

## Using Reading Levels to GUIDE But Never LIMIT

By Kathy King-Dickman | Categories: From the Field, Engaging the Disengaged, Implementation

Reading a recent blog by Donalyn Miller, *On the Level*, caused me to reflect. I have long used the Fountas and Pinnell as well as the DRA leveling systems to help teachers get students into just right books. While I agree that knowing a student's level can be helpful in guiding her choices for independent reading, Miller's blog caused me think deeply about this practice.

As a child of the 60s and 70s, my experience learning to read was in Round Robin Reading groups in which each student took a turn reading while the others followed along. It seemed these groups were always named after birds: Bluebirds and Hawks or such. Growing up as a struggling reader, a dear friend said she always felt she was in the Buzzards reading group even though, I am sure, that is not what the teacher called it. If my friend who grew up to be a master teacher remembers feeling this way, how do children of the twenty-first century feel when we say, you need to read all the books with a certain letter (F & P) or the box marked 18 (DRA) on the outside? Do they too feel that they are Buzzards? In our mission to get students to read just right books, are we limiting them by labeling them with a number or a letter?

While it is true that many struggling readers have been helped to become avid readers by getting into their zone of proximal development and reading just right books (check out my previous blog on this topic), this doesn't mean that these readers should be limited or, worse yet, labeled by these levels. What they need most is to feel good about themselves as readers while they avidly read books they can read accurately and comprehend without stress or struggle. In order to do this, many well-meaning teachers create elaborate systems to support their students.

### **“In our mission to get students to read just right books, are we limiting them by labeling them with a number or a letter?”**

One very capable young teacher spent much time this past summer leveling the books in her room, most likely based on a suggestion I made. She now provides the students with a stickered card that shows which boxes of books in the room are okay for them to read. As they progress in reading, the teacher changes the stickers on their individual cards. While this system is working to help her students find just right books, I do worry we might be, “...warping children's positive reading identity development and their perceptions of what reading is” (Donalyn Miller, *On the Level*). While these children have great reading practice each and every day, how do they see themselves as readers? Do they think they are Bluebirds or Buzzards? Will this stickering system help them become readers for life?

Years ago I had an outside literacy coach come regularly to my classroom. I had wanted so badly to reorganize the books in my classroom before her next visit but, as usual, finding the time between raising a family and running a second-grade classroom had kept this from happening. Brett's visit came upon me suddenly. She had made it clear on her previous visit that we would be working on independent reading for this visit. I crossed my fingers that she would watch me confer with the children and not attend to how the books were chosen or set up. Of course, she didn't pay any heed to my well-planned conferences; but rather, went to sit with

Alejandra who was curled up on a beanbag with a pile of books.

I am ashamed now to admit my first thought was, “NO, not Alejandra!” Suffice it to say that if I had had groups labeled by bird names, she would not have been a Bluebird or a Hawk. I dreaded our debrief as I was certain Brett would suggest in front of all of my colleagues that my room was not set up to support independent reading. To my surprise, she shared with all of us how delighted she had been by what she had seen. She had asked Alejandra to read to her and then asked her how she chose books that were just right. Sweet Alejandra told Brett exactly what I had been teaching her to do until I could get my books set up in a leveled system, “Mrs. D tells us to pick a book that has print that looks like the books we read with her in our reading groups, to read a page or two and stop and think whether we can sum it up so far and predict what might happen next.” Rather than reprimand me for having my 2,000 books in disarray, Brett applauded me for teaching my students to find just right books from the chaos within. Years later, I did get my books set up into tubs of series, authors, genres, and loosely by level—a system that allowed children to contract with me which tub they would work in for their just right reading time. Now I reflect back and wonder if my chaotic mess was the better choice for students.

Author and educator Kelly Gallagher suggests that we should assess teachers by taking their students to the local bookstore. If the students can choose books they **want to** and **can** read, the teacher passes the assessment; if not, the teacher doesn't. For a great video on teaching students to choose books they **want to** and **can** read, watch Collaborative Classroom's [Shopping for Books](#).

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So how do we help guide students to read just right books while making them feel they can soar like eagles? After 37 years in the field, I am not sure I have the answer to this. Please get in touch with any suggestions you have found to be successful.