

# A STUDY GUIDE



second edition

## *Beyond Leveled Books*

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Supporting Early and Transitional Readers in Grades K-5



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# Beyond Leveled Books, Second Edition

## *Supporting Early and Transitional Readers in Grades K–5*

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Karen Szymusiak, Franki Sibberson, and Lisa Koch

*Beyond Leveled Books*, Second Edition, is designed to help teachers think in new ways about how to help readers in grades K–5. The authors advocate an approach that depends less on matching students to levels of books and more on matching them to books based on observed needs.

Following are suggestions to help groups of educators read, discuss, and extend the ideas from *Beyond Leveled Books*, Second Edition, into classrooms. These ideas will come to life as teachers are given opportunities to put them into practice with their own students. With that in mind, we have developed questions and pulled provocative quotes from each chapter that will enable participants to talk about their own lives as readers as well as the reading lives of their students. We also encourage groups to try out some new practices in their classrooms using specific workshop suggestions that are designed to foster collaboration and spark new thinking.

Articles written by literacy experts have been included throughout this new edition to help readers think through a variety of issues related to matching students with appropriate texts. These articles are the perfect length for use in study groups and can encourage discussion about issues that correspond to the rest of the text. The articles included in this new edition are:

*My Son, Clark Kent* by Lisa Koch

*Teacher Decision Making Is the Key to Choosing Among Leveled Books and Going Beyond* by Diane DeFord and Adria Klein

*Creating High-Quality Leveled Books for Beginning Readers* by Lynn Salem and Josie Stewart

*Organizing Book Baskets: Letting Kids In On the Plan* by Katie DiCesare  
*Is There Life After Captain Underpants? Fiction for Transitional Boy Readers*  
by Larry Swartz  
*Supporting Student Book Choice* by Kathy Collins  
*Sluggers . . . a Series for Transitional/Reluctant/Emergent Readers from a Dad*  
*Who Happens to Live with One* by Loren Long  
*Nonfiction Books for Independent Reading: Moving Beyond Content*  
*Connections* by Franki Sibberson  
*Comprehending Graphic Novels: A Primer for Teachers* by Mary Lee Hahn  
*On Kidney Tables: Small Changes for Big Effects* by Karen Szymusiak  
*Just Because They Can Doesn't Mean They Should* by Shari Frost

### Helpful hints for all group discussions and activities:

1. If discussion stalls or digresses into a local issue or school problem that is unrelated to the book, you can refocus the group by introducing a key question or having everyone consider one of the “Quotes to Ponder.”
2. Several of the workshops ask participants to have their students complete an assignment. You may want to distribute in advance the forms needed to complete each assignment and set target dates for completion before each workshop.
3. You may want to rotate responsibility for leading whole-group or small-group discussions among participants to ensure that everyone has a turn leading and invests equally in the group.

## Introduction

### Key Questions for Group Discussion

What are the unintended messages that a focus on leveled text sends to our youngest readers?

What role do leveled books play in your classroom? Discuss.

## Workshop Suggestions

Have participants find quotes in the introductory article by Lisa Koch that changed their thinking or with which they strongly agreed or disagreed. Discuss.

Have participants share stories about how the use of leveled books in their classrooms has changed during the past several years. Has the change been good for students?

## Quote to Ponder

*Our questions about books changed. Instead of questions about characters, words, or what might happen next, he asked, “Mom, what level is this?” He looked at the covers of books at home, almost expecting to find a label, and then exclaimed, “It has to be, like, a level X!” (3)*

# Chapter 1: Challenging Leveled-Book Mania

## Key Questions for Group Discussion

Why do you think levels have become so important in today’s educational climate?

What benefits do you see in levels? How do leveled books help you in your own teaching?

## Workshop Suggestions

Have participants write down the ways that their students choose books for independent reading. Have them reflect on how these practices both support and limit their readers.

Have participants discuss the messages that students receive outside of school that add to this new focus on levels.

## Quote to Ponder

*Children in elementary classrooms need to have choice in what they read if they are going to develop skills to become lifelong readers. We are afraid that the use of lev-*

*eled books in classrooms has created very inauthentic reading experiences for our children. (14–15)*

## **Chapter 2: Expanding Our Definition of Just-Right Books in Our K–1 Classrooms**

### **Key Questions for Group Discussion**

How do you define a just-right book? Is your definition limiting at all?

How much of your classroom library is leveled? Is there a balance?

How might you use some of the ideas in this chapter to revise the way that your library is organized?

How do you choose leveled books that are supportive for your readers?

Which picture books in your collection do you find most supportive of early readers?

Do you think chapter books have a place in primary classrooms? Why or why not?

### **Workshop Suggestions**

Have participants think about their own reading during the last few months. In the first column of a two-column sheet of paper, have them list the books they have read. In the second column, have them list the reasons that each book was “just right” for them. Ask them to discuss the reasons that they chose the books they did.

Following this activity, have participants think about the ways that their students choose books.

### **Quote to Ponder**

*In our work across the country, we have heard countless stories from school librarians who are not allowed to buy books that are not leveled by some district-approved system. We have heard about very young children who tell relatives at holiday parties that they are a “level L,” and public librarians who are asked to give children*

## Chapter 3: Understanding Transitional Readers

### Key Questions for Group Discussion

What do you remember about learning to read, or reading instruction you received, when you were a student in grades K–5? What strikes you about these memories?

What do you wish you had been taught about working with readers at this grade level during your teacher preparation program?

What surprised you most when you began to teach students in this age group?

### Workshop Suggestions

1. Have all participants write down the names of three of their students: one should be a student they consider to be a strong reader, one an average reader, and one a struggling reader. Beside each name, participants should record the specific needs of that reader. Next, they should record the specific strengths of that reader. Have the group compare and contrast their lists. What similarities and differences exist? What is unique about some of these readers?
2. Take some time to discuss the article “Is There Life After Captain Underpants? Fiction for Transitional Boy Readers” by Larry Swartz on page 63 and to reflect on the types of books that boys tend to choose. Ask participants to name some books that might appeal to more reluctant readers.

### Quotes to Ponder

*Transitional readers are not struggling readers . . . they simply need new strategies to read more complex texts and move toward independence. (53)*

*When we close our minds, our eyes, and our ears to the real stuff inside every child, our teaching is dull. (63)*

## **Chapter 4: *When Levels and Learning Clash: Moving from Levels to Supports in Designing Instruction***

### **Key Questions for Group Discussion**

How would your students define a just-right book? Do you feel that their definition is an authentic one?

How can we help our students choose books that support them as readers without limiting them?

### **Workshop Suggestions**

Have participants bring in a stack of books from their classroom libraries. Give them time to look over the supportive features of text that are listed on pages 79–84. Have them analyze their books for supportive features.

Discuss the mini-lesson “Just-Right Books: Things to Think About” on pages 87–88. How might participants implement lessons like this one in their own classrooms?

### **Quote to Ponder**

*When students’ reading diet is exclusively a leveled one, their purpose for reading disappears. They read for us. They become eager to reach the next level instead of being eager to learn more from what they are reading. In our haste to put skills instruction back into reading programs, we may have forgotten what we know about teaching children to read. We have abandoned the important lessons we learned about real reading, real books, and real children. (70)*

## **Chapter 5: *Taking a Close Look at Series Books***

### **Key Questions for Group Discussion**

Does your classroom library include series books? Do students in your classroom tend to get hooked on an entire series?

How might you introduce more series books to your students?

How can you use series books in read-aloud sessions or mini-lessons?

## Workshop Suggestions

Have participants review Table 5.1, which begins on page 98. Ask them to find a series in the table with which they are familiar and to read the features described for that series. Are they surprised by any of the characteristics listed for the series?

Ask participants to think of series books that are popular with their students but are not included in Table 5.1. Are these books supportive of transitional readers? What supports do they provide?

## Quote to Ponder

*Just as predictable texts support young readers, Sharon Taberski (2000) reminds us how series books can provide similar support for transitional readers . . . Through their shared characters, settings, and events, these books support transitional readers' development just as the repetitive language and structure of emergent and early texts supported them when they were starting out (17)."* (90)

# Chapter 6: Using Picture Books, Nonfiction, and Graphic Novels with Transitional Readers

## Key Questions for Group Discussion

How does this chapter change the way you think about matching books to the needs of your students?

What are some differences between the ways you present fiction and nonfiction to your students?

Which types of books—picture books, nonfiction books, or graphic novels—are not as visible to your students as you would like?

## Workshop Suggestions

Have participants share picture books that can be used in mini-lessons to teach strategies needed at the transitional stage of reading.

Have participants read and discuss the article “Comprehending Graphic Novels: A Primer for Teachers” by Mary Lee Hahn, which begins on page 139. Then ask them to discuss their thoughts on graphic novels and their place in the elementary classroom.

## Quote to Ponder

*It has become the norm in many schools to teach students the features of nonfiction text. We agree that this is valuable for the students. But understanding the way text features work is not the goal of a unit on nonfiction. Knowing a feature does not mean that students can integrate all the features of a nonfiction text to gather information. It is important that we go beyond a unit on nonfiction text features if we want our students to understand and use all pieces of nonfiction text appropriately.*  
(130)

# Chapter 7: Organizing for Thoughtful Instruction

## Key Questions for Group Discussion

Which areas of your classroom library work well? Why?

How might you change your classroom library organization to meet students’ needs?

How is time organized in your classroom? Do students have sufficient time for independent reading?

## Workshop Suggestions

Have participants read the article “On Kidney Tables: Small Changes for Big Effects” by Karen Szymusiak, which begins on page 144. Discuss the subtle messages that are sent by items found in classrooms and schools. Do you agree or disagree that this is an important issue?

Study the mini-lesson “One Book Can Change You as a Reader” on pages 150–151. Then have participants think about their own reading lives. Using

their own reading as a model, ask participants to make a list of experiences they can employ in mini-lessons.

### Quote to Ponder

*We gather information about our students from many sources—running records, individual interviews, observations of how they select and discard books, analysis of early reading log entries, and whole-class discussions of reading. Our goal is to see how our students define reading and what their perspectives of themselves are as readers. (156)*

## Chapter 8: Grouping for Instruction

### Key Questions for Group Discussion

How do you organize groups for reading instruction?

How might you change that organization based on what you read in this chapter?

### Workshop Suggestion

Have participants bring in their class lists. Distribute the Temporary Reading Groups form (page 215) to each group member. Have everyone brainstorm possible student groupings, reasons, and texts using any criteria except leveled books. Once all of the participants have created two or three possibilities each, discuss how and why they developed their groups.

### Quote to Ponder

*We group in several ways throughout the year. We think about the students' needs, the students' own goals, our state's standards, and the time we have. Some groups are designed to stay together for only one session. Other groups stay together for a few days based on the purpose of the group. To group effectively, it is important that we know our students well and constantly look for patterns in the class. (163)*

## Chapter 9: Building a Reading Community

### Key Questions for Group Discussion

What types of texts do you choose to read at home?

What types of texts do your family members choose to read?

Which family member or friend has had the greatest influence on your reading choices? (You can discuss current or past influences.)

### Workshop Suggestion

Have participants make copies of the Family Homework: Books I Read When I Was Young form (page 221) and distribute it to their students for homework. After students complete the forms, have participants share them with the group and discuss the following questions:

Which books are highlighted repeatedly?

Why are these books popular?

What patterns emerge across families?

What connections can you make between learning to read and reading enjoyment?

### Quote to Ponder

*Because our goal with transitional readers is to move them toward independent and lifelong reading, we should provide opportunities for them to explore their lives as readers both in and out of the classroom setting. (186)*

## Chapter 10: Taking the Conversation Home

### Key Questions for Group Discussion

What are some ways you might include families in your reading program?

As a group, brainstorm and list possible obstacles to increasing family involvement in your classroom reading programs. What are some strategies you might use to overcome these obstacles?

## Workshop Suggestion

Have participants make copies of the Family Homework form (page 221) and distribute it to their students for homework. After the forms have been completed by students' families, bring them to the group for discussion. In small groups, look at patterns across individual questions. What sparks reading enjoyment for family members? What types of books are family members least likely to enjoy? What are the implications for classroom practice?

## Quote to Ponder

*In a time of test scores and accountability, teachers are being forced to spend precious classroom time in ways that do not necessarily foster lifelong reading. (212)*