

# The Fountas & Pinnell Story

Our commitment is to develop the expertise of teachers and we share a long history of trying to write books and materials that are research-based and practical for teachers. We have always wanted teachers to be able to use our books as professional teaching guides, referring to them frequently as they work with children.

The publications of *The Continuum of Literacy Learning*, the *Benchmark Assessment Systems (BAS) 1 and 2*, and the *Levelled Literacy Intervention Systems (LLI)* are the result of over two decades of research and practical work with teachers. Our work is rooted in our own classroom teaching, but we have had the pleasure of working with many teachers, from kindergarten to year eight, as well as to participate in research projects and to read the research of others.

In the early 1990s, both of us had been working in Reading Recovery® (early intervention involving one-to-one tutoring). We had also been involved with comprehensive approaches that involved professional development and leadership training for classroom teachers and in-classroom literacy coaches, and with small-group interventions to help struggling readers. We found that comprehensive plans led to higher achievement when classroom and intervention teachers worked together as a coherent, cohesive team.

We knew that it was essential to match books to readers and to provide differentiated instruction through working with small groups in reading. But we could not find a focused professional book that offered practical advice and discussions of research-based practice in this area. So, we teamed up to write *Guided Reading: Good First Teaching for All Students*. It was a wonderful surprise to find that we could produce more helpful materials for teachers when we worked together, so we just kept writing in response to the questions teachers gave us, the needs they expressed, and the challenges we observed in our hundreds of partner schools.

Our books and articles were directed either towards primary teachers (for example, *Interactive Writing*, with Andrea McCarrier) or intermediate and middle level teachers (for example, *Guiding Readers and Writers*). Some books seemed to help both groups (for example, *Word Matters: Teaching Phonics and Spelling in the Reading/Writing Classroom* and *Word Study Lessons*), and we began to think about the long continuum of literacy and language development from the time children enter preschool to year eight, when literacy is essentially at adult level (except for the long years of experiences of reading texts that adults have accumulated over time).

For many years we had been using a valuable tool—the gradient of text from A to Z that Irene had begun to create with teams of teachers in school districts almost thirty years ago. We refined this tool and published it for the first time in *Guided Reading*, but we continued to explore just what made one book easier or harder for readers. Thinking across the gradient from A to Z provided a picture of the development of systems of strategic actions over time, and we used this picture to guide the observation of precise reading behaviour and the teaching that would lead each reader forward.



“When everyone in the school uses the same assessment, continua and language as they move from observation to instruction, a common conversation occurs.”

– Irene Fountas and  
Gay Su Pinnell

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We began to write the book that was eventually entitled *Teaching for Comprehending and Fluency: Thinking, Talking, and Writing about Reading, K–8*; it took a long time, and there were a few detours along the way. In fact, it took three years and two cold Januarys, including one blizzard, to complete the text.

Here's what held us up. We needed to analyse in great detail the text characteristics of fiction and nonfiction books at every level of the A to Z gradient to understand the demands of each level on the developing reader. Much of this work had been presented in *Levelled Books for Readers*, but we continued to refine it. And the most challenging task was to think about what the reader needs to be able to do at each level to read with accuracy, understanding and fluency. We decided to write specific behaviours and understandings to notice, teach for and support each A to Z level—following the outline of twelve systems of strategic actions that we had identified in several other publications. This exercise resulted in the creation of the *Guided Reading* section of *The Continuum of Literacy Learning*, and that led to more work!

We went on to use the same text characteristics and curriculum goals as a framework for designing other continua: interactive read-aloud, shared and performance reading, and writing about reading. We began to think that the continuum would be too large to be an appendix for *Teaching for Comprehending and Fluency*. And, as we thought about teachers' and administrators' needs as they worked to create comprehensive systems, we knew that we needed to add three more continua, K–8: writing (conventions, craft and process); oral, visual and technological communications and phonics and spelling (a year level version of the more detailed phonics continuum in the *Phonics Lessons and Word Study Lessons* series we had previously produced). We now had a detailed continuum of literacy learning for K–8, which has proved to be a very helpful tool for teachers to use when planning and assessing and for coaches and administrators to use when supporting teacher development. However, this process led to other challenges.

As we created the continuum, we thought constantly about those students who were having difficulty meeting the curriculum goals. What kind of—and what level of—instruction would they need? For many years, we had been implementing a range of interrelated practices in classrooms. We worked to teach for strategic actions across these contexts and to differentiate instruction through guided reading and small-group instruction. We also worked with teachers to provide supplementary small-group interventions for those students who were struggling. We decided to systematise our supplementary work by designing a small-group intervention that would be highly structured and sequenced, intensive, and highly engaging for students. We called it *Levelled Literacy Intervention* because it was based on the work we had done on the continuum, and it allowed teachers to make highly intentional teaching moves based on the gradient. That was over seven years ago!

As we look at these publications, we sometimes feel we were working on one continuing publication over the last eight years. Together they make a cohesive and coherent set of tools to make teaching efficient and transformative. All of our thinking has come together in a way we hope will help teachers work in highly effective ways with students and learn more about literacy teaching and learning.

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