

Research Foundation for Engage Literacy Leveled Readers

Engage Literacy: Using Leveled Texts

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Engaging Children with Engage Literacy

Research shows the more children read, the better readers they become. And one of the best ways to engage children in reading is to make sure they are successful. When they are able to read successfully, they will read more and they will become better readers. But what helps children to be successful? First and foremost, it's providing children with access to texts that are matched to their literacy instructional levels.

Engage Literacy is a new literacy resource that incorporates precise leveling of all texts and builds on the strengths of many previously published research-based programs. *Engage* is authored by experienced classroom teachers. In addition to literacy development research, it draws on best-practice teaching principles, together with consultant validation and ongoing in-school trialing. At its foundation is the extensive literature and research that demonstrates the importance of leveled readers in any literacy setting.

Children's Literacy Development

Research acknowledges that literacy development in children starts long before they attend school. By the time children start formal schooling, they have already developed a wealth of knowledge about the world in which they live, about the language they use, and about the print they see (DECD, 2011). A strong foundation of oral language, where children are immersed in talking, singing, playing, and listening to books being read aloud, builds a strong foundation for learning to read and helps children acquire literacy skills in a variety of ways and at different ages (Emergent Literacy Project, n.d.; McGee & Richgels, 1996; Ramsburg, 1998; Strickland & Morrow, 1988).

Children entering school are considered to be *emergent readers*, and when they have the opportunities to “read” books they have heard frequently through exposure to literacy rich environments, they make rapid growth in their literacy skills. As emergent readers, children are beginning to control early reading strategies such as directionality, one-to-one word matching, and concepts about print, while continuing to use visual supports and their knowledge of language structure to help them (Holdaway, 1979; Pinnell, 1996b; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). You will find instruction to support this language development in the Teacher's Resource Guides. These instructional tools provide teachers with strategies for using the *Engage Literacy* leveled readers to build the basis for language learning.

While there is no prescribed grade level for reaching conventional literacy, children usually move from *emergent literacy* gradually into *conventional literacy* some time during the kindergarten or first grade year. As Pinnell (1996b, p. 177) states “... emergent literacy and conventional literacy are not discrete stages but a continuum of learning that varies with the complexity of each individual's development.” Frequently the terms *early reader*, *transitional reader*, and *fluent reader* are used to describe conventional literacy growth. The progression of leveled readers in *Engage Literacy* will support students as they move from low levels of emergent reading into levels of conventional literacy. The foundation on which *Engage Literacy* is built takes into account the vocabulary development and progression for literacy development and introduces words in an appropriate order to ensure students are able to progress naturally between levels. No vocabulary word is introduced before a student has the background to read, understand, and communicate the words of each leveled text.

During first grade, most children are or will become *early readers*. They use early reading strategies and are able to integrate meaning, structure and visual sources of information (Clay, 1991). At this time, children are beginning to build up a bank of known high-frequency sight words and commonly look at beginning and ending letters in order to

decode unfamiliar words (Clay, 1991; Pinnell, 1996b; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). They can independently read appropriately selected texts after the teacher has given them a story introduction (Pinnell, 1996b).

Most children in second grade are *transitional readers*. They are able to read unknown text more independently and integrate meaning, structure, and visual sources of information more fully, recognizing a large number of frequently used words on sight and using pictures in a limited way while reading (Clay, 1991; International Reading Association & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998; Pinnell, 1996b; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

By the time children are in third grade, they are typically *fluent readers*. They use all sources of information flexibly to read a variety of unknown texts, reading for meaning with less attention to decoding. Fluent readers can independently solve problems encountered in the text (Clay, 1991; International Reading Association & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998; Pinnell, 1996b; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Children at this stage, when provided with appropriately challenging reading materials, continue to increase fluency, including automatic word recognition, rapid decoding, and checking for meaning (Johnson et al).

Engage Literacy supports this literacy development by providing appropriate leveled text for each stage of the continuum. By matching appropriate text with student needs and development, students are given the language skills they need to progress more steadily as they become fluent readers.

How can leveled texts help children's literacy development?

The goal of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (CCSS Initiative, 2010) is to prepare U.S. students for college and their future careers, in part, by placing an emphasis on the increasing levels of text difficulty from the early grades through high school. This means the issues of text complexity and a gradient of text difficulty are becoming increasingly more important (Mesmer, Cunningham, Hiebert, 2012).

One part of the emphasis on text complexity by the CCSS is the importance placed on the inclusion of nonfiction texts in the teaching of reading. Students, as well as having access to nonfiction texts, need to be receiving instruction in how to read them in a more analytical manner.

Research shows that any successful learning experience involves the content, the sequence of the content, the pace at which the new content is presented, and the repetition of the content (Ericsson in Mesmer, 2012). These same elements can be applied to learning to read. The use of a gradient of difficulty, or leveling of texts, allows for texts to be organized in an appropriate sequence, with opportunities for concepts to be paced and repeated, assisting children to learn to read successfully. Leveling texts allows children to progress from simple to more complex texts with increasingly more challenges.

The prime purpose of using leveled texts is to enable children to read texts at "just the right level." This involves children reading texts that provide them with appropriate support as well as a appropriate challenge: texts with which they can problem-solve and read without becoming frustrated or losing meaning (Rog & Burton, 2001/2001). Importantly, as well as providing texts that are leveled, *Engage Literacy* offers content and contexts that will be immediately recognizable to young readers, and that will allow them to build on and bring to bear their prior knowledge and experiences. There are also clear curriculum links throughout the program and thematic links between paired fiction and nonfiction titles.

Texts organized into levels of difficulty help teachers quickly and easily select reading materials that match young children to suitable texts at a pace suited to their learning (Rog, 2001/2002). Teachers are able to make appropriate selections for instructional experiences (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). However, as Rog (2001/2002) notes, the level is not the only consideration for matching children to texts. When selecting texts, teachers also need to take into account their knowledge of the children, their knowledge of the texts, and their knowledge of the reading process. While the text might actually be at an appropriate level for the child's reading ability, the child's interests and background knowledge also need to be taken into consideration. A teacher might need to provide the child with a much richer introduction to the text if it contains new or unusual vocabulary, contains new or unusual language phrases, uses known words in an unusual way or has a complicated story or plot. For example when introducing the text *City Life, Farm Life* (*Engage Literacy*, level 25), a teacher in a rural area would plan a very different introduction than would a teacher in a city area, to ensure children understand the vocabulary and concepts. This type of background information is provided for each text in the *Engage Literacy* Teacher's Resource Guides, and it gives teachers the knowledge they need as they match books to their students.

While the CCSS (2010) respect teachers' judgments and do not define how teachers should teach, the standards do provide expectations for children. Teachers and school districts are given the opportunity to be decision makers in the process of determining how the standards are to be met. The use of leveled texts in a school or a school district ensures the use of consistent procedures to support a whole site approach to literacy. The levels are internationally recognized, so all stakeholders will be using a common language to describe the learning of the children, their progress, and the teaching programs.

Leveled texts are not linked to a particular literacy theory. Rather they assist teachers in providing children with texts that allow them to work within their Zone of Proximal Development. Vygotsky (1978) defines the Zone of Proximal Development as the maximum level of development the child can reach with assistance. When a child is assisted to work in his/her Zone of Proximal Development, higher levels of understanding occur—what the child achieved yesterday with assistance becomes what he or she can do independently today.

How do leveled texts help us to teach effectively?

Essential in teaching and learning programs is the ability of a teacher to teach a wide and diverse range of children in the class. The use of leveled texts provides the opportunity for texts to be placed into a sequence that will cater for the needs of all children by enabling them to be working at their instructional reading levels (Rog, 2001/2002, Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Leveled texts assist teachers to:

- group together children with similar strengths, needs, and abilities. These groups must be flexible throughout the year: as children progress and are able to work successfully with increasingly more difficult texts, they can move to more appropriate groups.
- cater for individual differences by allowing children to progress through increasingly more difficult texts, at a pace that is suitable to their individual needs (Regina).
- develop a reading program centered around "authentic" tasks—reading continuous texts, rather than focusing on activities with isolated letters or words.
- develop a sequence that will guide and inform their teaching.

The National Reading Panel (NRP) was convened by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2000) to assess, in part, research-based knowledge to various approaches to teaching children to read (NICHD, 2000). The NRP identified five essential elements to reading instruction: phonological awareness instruction, phonics instruction, fluency instruction, vocabulary instruction and comprehension instruction, placing all five elements at the same level of priority. The CCSS (2010), however, place a far greater emphasis on the sophistication of a text and comprehension. The use of leveled texts enables children to read at an appropriate text level that ensures comprehension is placed at the foreground of a child's reading. As Clay states: "Comprehension is very dependent on the difficulty level of the text. It makes no sense to assess comprehension on a hard text, nor an easy text. If the text level is instructional then that tells the teacher to teach for understanding."

In order to support learning, *Engage Literacy* was developed to systematically introduce a wide range of increasingly complex texts. At this time, teachers model how to enhance meaning through active engagement in texts, as they explicitly involve children in an analysis of text structure. The DECD (2011) states, "As students engage in reading a wide range of texts, the literate understandings and skills they develop can be drawn on as they make meaning in other ways: speaking and listening, viewing, writing, and creating."

How are texts leveled?

The levels for texts in the *Engage Literacy* program were originally designed as a "Gradient of Text Difficulty" using color bands to grade texts. This "Gradient of Text Difficulty" designated texts to a color band based on the complexity and challenges contained in them. However as within each color band there exists a range of texts, this range has been organized into a finer gradient of levels, if and when necessary.

It is important to note that in a classroom it is not necessary for teachers to work through each level in sequence with the children. Children in different groups in the classroom will have different strengths and flexibilities, interests, and prior knowledge. The use of broader color bands will allow teachers to cater for these differences (Fountas and Pinnell 1996, p.115).

If a child reads a Level 11 text one day and a Level 9 the next day, this does not mean the child is “going backwards!” For example if a child is reading at level 16 and then is very excited because he or she gets a new cat at home, this is the perfect time to read a book about cats that is a Level 14 book: the child is reading something that is of interest, so it is a perfect text for him or her, regardless of the level.

Designating a text to a level is a complex process that takes into account:

- vocabulary contained in the text,
- text features of the text,
- sentence length,
- sentence complexity,
- subject matter of the text,
- story structures, and
- language features (Calkins, 2000; Szymusiak & Sibberson, 2001).

Grade Level	Stage	Reading Recovery	Fountas & Pinnell GRL	Lexile	Rigby PM	Engage
Kindergarten	Emergent	1	A		Starters 1	1 Magenta
Kindergarten/1st Grade	Emergent	2	B		Starters 2	2 Magenta
1st Grade	Emergent	3,4	C		3,4 red	3,4 Red
	Emergent	5,6	D	100	5,6 red/yellow	5 Red 6 Yellow
	Emergent	7,8	E		7,8 yellow	7,8 Yellow
	Early	9,10	F	200	9,10 blue	9,10 Blue
	Early	11,12	G		11,12 blue/green	11 Blue 12 Green
	Early	13,14	H	300	13,14 green	13,14 Green
1st/2nd Grade	Early	15,16	I		15,16 orange	15 Green 16 Orange
	Early	17,18	J	400	17,18 turquoise	17,18 Orange
2nd Grade	Early Fluent	19,20	K		19,20 purple	19,20 Purple
	Early Fluent		L	500	21 gold	Gold
2nd/3rd Grade	Early Fluent		M		22 gold	Gold/Silver
	Early Fluent		N	600	23 silver	Silver/Ruby
3rd Grade	Early Fluent	22	O		24 silver	Ruby
	Early Fluent		P		25 emerald	Sapphire
4th Grade	Early Fluent	24	Q	700	26 emerald	
	Fluent		R		27 ruby	
	Fluent	26	S		28 ruby	
	Fluent		T		29 sapphire	
5th Grade	Fluent	28	U		30 sapphire	
	Fluent		V			
	Fluent		W			
	Fluent	30	X			
and up	Fluent		Y			
	Fluent	32,34	Z	1,000+		

How can leveled texts be used in the classroom?

While one of the most important reasons for using leveled texts is the support they provide for Guided Reading in the classroom, the use of leveled texts also assists the teacher to select supportive material for Reading Aloud, Shared Reading, and Independent Reading. Supportive texts include texts that:

- are relevant, and matched to children’s reading ability and interest.
- use continuous text, allowing the child to bring meaning to the reading.
- build on oral language by using authentic language.
- are culturally inclusive, relevant, and engaging, with familiar topics,
- support meaning and fluency while providing enough challenge to support problem-solving.
- enable children to effectively use the three sources of information to construct meaning (comprehension) as part of the reading process. These sources of information are:
 - **Meaning** (Does that make sense?): students use oral language, fluency, vocabulary amongst other things to determine if what they read made sense.
 - **Structure** (Does that sound right?): students use oral language and fluency to work out if what they read sounded correct in English.
 - **Visual Information** (Does that look right?): students use alphabetic principals, phonological awareness and phonic knowledge to investigate the way words work.

When teachers use the leveled readers in *Engage Literacy* for Guided Reading as an instructional approach to assist children to develop new strategies during reading, they select texts that are at the children’s instructional reading level.

Teachers rely on the leveling of texts to help them match children with the appropriate texts for guided reading instruction (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). By using texts that are appropriate for the children and are within each child’s capabilities, teachers have the opportunity to focus on

- teaching for problem solving
- teaching for phrasing and fluency, rate and expression
- drawing on and extending oral language
- helping the children to hear and use the language and language structures of the text
- creating opportunities for children to predict.

While the teacher has the responsibility for progressing children through the text levels and up into more difficult material, it is also important to remember that children need access to a wide range of text types (Clay, 2001). Children who have the opportunity to return to re-read a wide range of familiar material are able to practice putting together the complex reading behaviors they are learning to use, and they are also learning to read with more independence. It is considered vital that children have access to appropriate level texts for independent reading in order to develop their reading skills and abilities (Allington, 2002).

A great deal of children’s motivation to read comes from the opportunity to self-select reading material. Calkins (2000) highlights the dangers of having children reading texts that are too difficult, noting that the use of leveled texts assists children to select appropriate texts for independent reading. The leveling of texts helps children select material which is at ‘just-the-right’ level but which is still interesting to them. It is important then that children have time to self-select texts that will be interesting to them.

Assessment and Leveled Texts

Tracking student improvement through the levels is a reliable form of assessment. When teachers take Running Records on a regular basis to assess children's progress, they can use the information they gain to move children from one text level to the next, through the gradient of text difficulty. As Fountas & Pinnell (1996, p.78) state, "a Running Record . . . [provides] both quantitative and qualitative information." Children's growth and progress can be monitored and the change over time in their reading development can be tracked. This information, as well as providing teachers with information for classroom instruction, can be used to give clear and explicit feedback to both parents and children, in line with CCSS (2010). Engage Literacy provides a Running Record for each student book.

By taking and analyzing Running Records on a regular basis, teachers can determine if children are :

- actively engaging with the text
- constantly checking on themselves to make sure the story makes sense
- checking on their reading to make sure the sources of information they have used interact, by asking themselves:
 - Did that make sense?
 - Did that sound right?
 - Did that look right?
- making predictions about the text
- checking their predictions
- self-correcting if their predictions are not confirmed
- solving tricky words as they meet them in the text
- rereading to search, to confirm, to self-correct, and to regain fluency.

Comprehension and Leveled Texts

Meaning is the basis for comprehension: "I regard meaning as the 'given' in all reading—the source of anticipation, the guide to being on track, and the outcome and reward of the effort. Meaning provides the purpose of reading and writing" (Clay, 2001). When we talk about meaning we are not talking about meaning at the word level of the text but rather at a deeper level—that of the author's intent. *Engage Literacy* has comprehension strategy support for each leveled text in the Teacher's Resource Guide. Additionally, the program employs the use of recurring characters in the books which helps students build on prior knowledge, to link content in previously unseen text, with content from previously read text creating a comprehension thread to base comprehension on.

As Anderson notes, "The meanings of words cannot be 'added up' to give the meaning of the whole. The click of comprehension occurs only when the reader evolves a schema that explains the whole message."

It is vital that we talk with students about the texts they are reading before, during, and after the reading and encourage the children to talk to each other at this time. In this way we can be sure meaning is always driving the reading and children are:

- predicting by making links with their own life and prior knowledge.
- making connections with text to self, text to text, text to world.
- questioning/clarifying/monitoring by reassessing their thinking before, during, and after reading.
- visualizing by creating images in their minds.
- inferring—by reading between the lines.
- summarizing and synthesizing to create new knowledge and deeper understanding.
- determining the important ideas.

Children who are good readers make predictions and anticipate what is about to happen in a text before they read. While they read, they check and verify that what they have read makes sense, and when they finish reading they reflect on the text to extend their own experience. The connections, questions, inferences, and mental images made by children are enhanced by their oral language development. Teachers assist children with their oral language development by providing time for talk in classrooms as they listen and respond, have conversations rather than interrogations with children, and use open-ended rather than closed questions. The classroom program should provide opportunities for children to engage in discussions, ask questions, gather information, and form ideas. They need to be encouraged to express opinions and to challenge others. *Engage Literacy* provides teachers with strategies for supporting students as they make predictions about each book through the instructional design laid out in the Teacher's Resource Guides.

The discussions that children have with the teacher and other students about texts deepen their understandings (comprehension). It is important that teachers develop children's speaking and listening skills as part of this process. Through listening and speaking with others, children deepen their understandings and learn from each other. All readers bring a different perspective to a text or an illustration and when they have opportunities to share their understandings, children reconsider, reconstruct, and enhance their initial understandings.

Summary

Engage Literacy is a new leveled literacy resource that adheres to the key findings of the extensive research base that has been built up over recent years on the use of leveled readers in the development of literacy. The foundation of *Engage Literacy* is based on many years of best-practice classroom teaching and the research behind guided reading instruction, comprehension strategies, and literacy development for students beginning to read. *Engage Literacy* is based on key design elements set forth in the Common Core State Standards for Language Arts. From language conventions and high-frequency word instruction to higher level synthesizing of literary and informational texts, the program supports teachers as they help students move through a developmental progression by providing multiple opportunities to match students with text at their instructional levels.

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