"I Wanted to Lie About My Level"
A Self Study: How My Daughter's Experiences with Leveled Books Became a Lens for Re-Imaging Myself as a Literacy Educator

by

Darla Chase Forbes

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of

The University of Manitoba

in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

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Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

The conceptualization of this thesis was born out of a conversation that occurred between my six-year-old-daughter Madeline and me. During this conversation she shared that she did not want to return to school because she felt as if she was the worst reader in the class, based on the book level she was assigned to read in her grade one classroom.

My concern and discomfort with this conversation prompted me to begin keeping a parent literacy journal, following in the tradition of other parent literacy researchers (Crago & Crago, 1983; Bagbhan, 1984; Bissex, 1980; Martens, 1988). In addition to recording Madeline's home and school literacy experiences, this journal became a place for me to question and challenge my own ideas and beliefs about literacy education. As I began the process of writing the story I had documented with the data from my literacy journal, it became apparent that my educational story as a parent and early years teacher was closely intertwined with Madeline's experience. My own questions, concerns, ideas, and thoughts provided the basis for re-imagining my own literacy program in my future classroom. I have, therefore, grounded my study in the methodological paradigm of narrative, self-study.

Reviewing the scholarly research about leveled books and the reading instruction paradigm into which they fit, and then systematically analyzing data derived from my parent literacy journal, has led me to patterns and themes that address issues of: identity, purpose, beliefs, reading models, public reinforcement and external rewards, and power.

Acknowlegements

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Introduction

It was a bright, sunny morning in the fall of 2005. My six-year-old daughter Madeline and I were on our way to her weekly gymnastics class. My cheerful mood kept me from noticing that she was unusually quiet and sullen that Saturday morning. After we had driven for a while her voice sadly piped up from the backseat.

"Mom, I don't want to go back to school on Monday."

This statement was so unexpected that it took me a minute to comprehend what she was saying.

"I thought you liked school. Why would you say that?"

"I am the worst reader in the class."

"What! What would make you think that?"

"Everyone else is on Level B or higher. I am the only one still on Level A. It's embarrassing and I don't want to go back."

This thesis was borne out of the above conversation. Although this conversation became the "critical incident" (Newman, 1998) that most challenged my thinking at the time it occurred, the topic of reading practices was something I had been reflecting upon, having just completed my graduate coursework. Early in my MEd program, I had been asked to write a personal statement articulating what I hoped to learn and accomplish through my course of studies. My statement dealt almost entirely with literacy learning. Previous to my graduate work, as an early years teacher I knew my theoretical understanding of literacy had never fully aligned with my classroom practice. As well, although I felt confident in my beliefs about how children learn to

read and write, I often seemed to falter when I tried to articulate my views to others. I knew I needed to both connect the theoretical underpinnings of my literacy beliefs with my practices and be able to clearly articulate and explain these beliefs and practices to colleagues, parents and administrators.

My conversation with Madeline launched an exploration of a specific reading practice that has swept through schools in Manitoba - the use of leveled books for reading instruction. I began this exploration with the following questions: What are leveled books and where have they come from? What is the basis for leveling books? Why are they so prominent on the school landscape? What effects are leveled book programs having on children? Are there children who do not experience success in such programs? Are these programs an effective way to teach children how to read? What does success with leveled books really mean in terms of literacy learning? Will sorting children into levels help them become confident and proficient readers in the future? Are children learning to read for a meaningful purpose in these leveled book programs? And on a personal level, as a mother, I wanted to help Madeline preserve her identity as a reader, even though she was not experiencing the "success" with leveled books that many of her classmates were enjoying.

I have informally challenged my ideas about literacy since the first day I started teaching. The tensions between my beliefs and the established practices dictated by the private school in which I was teaching, became too difficult to reconcile and I made the decision to leave. From there I went to a teaching position in a public school and taught a nursery program. Again, I ran into challenges between my beliefs and practice. I co-taught with a woman who had been teaching the nursery program for over fifteen years. She had created a very traditional

program that I was expected to follow. Although I was able to share some ideas with her and believe I did contribute to building some rich experiences with the children, the program was basically hers, and the parents seemed to embrace it. The program was built largely around an alphabet study in which individual letters of the alphabet were taught separately with letter activities every day. Instead, I wanted to be helping children to participate in authentic language experiences rather than isolated skill experiences. Once more, I felt I needed to leave a teaching situation frustrated and disheartened. I began to wonder if there was a school in which my literacy beliefs and practices would be supported.

I acknowledge that as an educator I have been unable to educate parents about what is important in literacy learning, specifically learning to read. I honestly wonder if when parents are adamant about their children learning to read in a certain way (often how they were taught) how successful I will be in helping them to understand alternative ways of enabling their children to grow into what I would consider to be "strong" readers.

Literature Review

To deepen my own understandings of reading instruction methodologies, I begin this thesis with an examination of the research literature on literacy teaching methodologies. The question about how to teach reading has been at the center of a debate that has raged for centuries. As the North American landscape changed from one composed mostly of small towns to one based on growing urban centers organized around industrial and commercial interests, the traditions of literacy lessons and schooling no longer served society. The search began for new methodologies. Four distinct methodological groups still vying for control today emerged: humanists, child-centered proponents, scientific managers and the social reconstructivists. Although tenets from each of these domains have appeared in the literacy landscape at various times, Shannon (1988) explains:

> Social, economic, and political circumstances and the public's fascination with business, science, and behavioural psychology have enabled advocates of the scientific management position to dominate American reading lessons since the 1920s through the nearly universal use of commercially prepared basal reading materials. Although the rhetoric of the humanist (e.g. classic literature) and the child-centered (e.g. stories appropriate for grade levels and interests) approaches appear in basal materials, the central focus of basal lessons is on the systematic, even standard, delivery of instruction along a fixed sequence of reading and language skills with periodic use of standardized tests to monitor student progress through the materials. (as cited in Shannon, 1990, p.14)

Although Shannon penned these words twenty years ago, they still accurately describe the current educational climate in which we live. Continuous reports about the "current reading crisis," suggesting illiteracy numbers are on the increase, have led to demands from parents and administrators for "more accountability." This accountability is usually framed in terms of testing or measurable outcomes such as "levels."

Think back to your own reading instruction. If you are like many of my generation it would have resembled the following scenario. The teacher would have divided the class into three groups, each group consisting of students of roughly the same ability level - homogenous ability grouping. The reading groups may have had cute names such as squirrels, blue jays or rabbits. It would soon become clear that the squirrels (or whatever name they were given) were the best readers in the class. Similarly, the blue jays after a few reading sessions would have come to realize they were the middle or average readers in the class. And before long everyone in the class knew that the rabbits were the worst readers. Everyone knew that when the rabbits went up to the front of the classroom to sit on the carpet and read with the teacher, it would be a long, painful process of pauses and choppy, fragmented reading.

In the lower grades, "rabbits" often didn't even get to use one of the graded readers that the other groups were using. Their time would often be spent drilling with flash cards or chanting phonics rules. The other two groups would be sitting at their desks quietly completing pages of seat work which might include teacher-made worksheets, commercial workbooks or other tasks that stressed isolated skills such as phonic blends, syllable counting or letter sound identification. In the two other groups of students, those who completed their work first might then get to take out a book of their choosing and do some quiet reading, if there were books in

the classroom. In this model, the readers who most likely needed to be reading and practicing reading continuous text, such as whole stories, were least likely to have this opportunity. Although many of us probably remember this reading experience, I wonder how many of us actually remember the stories we were exposed to from this reading.

This model has characterized reading instruction in North America for the last sixty years (Goodman, Freedman, & Murphy, 1988). As a teaching model it was problematic for a variety of reasons. First, learners were grouped in ways that made it obvious to them whether they were or were not successful learners. Allington (1995) writes that this sorting of children into groups could be hugely damaging to some children. Another reason this teaching method was problematic was that it did not trust learners to make decisions. The students in this model were passive. The teacher was in control of virtually every aspect of the process. The reading materials were predetermined with little or no choice for students, right down to the number of pages that they were expected to read in a session. A reading program such as this was based on reducing learners' experiences to a small subset of the total reading experience; teaching them that they needed to learn discrete skills (phonics, sight words, etc.) first before they could attempt the whole reading act in all of its complexity (Cambourne, 1988; Larson & Marsh, 2005). This model also assumed that children progressed in similar ways and acquired specific skills in particular sequence (Larson & Marsh, 2005). While it is accepted that no two children learn to walk in the exact same way or in the exact same time frame, society seems to think that every child should learn to read in the exact same manner and in the exact same time frame. As a result of this societal expectation, educators and parents treat literacy teaching in a very different way from how we view children's language learning in and outside of a school context. "When

children learn to talk they are not expected to wait until they have all the systems and the sub-systems in place before they are allowed to talk with others" (Cambourne, 1988, p.37). If this were the case, children would not be interacting through talk for many years - perhaps never. And yet, we don't look at the acquisition of literacy in schools at all in this way.

It might seem as if I have digressed from the discussion of the current use of leveled books to a discussion of an old model of reading instruction. The reason I chose to write about this model is two-fold. First, many parents and educators can relate to the above scenario, since many of us went through that process. And while most of us did learn to read, I would argue that this was in spite of the shortcomings of the instruction we may have received. Frank Smith (1978) addressed this point long ago when he wrote, "In the two-thousand year recorded history of reading instruction, as far as I have been able to discover, no-one has devised a method of teaching reading that has not proved a success with some children" (p. 4). Perhaps the question to be asked about the generations of people who were taught with the above method is not so much, can they read, but rather, knowing how to read, do they choose to do so and how well do they read? Jackson (2003) writes that 42% of college graduates never read another book after college.

The second reason I addressed the above reading model is that it is really not far removed from the current leveled book phenomena in widespread use today in Manitoba. While today's teaching behaviors may have shifted slightly, the substance is much the same. The underlying methodological philosophy is grounded in the same cognitive, psychological theory (Cambourne, 1988; Larson & Marsh, 2005) which assumes that children progress in similar ways and acquire specific skills in sequence.

Leveled Texts

Turning back to leveled texts, I'd like to present a closer examination of them. Leveled texts have become a major component of reading instruction in many Early Years (kindergarten to grade 4) classrooms in Manitoba and throughout North America. Leveled texts generally refer to reading materials that represent a progression from more simple to more complex and challenging texts (Brabham & Villiaume, 2002). Brabham and Villiaume (2002) write:

> Different text progressions use different leveling criteria. Some are based on readability formulas. Others apply multiple criteria related to language predictability, text formatting, and content. Still others present progressions of letter sound relationships. These progressions also reflect varying degrees of precision. Some progressions provide estimates of grade-level difficulty (e.g., gr. 3); others use smaller increments (e.g., gr.3.2); still others depart from grade levels and order texts using letters (e.g.; A-W) or numbers (e.g.; 1-20). (p. 438)

The multiple and varying ways in which books are leveled illustrate that unless parents have actively researched and educated themselves about the particular leveled book schema their children are working within, they can not truly know what the progression through book levels means. What is the basis for a child being placed at a certain level? Similarly, when children progress rapidly through certain levels, what does this really mean? Parents seem to have "bought into" the concept of text levels being synonymous with children's growing sophistication as readers.

There are two major categories of leveled books. The first category uses children's literature that has been assigned a level, in an attempt to match individual children with the appropriate book difficulty (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; 1999). The second category uses books

written for the sole purpose of teaching reading skills through a progression of text difficulty (Pitcher & Zang, 2007).

Quality of writing is not a consideration in this second category of books. In fact, in a study undertaken to determine whether these leveled texts were of high quality from a linguistic perspective, Pitcher and Zang (2007) utilized criteria suggested by British educational linguist Katherine Perera. According to Perera (2005), early reading books such as leveled texts, must meet three requirements in order for them to be considered "good books." These requirements include: supporting children as they begin to read; showing children that reading is enjoyable; and offering good models for children's own writing (as cited by Pitcher & Zang, 2007). In addition, Perera (2005) identified two other key linguistic features of good story books for beginning readers: they must have a recognizable story structure with a satisfying ending and make use of rhythmic and natural-sounding language (as cited by Pitcher & Zang, 2007). Pitcher and Zang concluded their study by noting:

> It is indeed challenging to produce interesting, well structured stories written in rhythmical, natural-sounding language while using only a strictly controlled vocabulary and endeavoring to repeat the most important words frequently enough for children to become familiar with them. (Pitcher & Zang, 2007, p. 50)

The researchers then state that it is crucial for classroom teachers to include in their classroom libraries other types of texts such as trade books and magazines so that students' reading experience can be made truly enriching and enjoyable. Personally, I wonder why educators use leveled text sets at all, rather than using already available, excellent children's literature for facilitating reading and reading instruction.

Fountas and Pinnell (1996, 1999) have widely promoted guiding reading and the need for leveled text sets to be used during this instructional practice. Fountas and Pinnell (1996) write, "guided reading is an instructional setting in which a teacher has brought together a small group of children who are similar in their reading behaviors at a particular point in time" (p. 11). The teacher is then able to select a text that enables the children to use what they already know in terms of what to do as readers and to extend their "processing power" with a few new challenges (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999). The guided reading process adopts the following pattern. The teacher selects a slightly challenging text for the group she is working with. She offers a brief story introduction and then the children in the group read the text simultaneously, silently at their own pace. During this time, the teacher expects to observe behavior and interact with individuals to "reinforce or support effective problem-solving behaviors" (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999, p.12). Afterwards, the teacher facilitates and engages the readers in a discussion of the story and makes teaching points based on observations of the children's reading strengths and weaknesses. In classrooms where guided reading is practiced, often children are expected to use the leveled books during independent reading time as well. This means that these students will be told the level at which they can read, and then will be expected to choose books from a basket of books at that certain level. For example, children who are told they are reading at Level G could only choose books from the basket designated as the Level G basket. The rationale is that during independent reading with leveled texts, students practice and become fluent in their use of effective reading strategies (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999).

Dzaldov and Peterson (2005) point out that the desire to provide texts that students can read without feeling "frustration" is well supported by research (see Brabham & Villuame, 2002; Clay, 1991). In addition to the idea that leveled books help the teacher match books to children

appropriately, many teachers might have been drawn to the "leveling mania" (a term used by Szymusiak & Sibberson, 2001) for a variety of other reasons. Leveled book sets are commercially available and schools and school districts often seem willing to include money in the budget for their purchase. The same materials are then available across schools in a division or district. Assessment is easy in that teachers and parents always have a sense of the level at which each child is reading, according to the criteria determined from the text set being utilized. Larson (2002) argues, however, that "by relying on commercially produced materials, teachers and administrators can shift responsibility from self-accountability to the pre-packaged materials and the reason for continued underachievement to students" (p. 67). In these times of intense teacher accountability and pressure to raise reading test scores, commodified leveled literacy materials seemingly offer "objective" and ongoing evidence of children's reading performance. But control over these assessments is in the hands of commercial publishers who are far removed from the classroom and outside of the control of the classroom teacher, who obviously is better placed to know the individual needs of each class member.

Some potential problems with leveled books:

A) Narrow sociocultural selection of books to choose from

An inherent problem with leveled books is that when matching children to appropriate book levels, the diversity of students' social, cultural, and experiential backgrounds is not, indeed, cannot be taken into account. Leveled books produced for mass consumption cannot be designed to take into consideration the individual differences of each student reader. Dzaldov and Peterson (2005) agree, complaining that all the different criteria that might be used (readability formulas, criteria related to language and predictability, text formatting and

content; or progressions of letter-sound relationships, etc.) fail to take into account, "the interests, motivations, background experience and knowledge, or the sociocultural identities of the readers in the determination of book appropriateness for individuals" (p. 223). Concerned that the exaggerated attention to text levels had created a situation where students have an unnecessarily narrow selection of books to read, Dzaldov and Peterson (2005) undertook a small scale research project, examining 30 randomly selected texts, each determined to be at level G following the leveling scheme found in Fountas and Pinnell's Matching Books to Readers (1999, p. 314-324). The study was conducted to determine whether books within one specific level, or basket, would provide "enough variability in terms of topic, theme, genre, and sociocultural meanings to provide rich and varied reading experiences" (Dzaldov & Peterson, 2005, p. 224). In addition, they examined whether there was uniformity of G-level materials in terms of books and print features, language and literacy features, and text structure. The texts they chose came from a variety of sources, including texts used regularly in Reading Recovery programs, texts from different publishers, texts written as children's literature, and texts written for instructional reading. Although Dzaldov and Peterson did find that there was uniformity in terms of characteristics related to book and print features, as well as literary features, they also found there was no variability in terms of sociocultural features. They expressed their concerns in terms of some of the following examples: under representation of female characters, no texts portraying characters of low socioeconomic status, and so forth. The issue they raised is that some students might be drawing on limited background knowledge to make sense of the selected texts. Dzaldov and Peterson argue: "A text that reflects one student's experience may be at an appropriate level for that student. A student whose sociocultural experience is far removed from that of the characters in the text may feel frustrated when reading it" (p. 227).

B) Choice

As mentioned above, when leveled book baskets start to replace the more usual groupings of books by author, genre or theme (to name just a few), and children are directed to only select texts from certain baskets, their choices are severely limited. When this occurs beyond specific reading instruction time, it is especially disconcerting. As a mother and teacher, I want my daughter Madeline, her peers and the students in my own classroom to have a selection of reading materials that will enrich and develop their backgrounds and experiences, feed their interests and motivate them to continue learning and exploring the world around them. When this choice is limited to a basket of books organized around a certain level, choice is effectively eliminated. Harste (2006) writes, "Which of the demonstrations in a written language event learners attend to depends on the interest and experience of the language learner rather than the age or cognitive state the child is thought to be in" (p. 8). Although some text features such as sentence and word length might play a role in determining text difficulty, there are many other factors within the reader-text interaction that account for a text's level of difficulty for any particular reader. Booth (1998) supports this view,

> When a child chooses a book, she or he takes responsibility for learning. Children usually select a book because they are interested in the topic. Therefore, whether the book reflects their reading ability may be secondary, since interest can motivate a child to read a book that may be difficult. (p. 60)

When teachers know their students and work hard to help support students with what Watson (1997) refers to as "supportive and workable" texts that truly engage the reader, the reader is willing to work hard, with whatever additional supports might be necessary, to make sense of the text. When students read texts in which they are engaged, they are developing a

positive and authentic taste of what literacy might mean for them in their lives. They are not just learning to read, they are learning to read *something.*

C) Commercialization of reading

As the leveling books phenomenon has increased over the last few years, many companies have been profiting. Houghton Mifflin, Scholastic, and many other firms have tapped into the explosion of the leveled reading market by creating and selling text sets to schools. Renaissance Learning, a Wisconsin firm that saw revenues of US $114-million in the 2004 fiscal year, sells software that ranks thousands of published titles, but also provides subscriptions for electronic quizzes--short, content-oriented multiple choice tests--so teachers can monitor children's progress up the literacy ladder (Lorinc, 2006). Pierce (1999) writes, "As I look at what publishers are offering us--and I believe they are responding in part to what they think we want -- I am concerned that quality children's books are being drowned out in a sea of leveled readers" (p. 373). Other critics have weighed in on the matter, complaining that the titles in the leveled reading series are publisher-driven books that tend to be bland, lacking in creativity and are mediocre literature (Lorinc, 2006). Irvine and Larson (2001) observe that: "commodified literacy materials have been criticized for the limited view of literacy they promote and because they often attempt to script teachers' behaviors, deskilling them in the process" (p. 45).

D) The Reading-Writing connection

In the mid-1980's, writing achieved a stronghold in the elementary language arts curriculum that it had never held before. Led by educators such as Donald Graves (1983) and Lucy Calkins (1986), teachers began to view all attempts by children to make sense through

writing as legitimate. Graves and Calkins helped effect a change in thinking about the psycholinguistic notion of "error" as a window into children's thinking, allowing teachers to worry less about perfect spelling and grammar and more about the quality of thinking and problem solving evidenced by the students' attempts at writing. Process writing had children writing for genuine audiences and for real purposes. Process writing also helped us to see reading and writing as inherently intertwined, each supporting and informing the other (Pearson, 2002; Wilson, 2002). And yet, process writing is much harder to find in Manitoba early years classrooms today than in previous decades (Dr. W. Serebrin, personal communication, November 4, 2007). It is possible that the pervasive and high status of guided reading instruction in classrooms has crowded out writing instruction and that reading and writing are being viewed as a separate literacies. Yet, we know writing is a language form and "...not only are language forms defined by their interconnections, but they are learned when these interconnections are realized by the learner" (Cambourne, 1988, p. 183). Every time a child writes, that child is reading. Likewise, every time a child reads, that child is learning about writing (Wilson, 2002). Cambourne (1988) clearly articulates why the reading-writing connection is so important:

> The reading which occurs in association with writing is of two kinds. Firstly, there is the reading and re-reading of the written text as it is being constructed, or reading which accompanies the text. Secondly, there is the sum total of all the reading that the writer has carried out prior to writing the actual text. Whenever writers sit before a blank page and begin to write, they call upon this knowledge that the reading of other texts has stored in their linguistic data pools. This is reading which precedes the writing of a text. (p. 186)

Given the important role of quality written texts in children's writing, it is imperative that children are being exposed to excellent literature (songs, poems, stories and books) that will serve as a model for their writing. Wilson (2002) writes, "To teach writing divorced from a rich reading program is to feed writers a nutritionally poor diet" (p. 169). Fletcher and Portalupi(1998) claim that the writing children do can only be as good as the classroom literature that surrounds and sustains it.

Leveled books were never meant to replace quality children's books in the classroom. They were never meant to be more than one piece of the whole literacy curriculum. Yet, clearly they have gained popularity well beyond the realm of the small literacy instruction periods and the Reading Recovery programs they were originally intended to serve. But, if leveled books constitute the bulk of children's reading, we have to ask ourselves what kind of readers are children becoming?

What is Reading?

In order to advance an argument in support of the use of good quality children's literature, as opposed to the use of leveled texts, I would like to return again to the topic of reading instruction. What constitutes "good" reading instruction has been a question that has divided educators, researchers and society. I believe that in order to talk about strong reading instruction models, I first need to closely examine what the scholarly research has said about the reading process.

Earlier in this literature review I explained why reading instructional programs that view reading as a set of skills needing to be mastered (as often is the emphasis with leveled books), are not effective programs to teach children to become effective and efficient readers. I believe

that most educators accept that reading is more than decoding words on a page. Educators also generally recognize that effective and efficient readers do not always read each and every word accurately all of the time, but rather, that reading involves considerable approximation. Cambourne (1988) writes, "freedom to approximate is an essential ingredient of all successful learning" (p. 70). Yet, accurate word reading is a central feature of instruction with a leveled reading series. Students generally move up to the next level only after supposed mastery of the current level has been achieved. Mastery is demonstrated by achieving an extremely high level of word accuracy. If we believe correct pronunciation of each and every word does not in itself constitute successful reading, the question becomes, what does? Goodman's (1965, 1967, 1996) research helped clarify what happens during the reading process, as readers read to make meaning. He asserted that when a reader is reading a "real text" there are many cue systems available to the reader, with the primary cueing systems being: graphophonic (letter-sound relationships), syntactic (using sentence structure or the flow of language), and semantic (meaning-making). The idea that readers have multiple cues to draw upon while reading in the context of a story as opposed to reading words on a list explains why the reader can recognize and read many more words in context. Wilson (2002) explains:

> This view of the reading process involves the reader sampling the text by drawing upon the visual information, or what the eye sees, predicting the text by drawing upon non-visual information the reader has about language and about the world, and finally, confirming that the meaning made fits with the overall meaning being constructed within the whole text. (p. 3)