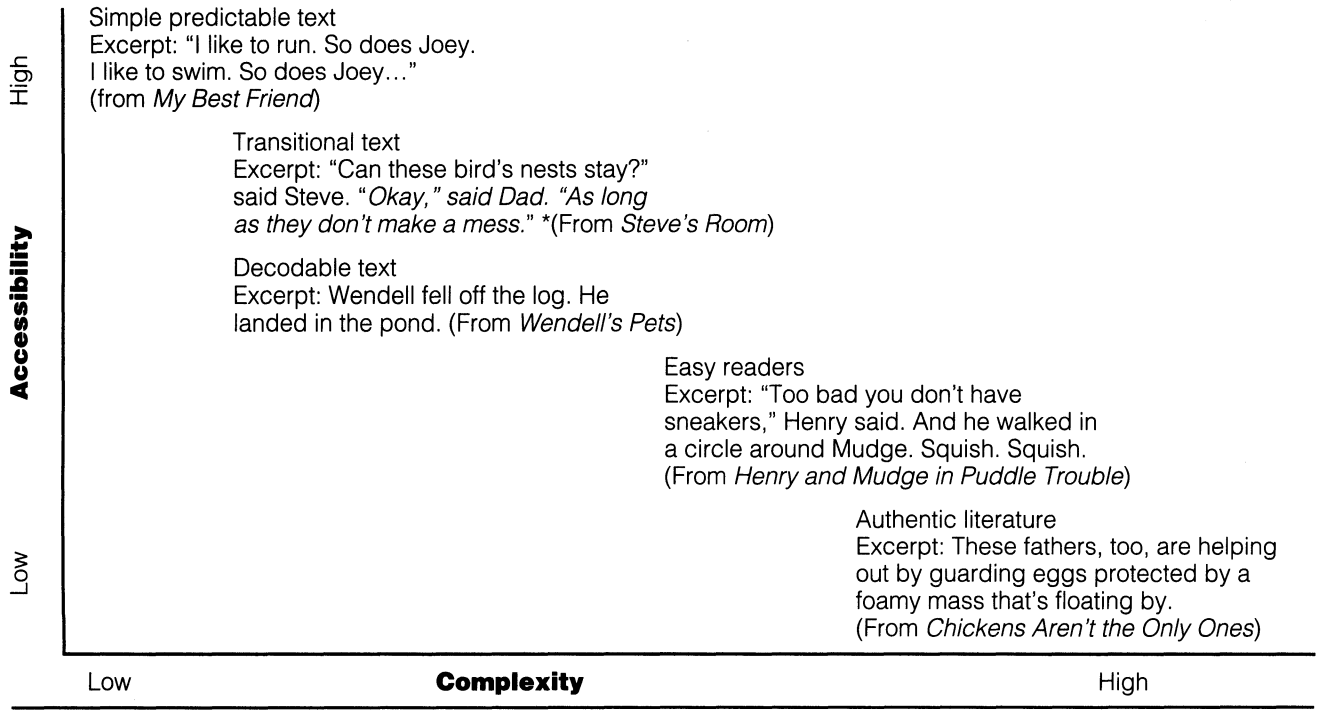
A brief glimpse into Linda's classroom is illustrative. On a Wednesday in February, shortly before afternoon recess, Linda asks her first graders to "Drop Everything And Read" (DEAR). Students choose texts from shelves, tubs, and racks and then sprawl comfortably around the room. Linda retrieves a novel from her backpack and perches on an empty desk to read. "We call it 'not-so-silent' sustained reading," she quips, referring to the steady hum of 6-year-olds reading softly—or not so softly—to themselves. Both teachers believe that daily, independent reading contributes to two important literacy goals: It builds students' motivation to read and helps them gain fluency in recognizing words and constructing meaning. This belief is supported by the research literature (see Pearson & Fielding, 1991, for a review) and by the two teachers' experiences. Barbara and Linda have observed that, over time, even rambunctious 6-year-olds come to expect and enjoy daily time to read self-selected books.

Success to date notwithstanding, participation in a university master's program (where I met them) led the two teachers to see their classroom libraries as having even greater potential. During a graduate-level class on beginning reading, I initiated a discussion on the role of text in primary-grade classrooms. Barbara and Linda found two points from the research literature especially salient. First, they were intrigued by evidence that repeated readings of instructional-level text help struggling readers improve not only in accuracy, speed, and expression, but also in comprehension (see Pearson & Fielding, 1991). Second, the teachers were interested in the idea that once students begin "breaking the code," their fluency can be enhanced by reading decodable text (Beck, 1981; Juel & Roper/Schneider, 1985; Stein, Johnson, & Gutlohn, in press).

As they thought about these ideas, Barbara and Linda began to reflect on the texts in their classrooms. Were some types of text better suited to meeting the needs of beginning readers than others? What made a text decodable? Did using decodable texts mean a return to the "Nan can fan Dan" genre they had rejected years before? What about students who did well with simple predictable books, but struggled with any text they hadn't memorized? Barbara and Linda talked at school and brought their questions to class. The other primary-grade teachers echoed these questions and added more. In particular, several were struggling with their classrooms' new literature anthologies. Teachers and students alike were delighted with the high-interest, authentic selections, but many of those selections proved too difficult for all but advanced beginners (Hoffman et al., 1998). Teachers responded by reading the anthologies aloud, but then scrambled to supplement with texts the students could read on their own. The teachers raised these issues with a heightened sense of urgency; they were haunted by research that foreshadows a downward spiral of achievement and motivation for young readers who do not experience success (Juel, 1988; Stanovich, 1986)

Using their questions as a springboard for action research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Zeichner, 1994), I asked the primary-grade teachers to go back to their classrooms to determine what kinds of text were available and to bring samples to class the following week. Consistent with then current trends (Baumann & Heubach, 1996; Chall & Squires, 1991), most teachers brought a published basal series and trade books. Thus, most primary grade classrooms had some access to authentic literature,

Figure 1
Relationship between text accessibility and complexity for beginning readers when reading independently



* Italicized text is repeated several times

simple predictable text, transitional text, decodable text, and "easy readers."

To begin the discussion, I suggested that making decisions about text for beginning readers required an understanding of different text types and their respective strengths and limitations. The most obvious difference comes from the level of control an author uses in word choice, sentence structure, and even the amount of text on a page (see Figure 1). Authors of simple, predictable, transitional, decodable, and, to a lesser extent, easy reader text, use this control to make what they write accessible to beginning readers. However, that accessibility has an inverse relationship with complexity. That is, the *most accessible* texts also are those with the *least complex* content. Excerpts from a simple predictable text like *My Best Friend* by Deborah Sycamore, a transitional text like *Steve's Room* by Mindy Menschell, and a decodable text like *Wendell's Pets* by Anne and Robert O'Brien illustrate this point (see Figure 1). Publication information for all children's books cited can be found in the list at the end of this article. None of these books can be confused with award-winning literature, but each is accessible to beginning readers—albeit in different ways. Easy readers like *Henry and Mudge in Puddle Trouble* by Cynthia Rylant are more complex, and therefore more difficult, but still accessible to young readers who have established some fluency.

In contrast, authors of authentic literature and nonfiction are not bound by accessibility constraints. They are free to craft sentences and choose words that meet their literary and artistic goals. This freedom yields texts with rich plots and detailed, complex information. It also makes those texts less accessible to beginners reading on their own. An excerpt from the award-winning nonfiction text *Chickens Aren't the Only Ones,* by Ruth Heller, provides a case in point (see Figure 1). The word choices, sentence structures, and even the amount of text in this popular informational text can be daunting for most beginners, but it engages adults and children alike when read aloud by a mature reader.

As the teachers and I discussed the potential strengths and limitations of these different text types, it quickly became apparent that no single one could be supported as "best" for beginning readers. Instead, it seemed more compelling to treat text as scaffolding, which meant using particular types of text at particular points in students' reading development. Of course, everyone agreed that students should hear plenty of authentic literature and nonfiction read aloud, regardless of what they can negotiate on their own. In short, we concluded that primary-grade classrooms stand to benefit from informed use of *many* different types of text.

Barbara and Linda took these ideas about textual scaffolding back to High Meadows Elementary and put them to work. Like many other first graders, their students ranged widely in their knowledge about literacy. For example, every year several students began first grade having had relatively few experiences with books and knowing few letter names and sounds. It was clear that the needs of these students differed significantly from those who had experienced thousands of hours of lap reading at home and had entered first grade fluently reading books like *Amelia Bedelia* by Peggy Parish.

The following student profiles show how Barbara and Linda used textual scaffolding to support three students who began first grade at very different places in their reading development. It is important to remember that the instruction described is *just one piece* of these teachers' comprehensive literacy program.

Travis: Learning About Print

Travis transferred to Linda's first-grade classroom in early October when his parents moved to take advantage of employment opportunities. Quick to make friends, Travis fit in socially right away. He especially enjoyed fast-moving action games at recess. He gained immediate popularity when he introduced a macabre song about Barney the purple dinosaur—a television character the first-grade boys viewed with derision.

Linda's initial reading assessment indicated that Travis enjoyed listening to and talking about stories. He could write and identify the letters in his first name with certainty, but it was hit and miss with most others. At sight, he could read *mom*, *dad*, *look*, and his own name—which he said had a "snake at the end and a *t* in the front." With any word outside this small corpus, his miscues bore little or no relationship to what was written on the page. These behaviors resemble Ehri's (1998) shift from the prealphabetic phase to the partial alphabetic phase. That is, beginning readers who have relied on salient, nonletter cues to identify words (e.g., the snake at the end of my name) begin to rely more heavily on their limited but growing knowledge of letters and sounds (e.g., the *t* in the front).

When Linda worked through a picture book with him, Travis was aware of front-to-back, top-to-bottom, and left-to-right directionality, but unsure about some of the other conventions of print, such as concept of word. With regard to phonological awareness, Travis could clap out syllable beats, but was unable to split onsets from rimes. Linda reviewed what she had learned about Travis as a reader and concluded that he was in the initial phase of reading development: Learning About Print (see Figure 2).

Linda was familiar with research suggesting that students who lack a strong foundation in book experiences have a pressing need to "learn about print" before learning how to "break the code" (Adams, 1990; Chall, 1983; Clay, 1987; Sulzby & Teale, 1991). This means understanding that print carries important meaning, developing a working knowledge of directionality in text, and developing a concept of word; that is, understanding that the groups of letters bounded by white space correspond to individual words in speech (Clay, 1987; Henderson, 1980; Morris, 1981). Learning About Print also means learning to manipulate sounds in speech and learning letter names and their corresponding sounds in preparation for learning to decode and spell (Morris, 1993). Last, but certainly not least, it means developing an appreciation of text as a resource for both pleasure and learning.

As one way to support students working in this phase of reading development, Linda used shared reading of fiction and nonfiction text (Cunningham, 1995; Holdaway, 1979). In doing so, she was explicit about how readers move through text. She made statements like, "I know that we always start up here and on this side." She tracked print with her finger as she read along and encouraged students to join in with the reading. Afterwards, she asked for volunteers to

Figure 2
Developmental reading phases and their characteristics

Phase 1: Learning About Print
- understands that print is used to construct meaning
- developing knowledge of print conventions (e.g., concept of word)
- developing knowledge of letter names and sounds
- developing basic levels of phonological awareness (e.g., detecting rhymes, syllable awareness)
- uses prior knowledge to construct meaning
- developing basic comprehension strategies (e.g., predicting, inferencing)
- developing knowledge about and appreciation for different types of text
- increasing motivation to become literate
- increasing motivation to read for pleasure and information
- relies heavily on memory, pictures, context, and selected letter cues to read text

Phase 2: Breaking the Code
- understands the alphabetic principle (i.e., letters map to sounds in words)
- developing more advanced levels of phonological awareness (e.g., blending, segmentation)
- developing knowledge of simple spelling patterns (e.g., blends, digraphs, phonograms)
- developing sight word vocabulary (e.g., *said*, *come*, *was*)
- developing knowledge of decoding strategies (e.g., blending, chunking)
- uses prior knowledge to construct meaning
- continuing development of basic comprehension strategies (e.g., predicting, inferencing)
- establishing coordination of decoding and comprehension strategies
- increasing motivation to become literate
- increasing motivation to read for pleasure and information
- relies heavily on knowledge of letter-sound correspondences to read text
- may read aloud in a halting manner
- may produce nonsense words when reading aloud

Phase 3: Going for Fluency
- developing more advanced levels of phonological awareness (e.g., segmentation, deletion)
- developing knowledge of more complex spelling patterns (e.g., phonograms, prefixes, suffixes)
- increasing automaticity in word identification
- increasing fluency and expression when reading aloud
- using a chunking strategy to identify unfamiliar polysyllabic words
- using prior knowledge to construct meaning
- continuing development of comprehension strategies (e.g., predicting, inferencing)
- developing more sophisticated comprehension strategies (e.g., reading to learn, monitoring understanding, summarizing)
- increasing coordination of decoding and comprehension strategies
- increasing motivation to read for pleasure and information

identify one letter and its sound, two letters, one word, two words, big words, and little words (Cunningham, 1995; Holdaway, 1979; Mason, Peterman, & Kerr, 1989; Slaughter, 1993).

Linda wanted Travis to spend time reading connected text that supported this instruction. When she asked herself which kind of text is best suited to helping students develop print awareness and appreciation, she turned to simple predictable text. Its unique characteristics provide textual scaffolding for students who are learning about print at a basic level (see Figure 3). Simple predictable text is controlled to emphasize rhyme, rhythm, and repetition (Watson, 1997). This feature—coupled with simple, familiar story lines, illustrations that closely match the text, simple sentence structures, and few lines of print per page—significantly reduces the demands on students' word identification abilities. Once students hear a predictable text read aloud a few times (sometimes just once), they can rely on memory along with context and illustrations to negotiate the text independently (Slaughter, 1993; Watson, 1997). In contrast, when beginning readers try to read authentic literature on their own, word identification demands often stymie their efforts (Beck & Juel, 1995). Simple predictable texts also offer a range

Figure 3
Simple predictable text

Characteristics
- difficulty increases gradually across levels of text
- text controlled to emphasize repetition, rhythm, and rhyme
- often includes polysyllabic and low-frequency words
- simple sentence structures
- illustrations support and extend text
- limited plot/information
- restricted amount of text per page

Examples
Have You Seen My Cat? by Eric Carle
I Am Frightened by Joy Cowley
Breakfast by Virginia King

Strategies beginning readers rely on to read simple predictable text
- using memory
- tracking print with finger
- using context clues
- using illustration clues
- identifying the first sound and making an educated guess
- using sight word knowledge
- using prior knowledge to construct meaning
- monitoring comprehension (does it make sense?)

Most effective instructional uses
- for enjoyment during shared and independent reading
- to model the concept that print has meaning
- to model "how books work" (e.g., directionality, concept of word)
- to provide independent practice in print awareness
- to develop students' oral reading fluency and expression

of levels increasing in difficulty, from the simplest texts with a line or so of very predictable text per page, to those that offer a bit more challenge in the form of slightly more text and some variation in language patterns (Chall, Bissex, Conrad, & Harris-Sharples, 1996; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

One example of simple predictable text is *I Am Frightened* by Joy Cowley. Readers are supported by the simple refrain "I am frightened of the..." on seven of the book's eight pages. They can use the illustrations along with initial consonant sounds to identify the words that change with each successive page (e.g., *spider*, *bird*, *cat*, *dog*). The story concludes with a question that anticipates the reader's personal connection to the text: "What are you frightened of?"

With these characteristics in mind, Linda used simple predictable books like *Honk!* by Sue Smith during small-group time with Travis and other students who were learning about print. To begin, she encouraged the students to preview the book and make some predictions to build and activate their background knowledge. She followed this activity by teaching one or two important high-frequency words she told the students that they would encounter in the text. Then, Linda read the book aloud while tracking the print and stopping occasionally to ask students what they had learned about their predictions. Next, she invited students to share in the reading as she read the text aloud a second time. Finally, Linda got the students started reading their own versions of the text and asked them to finish it independently while tracking print with their fingers. When polysyllabic words sometimes caused them to "get lost," Linda taught them to use their knowledge of beginning sounds to reorient themselves.

Within a few days, Linda began to see clear signs of progress. During DEAR time, she often observed Travis with his head bent over simple predictable fiction and nonfiction texts like *Can You Find It?* by Amy John Casey and *Animal Homes* by Betsey Chessen and Pamela Chanko. Travis was persistent about "not having any words left over" when he finished reading each page. This hurdle overcome, he often reread the book—with greater fluency and expression—with a reading partner looking on appreciatively. At this point, Linda knew Travis was ready for the next level: simple predictable books with a bit more text and a bit more variation in language and sentence structure. This challenge would give him greater opportunities to use what he was learning about print. Linda commented,

> Appreciating books and what they can do for us is important for students of any age, but I feel like it's just critical for kids like Travis who begin first grade with few book experiences. Simple predictable books give them an initial taste of success *and* provide important knowledge about how books work—without the frustration of having to decode.

Shamika: Breaking the Code

Shamika, a tall, wiry 6-year-old with a winning smile, entered Barbara's first-grade classroom "ready to roll." On the first day, she proudly announced that she knew every letter in the alphabet—upper *and* lower case—and lost no time proving it. As she explored the classroom, she worked at sounding out the cards that

labeled common objects like *wall*, *desk*, and *rug*. In addition to action games, Shamika loved to "play school"—casting herself as the teacher whenever the opportunity arose.

Barbara's initial reading assessment suggested that Shamika had entered first grade with many book experiences under her belt. During storytime, Shamika tried to restrain herself from giving away the ending to books she knew by heart. In addition to having a firm grasp on letter names and sounds, Shamika had a modest sight word vocabulary. She could recognize several high-frequency words like *said* and *the*, and sound out short, phonetically regular words like *mat*, *pen*, *sit*, and *cup*. With more complex words, she sampled a few letters and used context to guess. When Shamika took a turn in the Poem Corner, she easily tracked print with her finger as she chanted familiar rhymes aloud. All told, it was clear to Barbara that this first grader had mastered the Learning About Print phase of reading development. She knew this meant instruction should focus on the next phase: Breaking the Code (see Figure 2).

The term "breaking the code" refers to a well documented and important transition in learning to read (Biemiller, 1970; Ehri, 1991, 1998; Gough & Hillinger, 1980; Juel, 1991; Mason, 1984). This transition occurs when partial alphabetic readers move from using a few letter-sound correspondences to identify words, to using the entire word in their endeavors—what Ehri (1998) called the "full alphabetic phase." Shamika's ability to sound out short, phonetically regular words indicated that she was moving in this direction. It is interesting to note that, with or without formal instruction, readers in this phase of development sometimes read aloud in a word-by-word, halting manner, and sometimes produce "nonsense errors" that they fail to self-correct—a phenomenon Chall (1983) described as being "glued to print" (Bissex, 1980; Soderberg, 1977; Sulzby, 1985). Researchers speculate that this happens because beginning readers have not yet developed the deep knowledge of spelling patterns that allows more mature readers to recognize most words automatically (Ehri, 1998). As beginners gain this knowledge, they read more smoothly, with greater expression, and the number of nonsense errors decreases (Biemiller, 1977–78; Chall, 1983; Juel, 1991). Thus, Breaking the Code is the bridge between *learning about* print and *being fluent with* print.

To support Shamika and other students in this phase of reading development, Barbara taught them how to bulldoze through words by blending sounds together (Calfee, 1998) and checking to see if their attempts made sense (e.g., /sh/-/u/-/t/ = *shut* in "Shut the box, Tom"). Once the students showed some facility with blending, Barbara introduced the use of spelling patterns, or chunks to identify unfamiliar words. This strategy, known as decoding by analogy (Gaskins, 1998), is used in the following way: The teacher models, "Let's see. When I don't know a word, I look for chunks I know from other words. If I know *band*, then this must be *strand*. Now I need to go back and see if that makes sense." Every week, Barbara introduced several key words that contained common chunks (e.g., *-at* in *bat* and *-ight* in *fight*) and showed students exactly how sounds map to letters within each chunk (Gaskins, Ehri, Cress, O'Hara, & Donnelly, 1996–1997). Every day, she modeled the chunking strategy with poems or stories and then led brisk, interactive games that encouraged students to "sharpen their chunk knowledge" (Cunningham, 1995; Cunningham & Hall, 1994; Gaskins, 1998; Trachtenburg, 1990).

Barbara wanted Shamika to spend time reading connected text that supported this instruction. When she asked herself which type text is best suited to helping students break the code she turned to transitional and decodable text. However, finding high-quality examples of these kinds of text was challenging. Years earlier, Barbara and Linda had become exasperated with the strangled language that turned many decodable texts into meaningless tongue twisters. When authors eliminated frequent but phonetically irregular words like *said*, *what*, *come*, and *was*, they rendered the text almost incomprehensible with sentences like "Pam and Dan had jam and ham." In protest, Barbara and Linda had stocked their classroom shelves with high-quality children's literature, predictable books, and easy readers. Barbara said,

> We soon found out, though, that we needed something to bridge simple predictable books and easy readers. We noticed that when some of the more challenging predictable books became less predictable, they didn't control their word choice for the rest of the text carefully enough. As a result, our lower

achievers often hit a wall when they came to parts of the text where they couldn't rely on memory, pictures, or context. Their word-attack skills weren't developed enough to cope with the wide variety of words they encountered. We needed interesting, meaningful text that supported what our kids were learning about the alphabetic system.

Linda added,

It took perseverance, but we finally found some. Somebody must have been paying attention to the authors of *Becoming a Nation of Readers* when they said that with all the millions publishing companies spend developing materials, you'd think they could hire someone to write some decent text for beginning readers! (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985, p. 48)

Well-written transitional and decodable texts have some powerful characteristics that scaffold the efforts of readers learning to break the code (see Figure 4). Both types of text are written to balance word control and natural-sounding language. Moreover, both are leveled—they increase in difficulty as they parallel the progress that beginning readers make (Chall, Bissex, Conrad, & Harris-Sharples, 1996).

Figure 4
Transitional text

Characteristics
- difficulty increases gradually across levels of text
- text controlled to provide diminishing predictable support (e.g., memorable refrain)
- text controlled to provide increasing decoding support (e.g., familiar spelling patterns)
- simple sentence structures
- limited plot/information
- illustrations support and extend text
- restricted amount of text per page

Examples
Ben's Pets by Anne Miranda
When We Are Big by Marilyn Minkoff
The Everybody Club by Anne O'Brien

Strategies beginning readers rely on to read transitional text
- diminishing use of memory and context to identify words
- blending of letter-sounds (/b/-/a/-/t/ = *bat*)
- using a chunking strategy with simple spelling patterns ("If I know *bat*, then this if *flat*.")
- using sight word knowledge (e.g., *said*, *come*, *was*)
- using prior knowledge to construct meaning
- monitoring comprehension (does it make sense?)

Most effective instructional uses
- for enjoyment during independent reading
- to develop students' letter-sound and simple spelling pattern knowledge
- to provide independent practice in using blending and chunking strategies
- to model decoding strategies while reading aloud to students
- to develop students' oral reading fluency and expression

At the lower levels, transitional texts provide a considerable amount of predictable support (e.g., memorable refrains). They also provide decoding support in their nonpredictable portions by using familiar vowel patterns, phonograms, and high-frequency words. As one moves through the levels, these texts make an important transition—the same transition that beginning readers make as they gain increasing control over the alphabetic system. Specifically, as transitional texts become more challenging, they become less predictable and increase the extent to which they ask readers to use their decoding abilities.

One example of well-written transitional text is *Pick Up Nick*, by Kate McGovern. It is an interesting, 16-page story about a family trying to quiet a crying baby. Young readers learning to break the code are supported by simple sentence structures, illustrations that correspond to the text, a familiar story line, memorable refrains, and the author's frequent use of common spelling patterns and high-frequency words—yet the language sounds quite natural.

So she said to Grandpa, "Can you rock Nick for a little while? Maybe you can get him to stop." "Sure," Grandpa said. "Now I can try." But my grandpa had no luck. So he said to me, "Can you play with Nick for a little while? Maybe you can get him to stop." "Sure," I said. "I will pick him up. It's my turn to try! Try not to cry, little Nick," I said. (pp. 10–14)

Well-written decodable text provides similar support in leveled texts without predictability (see Figure 5). Typically, these texts follow a word recognition scope and sequence that becomes increasingly complex. Consequently, lower level decodable texts consist of short-vowel and high-frequency words in texts with familiar story lines and simple sentence structures. Gradually, across levels, the texts include more complex spelling patterns (e.g., long-vowel words with a silent *e* marker, words with "vowel teams") and more challenging high-frequency words. In addition, story lines and sentence structures become more complex. The following example is from *Fun With Zip and Zap*, by John

Shefelbine, an engaging collection of simple decodable stories about a family and their two rambunctious dogs. With knowledge of short vowels and a few high-frequency words, a student learning to Break the Code can have a successful independent reading experience with this text. Zip, the little dog, narrates.

> Ben and Jen dig. They plant the little plant. I go and dig it up. I like to dig. I can't help it! Mom tells Jen and Ben to stop me. She says the little plant will not grow if I dig it up. Ben says, "Zip, you have to stop!" Jen says, "If you stop, I will give you a kiss." (p. 10)

Transitional and decodable texts provide scaffolding for readers who are Breaking the Code in several ways. First, the sentence structures remain relatively simple and illustrations continue to support the story line. Second, students must use what they know about letter-sound correspondences and spelling patterns to identify many words. As they see these spelling patterns again and again in their reading, those patterns become more and more familiar—moving students closer to the time when they will recognize them automatically (Ehri, 1991, 1998). Third, when teachers match the text levels to the pace of their word study instruction, students are likely to see value for the instruction. This also increases the likelihood that students will be able to read the texts independently because the spelling patterns and sight words they see are familiar (Beck, 1981; Juel & Roper/Schneider, 1985; Stein, Johnson, & Gutlohn, in press). Finally, transitional text provides additional scaffolding in the form of gradually diminishing predictability across levels of books (Englebertson, Hiebert, & Juel, 1997; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). This gives beginning readers welcome opportunities for fluency as they negotiate text that asks them to do a fair amount of decoding.

Barbara used both transitional and decodable text with Shamika and other students in the Breaking the Code phase of reading development. For example, when Barbara led a small group of students in a guided reading of *Steve's Room*, a transitional text by Mindy Menschell, she began by reviewing how students can use the *-est* and *-ell* spelling patterns to figure out unfamiliar words in the story. After initiating a preview and predict discussion, Barbara read the first two pages of the book aloud, stopping once to ask students for help as she simulated difficulty with a particular word. After coming up with a pronunciation, she asked, "Are we done yet?" "No," the students said sternly, "You have to go back and see if it makes sense!" From there, Barbara turned the reading over to the students, stopping them every few pages to talk about story events or challenging words. When they were finished, she led the students in a discussion about how the story might relate to their own lives, or to other books they had read.

Next, Barbara encouraged Shamika and her peers to read their copies of the text to a partner and to her. If they liked the story, she encouraged them to use it in Readers Theatre. Reading a text to an audience of peers gave students motivation to do multiple readings of a favorite text—an activity that improves decoding accuracy, speed, comprehension, and oral expression (Dowhower, 1987; LaBerge, 1973; Perfetti &

Figure 5
Decodable text

Characteristics
- difficulty increases gradually across levels of text
- text controlled to emphasize letter-sound, spelling patterns, and high-frequency irregular sight words
- simple sentence structures
- simple, familiar story line
- limited plot/information
- illustrations support and extend text
- restricted amount of text per page

Examples
The Snow Game by Patricia Griffith
Fun With Zip and Zap by John Shefelbine
All About Bats by Jennifer Jacobson

Strategies beginning readers rely on to read decodable text
- blending of letter-sounds (/b/-/a/-/t/ = *bat*)
- using a chunking strategy with simple spelling patterns ("If I know *bat*, then this is *flat*.")
- using sight word knowledge (e.g., *said*, *come*, *was*)
- using prior knowledge to construct meaning
- monitoring comprehension (does it make sense?)

Most effective instructional uses
- for enjoyment during independent reading
- to develop students' letter-sound and simple spelling pattern knowledge
- to provide independent practice in using blending and chunking strategies
- to model decoding strategies while reading aloud to students
- to develop students' oral reading fluency and expression

Lesgold, n.d.). One week in October, Shamika and her friends threw themselves into preparing Dr. Seuss's *Green Eggs and Ham* for a Readers Theatre presentation. They made decisions about who would read each page, devised some simple props, and read and reread the book a half dozen times—with much attention to what their voices should sound like at certain points.

Watching them, Barbara commented on the sense of ownership and motivation that characterized the entire process (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998–1999):

> Readers Theatre is a great way to get around the "I've already read it" complaint. They'll read something lots of times if they know they'll be presenting for an audience. And the whole thing snowballs after they watch a couple of performances. They really start to work on their expression—which is a great indicator of fluency and comprehension.

With time, instruction, scaffolding, and encouragement, Shamika broke the code. As Christmas drew near, her oral reading was more fluent, and she read with greater expression—an indication that she had moved well into the full alphabetic phase (Ehri, 1998). Readers in this phase of reading development have begun to amalgamate how words are spelled and how they are pronounced in memory. This means that they can recognize a growing number of words at sight—a far more efficient strategy than relying on letter sampling and context. It also enables them to use chunks to decode by analogy because chunks are simply amalgamated letters and pronunciations. Thus, when Shamika encountered unfamiliar words she no longer guessed; she looked for chunks she knew and checked the word she generated against the context. Furthermore, when Shamika did miscue she frequently stopped and offered a bemused "Wow! That didn't make sense at all," and then went back to try again. Perhaps most exciting, Shamika was acutely aware of her progress. She approached reading with confidence and looked forward to checking out "real chapter books" from the library.

Patrick: Going for Fluency

When Linda interviewed her students about favorites as a prelude to selecting topics for the year's first writing workshop, Patrick quickly announced that he loved soccer, basketball, cartoons, video games, sleepovers, and chocolate doughnuts. Afterwards, Linda thought it curious that he did not mention reading, because this 6-year-old had walked in the door reading like a second grader. When he waltzed through her initial reading assessment—including a primer-level decodable text—Linda handed him a book from the Henry and Mudge series by Cynthia Rylant. "He was so fluent! I was curious how he would do with an easy chapter book he'd never seen before."

While Patrick had obvious difficulty with words like *thought* and *enough*, he was able to read most of the first chapter fluently and with expression—including words like *Mudge*, *something*, and *anybody's*. Moreover, his retelling was complete and detailed. When Linda asked Patrick where he learned to read, he simply shrugged.

At the first parent-teacher conference, Patrick's mother cleared up the mystery. Using magnetic letters on the refrigerator and vinyl letters in the bathtub, she taught him not only letters and sounds, but also how to blend simple, phonetically regular words. Teachers at Montessori preschool and kindergarten finished the job with individualized instruction. The result? Patrick learned about print and broke the code long before he entered first grade. No wonder he had no memory of learning to read!

It was clear to Linda that Patrick was an advanced beginner who had moved to the Going for Fluency phase of reading development (see Figure 2). Advanced beginners are no longer focused on learning how books work, or on sounding out most of the words they encounter. They recognize many words at sight, and as a result they are able to spend their cognitive resources where they should be spent—constructing meaning (Perfetti, 1991; Stanovich, 1991).

Despite Patrick's impressive progress, Linda knew there was more to do. She wanted Patrick to become increasingly strategic at constructing meaning from what he read and even more automatic at recognizing words. Moreover, she wanted him to *want* to read. Despite his ability, Patrick rarely chose to read when he had the opportunity. In reflecting on his favorites, socializing and sports ruled the day. To accomplish her goals, Linda planned to provide instruction. She also knew that Patrick needed more than just instruction. He needed motivation to read, read, and read some more (Gambrell & Marinak,

1997; Guthrie, Schafer, Wang, & Afflerbach, 1995; Schallert & Reed, 1997; Wigfield, 1997)

Thus, in addition to teaching effective decoding and comprehension strategies, Linda set about building Patrick's motivation to read by helping him find interesting, well-written books on his independent and instructional levels. In short, she hoped when Patrick discovered he could access his favorites through books, he would come to see reading as a way he wanted to spend his time (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988).

When it came to choosing text, Linda knew that advanced beginners like Patrick could do without the kinds of support that predictable, transitional, and decodable text offer. Still, such readers quickly reach frustration level when reading authentic literature on their own. This means that just as readers who are Learning About Print or Breaking the Code can benefit from textual scaffolding, readers who are Going for Fluency also benefit from opportunities with text that provide support for what they know about the reading process. Linda said,

> We feel like simple predictable, transitional, and decodable books help kids build a really important foundation in terms of print awareness, decoding basics and overall *success* as readers. From there, they're ready for something more challenging—something that helps them build automaticity and gets them closer to reading authentic fiction and nonfiction on their own. That's where easy readers come in.

Easy readers provide this challenge and, at the same time, provide textual scaffolding (see Figure 6). An excerpt from the time-tested easy reader *Frog and Toad Are Friends* by Arnold Lobel illustrates this point:

> "And it means that we can begin a whole new year together, Toad. Think of it," said Frog. "We will skip through the meadows and run through the woods and swim in the river. In the evenings we will sit right here on this front porch and count the stars." (p. 8)

This text has far less control than the texts Travis and Shamika read when they entered first grade. With easy readers, students encounter numerous polysyllabic words, more difficult high-frequency words, more complex sentence structures, and, in general, a lot more text. Hence, the challenge. At the same time, this text does exercise some word control in an effort to be accessible. This is the scaffolding that helps young readers meet the challenge successfully.

Figure 6
Easy reader text

Characteristics
- difficulty increases gradually across levels of text
- text less controlled than simple predictable, transitional, or decodable texts in word choice and sentence structures
- text more controlled than authentic literature or nonfiction in word choice and sentence structures
- illustrations support and extend text
- more complex plot/information than simple predictable, transitional, or decodable texts
- more text per page than simple predictable, transitional, or decodable texts

Examples
(easier)
Frog and Toad Are Friends by Arnold Lobel
Wagon Wheels by Barbara Brenner
(more difficult)
Horton Hatches the Egg by Dr. Seuss
Arthur's Teacher Trouble by Marc Brown

Strategies advanced beginners rely on with easy readers
- basic word identification automaticity
- using a chunking strategy with more complex spelling patterns (e.g., "If I know *fought*, then this must be *thought*") and with polysyllabic words (e.g., *fright-en-ing*)
- using sight word knowledge
- using prior knowledge to construct meaning
- monitoring comprehension (does it make sense?)

Instructional uses
- for enjoyment while reading aloud to students and during independent reading
- to develop students' oral reading fluency and expression
- to model comprehension strategies while reading aloud to students

The reduced need for control in easy readers gives authors like Arnold Lobel considerable latitude in developing a story line. As a result, easy readers typically are more engaging than texts where control is at a premium.

"We always breathe a sigh of relief when a child is able to negotiate easy readers," Linda commented, "We take it as evidence that they're well on their way to independence. From here—*if* they stay motivated—they just need to get more sophisticated at what they can already do." Linda found easy readers to be effective textual scaffolding for readers like Patrick. "Besides providing the right mix of challenge and support for kids at this point in their development, easy readers are readily available," Linda related, "There's an ever-increasing supply of these

Figure 7
Authentic literature and nonfiction

Characteristics
- word choice and sentence structure not controlled for beginning reader accessibility
- illustrations support and extend text
- complex plot/information
- more text per page than predictable or decodable books

Examples
Peter Rabbit by Beatrix Potter
Smoky Night by Eve Bunting
Owl Moon by Jane Yolen

Strategies readers rely on to read authentic literature and nonfiction
- advanced word identification automaticity
- using a chunking strategy with unfamiliar words of all types
- using sight word knowledge
- using prior knowledge to construct meaning
- comprehension monitoring (does it make sense?)

Instructional uses
- for enjoyment while reading aloud to students
- to model comprehension strategies while reading aloud to students
- to motivate students to become better readers

books on all kinds of interesting topics. They've been a great resource for our Book Clubs" (Raphael, Goatley, McMahon, & Woodman, 1995; Raphael & Hiebert, 1998; Raphael & McMahon, 1994).

Barbara and Linda encourage their students to form Book Clubs around topics or themes they find interesting. For example, a small group of students may choose a topic like pioneers or space and then seek out several related books. Every day, club members meet to read their books and respond to what they have read through writing, discussion, and art. For the most part, the clubs proceed quite independently with the two teachers playing a coaching role. Sometimes, a club's discussions may proceed in a fishbowl format (Alvermann, Dillon, & O'Brien, 1987; Grattan, in press) with the teacher and other students looking on. In this way, the teacher can quickly draw attention to effective strategies students use or clear up confusion. For example, as Patrick's club discussed *Arthur's Teacher Trouble* by Marc Brown, Patrick suggested that Arthur's main problem was his teacher, Mr. Ratburn. Ian, another member of the Arthur Book Club disagreed, citing the school spellathon as the main character's most pressing problem. When the discussion threatened to degenerate into, "Yes, it is!" "No, it isn't!" Linda reminded the club members to go back to the text and find evidence for their positions.

The week before Christmas, Patrick and three of his friends chose to read nonfiction books about pioneers in the American West. "That's a tough time of year for *anything* academic," Linda observed. "I was pleased they chose something they could really get into, because when those boys aren't interested, they're—shall we say—*itchy*." When the boys finished Barbara Brenner's *Wagon Wheels*, a true story about African American homesteaders, Patrick led the discussion. As she listened from nearby, Linda was pleased with what she saw and heard.

> Whoever leads the discussion is responsible for coming up with two questions and Patrick did a terrific job! When everyone was finished reading, he asked, "What did you think was the scariest thing the Muldie boys had to do?" Later, he asked "What was your favorite part of the story?" Then, he read his favorite part out loud with fluency, great expression, and confidence! He's continuing to make progress and he's enjoying himself when he reads. That's exactly what we want these advanced beginning readers to do!

Travis, Shamika, and Patrick: Stretching with authentic text all along the way

Regardless of where students are in their reading development, Barbara and Linda read authentic literature or nonfiction aloud every day (see Figure 7). Authentic text is not controlled for word choice or sentence structure. As a result, authors can develop meaty plots and provide complex information that is unavailable in simple predictable, transitional, decodable, and easy reader text. Authentic text ranges widely in style. Witness the proper yet lyrical prose of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter, the solemn cadence of *The Return of the Buffaloes* by Paul Goble, the mischievous rhymes of *Where the Sidewalk Ends* by Shel Silverstein, or the scientific precision of *Bearman: Exploring the World of Black Bears* by Laurence Pringle.

Barbara and Linda draw extensively on this textual resource with several goals in mind—goals that they believe increase students' abilities

and motivation to read. First and foremost, the two teachers are convinced that listening to authentic literature and nonfiction helps students appreciate the multiple ways books can enrich our lives. Second, the teachers use literature and nonfiction to model reading aloud with fluency and expression—in the hope that students will aspire to do the same. Finally, the complexity of authentic text provides the opportunity to talk about comprehension and writing strategies. As Barbara noted,

> It's tough to talk about strategies in any depth with the more controlled books because there's just not much there. That's the trade-off for the control. But take a book like *Grandfather's Journey* by Allen Say, or *Math Curse* by Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith. I can use them to show the kids how readers and writers think about elements of plot in fiction and important information in nonfiction. We also talk a lot about the choices authors make in using words, which starts to have a impact on students' writing.

Like their peers, Travis, Shamika, and Patrick thoroughly enjoyed listening to their teachers read aloud from an ever-changing selection of literature and nonfiction. Like their peers, when a particular book caught their fancies, they were eager to explore it on their own. "The kids wait like vultures for whoever has the latest book to finish with it," Barbara noted, "As soon as the book is closed, someone else is lurking nearby ready to pounce on it!"

Which text *is* best?

The teachers who inspired this vignette have chosen not to engage in the debate over which kind of text is best for beginning readers. Instead, they have chosen to use particular types of text to achieve particular goals with particular students at particular points in their reading development. Thus, they reframed the question about "Which text is best?" to ask "*What* type of text is best suited for achieving *which* purposes with *whom*, and *when*?"

Thinking about text this way allows teachers to use different types of text as scaffolding for beginning readers. By matching text types with their students' reading development, the teachers are better able to support students' reading progress. Some students may enter first grade fluent enough to dive right into challenging easy readers. Others may be learning to break the code and ready to apply what they're learning in transitional and decodable books. Still others may be in a position to learn about print from the catchy rhythms of simple predictable text. All of them will profit from listening to authentic literature and nonfiction being read aloud.

In short, primary-grade classrooms stand to benefit from all kinds of books. The concept of textual scaffolding can help teachers use those books effectively to support beginning readers throughout their development.

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