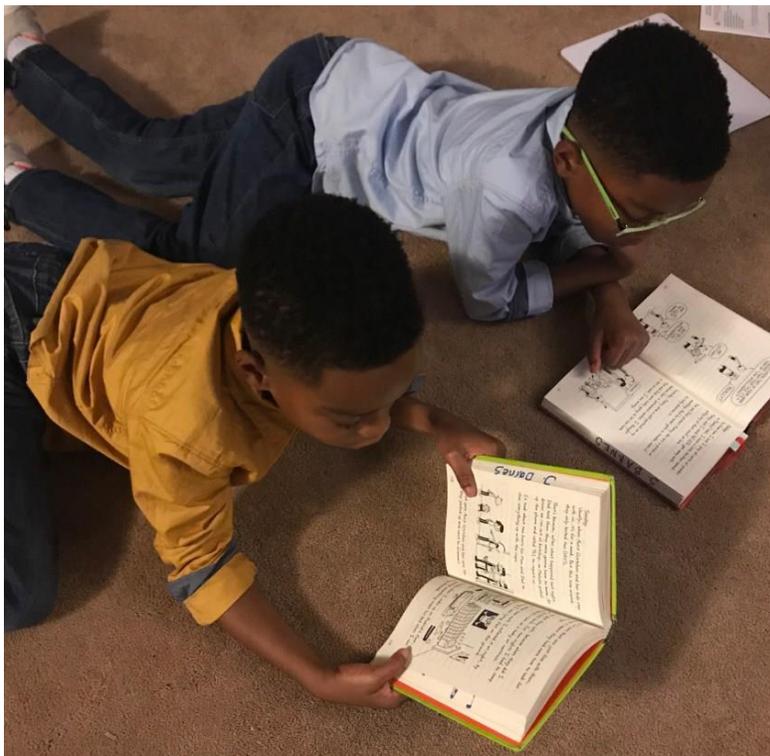

Do Fountas and Pinnell Care If Children of Color and Poor Children Can Read?

By Shawnta S. Barnes – September 23, 2018



Recently [Erika Sanzi](#), an education advocate, shared a [tweet](#) from Fountas and Pinnell and stated, “This is insane.” I agree with her stance.



Erika Sanzi @esanzi · 21h

This is insane.

Fountas & Pinnell @FountasPinnell

Parents/caregivers should not be told a child’s reading level. A level is a TEACHER’S TOOL only. #FPLiteracy

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This is my 13th year as an educator and I have had various roles: English teacher, English as a New Language Teacher, Elementary and High School Literacy Coach, and I am currently an Elementary Library/Media Specialist. For the last five years, I have also taught Psycholinguistics for Reading Teachers K-12 at a local university. One connecting focus in all of my roles is literacy which means I am familiar with Irene C. Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell who are literacy gurus. Among many contributions to literacy, they have created a system to assess a child's reading level which teachers sometimes call F&Ps. I have given the assessment and I even use one of Pinnell's articles in the college course I teach. Although I do believe these ladies are literacy experts and have helped make an impact on literacy in schools, their recent tweet makes me think they are too far removed from the classroom.

In a recent [YouTube video](#), I retold a story I had shared the week before at the 2018 National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ) Convention in Detroit when I was part of [The Importance of Educating our Black Children](#) panel. I have twin sons and their schools use the F&P assessment. Since kindergarten, both of my sons have been given the assessment and have read well above the level they should have been at the time according to their grade level. Last year, one of my sons' teachers did not believe he could read higher than he could. If I had not been told the level, I would not have been able to take any action to advocate for my child. If you haven't watched my video, spoiler alert, I was right about my son.

What about the students who are not reading at grade level or who are far behind? Withholding data handicaps parents. I am not here to judge other parents, but some parents have no clue their children are behind in reading. When I was teaching eighth grade, I was explaining to a parent that her child had the reading ability of a second grader. I needed her to have this information because I needed her to help me help her son improve before he went to high school. This is what the parent initially said to me, "Mrs. Barnes, I think you are mistaken. My son can read. How would he be in 8th grade? No one has ever told me that he was having problems reading." What I did next may seem cruel, but I needed her to believe me. Her son was at the meeting and I asked him to read an 8th-grade level text. He couldn't read any words that were more than three to five letters. His mom started tearing up because she really didn't know.

This school was a majority-minority school where the majority of students also received free and reduced lunch. This student was a black boy and many times in schools with these demographics, this data is withheld. Yes, the reading level is a tool and it is not the end all be all when it comes to literacy instruction but it is a tool that all parties: the parent, the student, and the teacher need to know.

Unfortunately, I have worked in schools where even students didn't know their data. Real talk – the students knew they could not read well; they just didn't know where they fell on the scale. I coached a few of those teachers who didn't tell their students their reading level. One teacher said, "I don't want to lower my students' self-esteem by telling them." After my principal got involved, all students knew their level and then they were able to set goals. You can't grow if you don't know exactly where you are starting.

I respect Fountas and Pinnell's work, but this recommendation hurts children of color; it hurts poor kids. Research already tells us that majority-minority schools and schools where the majority of students receive free and reduced lunch, tend to have limited resources, high teacher turnover, and teachers who don't teach well. The least the school could do is to ensure parents are informed with facts so they can take action. No school should follow this recommendation from Fountas and Pinnell.