

Levels or Labels: Some Suggestions for Leveled (Leveling) Texts in the Elementary Reading Curriculum

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Children's literature, namely picture books and novels written and published for the trade market, has assumed a prominent position in the elementary reading curriculum (Huck, Helper, Hickman, & Kiefer, 1997). In addition to the wealth of children's literature available in the trade markets, numerous commercial publishers are producing and marketing sets of leveled books for schools to expand their collections of reading instructional materials. As the resources used for reading instruction and independent reading expand, analysis of these materials and their effects on young readers is warranted.

In response to these trends in the educational publishing industry, classroom teachers are faced with the challenge of selecting from a wide array of reading materials appropriate texts for reading instruction and guiding students' choices for independent reading opportunities. Since Fountas and Pinnell published *Matching Books to Readers: Using Leveled Books in Guided Reading* (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999) providing classroom teachers with suggested levels for selecting trade books for guided reading instruction, many elementary schools have created "book rooms" full of leveled texts, designed to support teachers' selections of appropriate instructional materials. These book rooms often become a primary source of instructional materials for guided reading groups and independent reading.

Unlike the broad, general categories of "easy" or "young adult" books used in elementary libraries, or the suggested reading levels displayed on the back of books as a marketing device, books are leveled based on a specific readability formula (Fry, 1977), or a criteria for determining the supports and challenges of a particular text (Clay, 1991; Fountas & Pinnell, 1999). Whether a traditional readability formula or more extensive selection criteria are being used to categorize or level books, there has been a significant increase in the number of books being leveled for use in guided reading and other instructional practices in elementary schools across the United States (Szymusiak & Sibberson, 2001).

Some of the oft cited reasons offered for this "leveling mania" (Szymusiak & Sibberson, 2001, p. 16) include (a) the need for teachers to make appropriate selections for instructional experiences (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996), (b) the dangers of having novice readers reading material that is too difficult (Calkins, 2000), and (c) the need for teachers to think about the level of support and challenges a particular text may present a reader (Brabham & Villaume, 2002).

Active readers need to be active assessors of appropriateness of their reading selections.

With every rationale for implementing a practice such as leveling texts, there are also many concerns that need to be considered. Watson (1997) raises the concern of whether the processes and criteria used to level texts are helpful in supporting teachers' choices of reading materials. Rog and Burton (2001/2002) state, "simple grade-level approximations provided by readability formulas are not accurate at the early primary level because they fail to take into account the many additional kinds of information provided by illustrations" (p. 348). Brabham and Villaume (2002) offered accounts written by teachers where students were confined to reading in color-coded sections of school libraries, limited in the choices by their assigned reading levels. These considerations alone need to be considered as teachers level their classroom libraries and use suggested levels for selecting books for guided reading instruction.

Students reading texts at an appropriate level for independent reading, rather than selecting texts that are frustrating, is considered of primary importance in developing young readers' skills and reading abilities (Allington, 2002). Readers need access to a wide range of texts and extended time to engage with appropriate reading materials (Fielding & Roller, 1992). Although leveled texts are only one component of a balanced literacy framework, the process used to level texts, the reasons for leveled texts, and the possible consequences of leveled (leveling) texts need to be considered.

After a brief review of the nature of leveled texts, because the nature and history of leveled texts has been reviewed extensively elsewhere (Brabham & Villaume, 2002; Hoffman, Roser, Salas, Patterson, & Pennington, 2000), I will discuss particular possibilities and challenges for leveled (leveling) texts. I will close the article by providing some suggestions for the use of leveled texts in the elementary reading curriculum.

A Brief Overview of Leveled (Leveling) Texts

The term "leveled text" refers to reading material that has been created with controlled vocabulary and increasing conceptual density to offer readers a progression from simple to more challenging texts, or the process of applying a formula or criteria to published trade books to place them along a similar progression (Clay, 1991; Hoffman et al., 2000). The practice of leveling texts was initiated to insure readers were reading texts that provided an appropriate amount of support and challenge, and did not cause readers to become frustrated and unable to comprehend what was being read. It seems that the search for a "just right" text for readers has been a primary impetus for the use of leveling systems and leveled texts (Rog & Burton, 2001/2002).

One distinction that should be made is the difference between books in a publishers' series that were written to fit a particular level, and trade books, written primarily to tell a story, that have been leveled by the application of a particular formula or procedure. Texts written to fit a particular leveled series of books often use controlled vocabulary (limited number of words, particular spelling or phonics patterns, controlled number of rare words) to create these

leveled texts.

Texts that have been created by commercial publishers (e.g., Rigby, Wright Group, Scholastic, Ready to Read), sometimes referred to as "little books," are often included in a school's leveled collection. However, with the publication of professional development materials like *Matching Books to Readers: Using Leveled Books in Guided Reading* (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999), suggested reading levels have been created for trade books. This practice has allowed teachers to level books that were not originally intended to be part of a leveled series.

Different series of texts use different criteria or formulas for leveling texts. Some are based on readability formulas; others apply multiple criteria related to language predictability, text formatting, and content; while others are based on letter-sound relationships (Brabham & Villaume, 2002). By applying a particular formula, for example the Fry Readability Formula (Fry, 1977), or a set of criteria used to examine the conceptual density and textual structures to create a level (Clay, 1991), teachers and literacy specialists are able to create leveled libraries intended to support reading instruction, in particular shared and guided reading groups.

In general, the criteria used to level texts include text features, vocabulary, sentence length and complexity, subject matter or content, story structures, and language features. Although teachers are encouraged to view the designated levels as an approximation of the gradient of difficulty associated with each book in a particular list (Calkins, 2000; Szymusiak & Sibberson, 2001), these levels are published as a progression from simple to more complex reading material designed to support young readers' development. Most leveled text lists include reading material for grades kindergarten through sixth grade.

Teachers using guided reading as an instructional approach rely on the leveling of texts to match readers with the appropriate amount of supports and challenges for reading instruction (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). For guided reading instruction, classroom teachers are encouraged to use published lists of leveled texts to help readers proceed from easier books to more complex reading materials, and to select texts that are at a reader's instructional level. Teachers use these published lists as a series of texts with increasing levels of difficulty to push readers to develop new strategies during reading.

The Possibilities of Leveled (Leveling) Texts

One of the most important possibilities of using leveled texts, or systems designed to level texts, is the support it provides classroom teachers in selecting reading material for reading aloud, shared reading experiences, and guided reading instruction. In addition, leveled texts may provide support for helping readers make appropriate selections for independent reading. Although the levels designated to particular texts need to be considered an approximation of the complexity of the reading material, these levels can provide a starting point for teachers and students to make appropriate selections for reading and reading

instruction.

All of the focus on leveled texts and the process of leveling texts may have produced an interesting parallel effect. Because of the rising interest in the use of leveled texts and the processes used for leveling texts, it is possible that teachers have become more cognizant of the criteria used to level texts and therefore developed a better understanding of the supports and challenges that particular texts pose for the readers in their classrooms, although further research is needed to determine if this is occurring. Teachers and literacy specialists are often involved in the creation of their school's book room, or in the actual determination of the levels designated to particular books. This attention to what constitutes supports and challenges for a particular reader reading a particular text is an important consideration for classroom teachers. As teachers focus their attention on the supports and challenges of a particular text, they are more capable of making appropriate choices for instructional materials and offering suggestions for students' independent reading choices.

Citing the dangers of spending time with texts that prove frustrating, proponents of leveled texts purport that leveling systems and the creation of personal "book baskets" help readers make more appropriate selections for independent reading. Students are also encouraged to use the organization of leveled texts to determine which texts are at their independent reading level and which ones pose too much challenge at a particular time, for a particular purpose. If the levels designated for reading materials help students choose texts appropriately and still provide access to interesting reading material, then they may have a positive effect on students' development as readers. Having readers spend time with texts they can read and understand is an important instructional consideration (Brown, 1999/2000).

The expansion of reading materials beyond the basal anthology in elementary reading programs has been credited to the literature based reading or whole language movement (Hoffman & Pearson, 2000). Novice readers need access to exciting, authentic, interesting reading material. Extensive classroom libraries increase readers' reading and help them become better readers. It may be possible that the creation and promotion of published lists of leveled texts have encouraged school districts and teachers to purchase more reading materials for their classrooms. A concern may be raised about the quality of these new materials that are being provided, but there is anecdotal evidence that leveled collections are providing additional access to reading materials in many classrooms across the country.

The primary possibilities of leveled (leveling) texts include (a) levels can be used to help readers make appropriate selections for reading and teachers make better selections for reading instruction, (b) the proliferation of lists of leveled series of books may have increased the amount of little books in elementary classrooms and reduced the reliance on basal anthologies, and (c) leveling systems may have forced teachers to attend to the supports and challenges that particular texts pose for the readers in the classrooms.

The Challenges of Leveled (Leveling) Texts

The challenges of leveled texts, or using a system for leveling texts for instruction or students' self-selection of appropriate texts, deserve our attention as more and more classroom teachers are using leveled texts as a component of their reading program. A primary challenge in the process of leveling texts is the criteria or formula that is used to create the levels. Traditional readability formulas (e.g. Fry, 1977) focus on characteristics of the complexity of language used in the text, in particular sentence length, vocabulary frequency, and syntactical structures, to designate gradients of text difficulty. These formulas focus on the characteristics of the text itself, and not the relationship between the reader and the text that develops during the act of reading. Because of this focus on the text itself, these formulas ignore what the reader brings to the reading event and theorize texts as objective entities that can be leveled and understood apart from the readers that read them.

Other more complex criteria, for example Clay (1991) and Fountas and Pinnell (1999), are being used to create more distinct levels based on design features and conceptual density, in addition to the criteria traditionally included in readability formulas. Whether these criteria do a better job of leveling texts has been discussed elsewhere (Hoffman et al., 2000) and is not the focus of this article. However, as the levels become more specific, with as many as ten levels associated with a particular grade level, the challenge arises whether we can in fact discern text and reader complexity in such narrow terms.

Associated with the process of leveling texts is the question of who is involved in the actual leveling of texts. Although veteran teachers and literacy specialists generally have extensive knowledge of reading and the needs of readers, the process of leveling texts often excludes novice teachers from the process of leveling texts, investigating the supports and challenges of various texts, and becoming aware of the details of the texts they choose for reading instruction. In most cases, classroom teachers are invited to select from the predetermined leveled resources for their classroom reading instruction rather than being included in the discussions concerning the supports and challenges of particular texts.

The process of leveling texts and discussing the supports and challenges that a text may present for particular readers, could provide an important professional development experience for classroom teachers. Teachers involved in the actual process of leveling texts are at an advantage because they have been privy to the discussions and analytic investigations involved in the leveling process. Unfortunately, some teachers simply go to the book room and choose texts based on the levels predetermined by other teachers, simply pointing children in the direction of the next level of texts rather than understanding the supports and challenges texts may present individual readers.

Unfortunately, there are reports offered in the educational literature where readers come to describe themselves by levels assigned to texts rather

than their reading interests, books they have read previously or what they get from the act of reading (Pierce, 1999; Watson, 1997). In addition, Pierce has suggested students that are successful at the literacy tasks and events assigned in elementary classrooms, are generally accepted into the classroom more readily than those students who struggle with these tasks. Defining readers by what books they are able to decode, rather than by the books they choose to read or the genres and authors they enjoy, may create arbitrary divisions among our students.

A primary consideration in matching readers to texts is their decoding abilities, not necessarily their comprehension abilities. When readers are leveled by the books they can decode or read orally with a specific accuracy rate, they are often grouped together with other children of similar reading levels for reading instruction. Though this practice in and of itself is not necessarily detrimental to students, it may mask the individual differences among readers of a specific group and presupposes a homogeneity that may not exist in the individual members' reading abilities and needs. In other words, two readers assessed at the same reading level may require radically different instructional experiences because they use different strategies when they read, choose different books, or respond to their readings in unique ways. An overemphasis on decoding accuracy can hide individual differences in readers and create narrowly focused instructional approaches that do not address the needs, interests, and experiences of individual readers. This "assumption of sameness" may help teachers organize their reading programs, but it may not help teachers provide effective reading instruction.

Any attempts to shortcut the experiences necessary for effective reading instruction – knowing the resources available and understanding the needs, abilities, and progress of the readers in one's classroom – are primary concerns when considering the role of leveled texts. Although levels may give classroom teachers a sense of order, a sequence that children may proceed through to become more capable readers, levels may also deter teachers from getting to know the resources they are using, the readers in their charge, and the supports and challenges that readers face when reading particular texts.

Suggestions for Leveled (Leveling) Texts

While there are certainly both challenges and possibilities associated with leveled (leveling) texts, I still believe there is a place for leveled texts in the elementary reading curriculum, with a few caveats. First, the levels need to be made as invisible as possible. When the levels of a text, rather than the content or story contained, becomes the primary criteria used in students' selections of reading materials, we have placed too much emphasis on the levels. Placing stickers on every book in the classroom library is not necessary for helping readers make appropriate choices. I would suggest that primary classroom libraries should contain approximately twenty-five percent leveled texts, for example little books from commercial publishers, and seventy-five percent trade

books for students to select from for independent reading. Helping readers understand what makes an appropriate choice is more important than leveling texts to help make choices for them.

Second, there is more to making an appropriate selection for independent reading than considering the difficulty level of a text based on a predetermined formula or leveling criteria (Worthy & Sailors, 2001). The primary criterion for whether a text is an appropriate choice is whether the reader can construct meaning in transaction with a particular text, at a particular time, for a particular purpose. Every word of a picture book, or of non-fiction material, does not have to be decoded in order to construct meaning during a particular reading experience. Forcing readers to forego their reading of harder texts until every word can be decoded does a disservice to those children that enjoy these books and make sense from the illustrations, captions, and other systems of meaning (Sipe, 1998).

Third, if time spent with difficult, if not frustrating texts results in students' aversion to reading, we must monitor their selections for independent reading to insure this does not occur. However, my observations and experience suggests that many readers are not as turned off by difficult texts as some educators may purport. Many readers see these texts as a challenge to be overcome. As long as time spent with difficult texts is not frustrating enough to force readers to quit reading, and readers are making sense of some aspects of the text, I see little harm in spending time in texts beyond one's assessed decoding level.

Concluding Remarks

Although the process and practice of leveled (leveling) texts may be well intentioned, there are negative consequences associated with many well intentioned literacy educational practices (Duffy, 1999). Leveled (leveling) texts is intended to provide support for young readers choosing books for independent reading and classroom teachers making appropriate selections for instructional purposes. However, when the levels associated with texts are made clearly visible, when students become aware of these levels, and when teachers overemphasize the use of levels and leveled texts, other outcomes are possible.

When levels are overemphasized and children are required to follow a color-coded system for selecting books, children may be denied access to particular texts. In our fervor to prevent children from spending time with texts that are too difficult for them, we may be limiting their access to appropriate and interesting reading materials. In addition, the lower the level, the more limited the materials readers have access to for reading (Worthy & Sailors, 2001). This practice of leveling and coding texts often limits choice of reading material to what is decodable, not what materials are relevant or personally significant.

Szymusiak and Sibberson (2001) state, "When students' reading diet is exclusively a leveled one, their purpose for reading disappears" (p. 15). Rather than teaching children to read for meaning, learn how to monitor comprehension,

and make choices based on what they can understand, we are teaching children to go to their book baskets and pick a book from the ones that are designated at their reading level.

For too many teachers, the easy way to get readers to make appropriate choices is by leveling and labeling every book in the classroom library and providing codes for readers to recognize what they can and should read. However, what is lost in this process? Are we inadvertently demonstrating that many readers are incapable of making appropriate selections and should read what books have been selected for them? In our fervor to get children to read appropriate books, we have taken away the responsibility for making those choices and diminished the personal relevance and significance of what they can choose to read.

Active readers need to be active assessors of appropriateness of their reading selections. When we take away the responsibility for determining what is an appropriate text, we force readers into a passive role, learning to accept the texts that we deem most appropriate. Getting students to understand that reading is about comprehension and making sense of texts, and not simply the ability to pronounce words correctly aloud, is a difficult task, but one that cannot be "shortcutted" by leveling every text in the library.

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