Leveled Texts: Things to Think About

The Unintended Consequences of Leveled and “Just Right” Texts

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, James Hoffman (University of Texas/Austin) describes walking into a school and seeing a large chart in the front hall with a continuum of color-coded reading levels and samples of texts at each level. The chart’s headline: *What level of reader are you? Find the level that’s comfortable for you. Find your “just right” level. Across the hall in the school’s library, books had colored labels mirroring the levels on the hallway chart.*

Hoffman was angry. “Everything about the chart was so sure and so wrong,” he says. To explain his strong reaction to this practice, he traces the history of leveled texts and “just right” books, which started with research on frustration/instructional/independent reading levels and Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development. The theory of action sounds logical: if teachers give their students reading material that’s challenging but not too challenging and provide appropriate support, students will make progress.

But Hoffman believes this theory has three fundamental flaws. First, there’s no such thing as a uniform scale of reading difficulty; there’s lots of variation depending on students’ prior knowledge, interests, and motivation and the nature of the texts they’re reading (this is especially true for informational material, which conforms less readily to leveling). Second, a single “just right” reading level doesn’t account for a teacher’s desire to use different texts to promote curiosity, comprehension, appreciation, imagination, writing, or critical thinking. And third, reading is not a subject; it’s a tool for comprehending and working with literature, history, science, math, and other real subjects.

Because of these conceptual flaws, Hoffman says the practice of leveling and “just right” texts has produced no fewer than 12 unintended consequences for students and teachers:

- Literacy becomes a goal and not a tool.
- Readers take on levels as their reading identity.
- Reading levels feed into deficit discourse around students in schools, particularly in schools serving students from low-income families, as *low, poor, or struggling*.
- Denying access to challenging texts leads to the “poor” getting “poorer.”
- Levels that students carry with them are used to summarize performance by class, grade, and school, and to gauge students’ progress and teachers’ effectiveness.
- Teachers are not allowed to make decisions about how to support students as a function of the challenge level of texts and tasks.
- Reading pulls time and attention from content subject areas.
- “Just right” leveling may divert attention from other important goals in the curriculum.
Leveling in basal readers serves the interests of publishers rather than those of teachers and students.
“Just right” leveling denies access to informational texts that readers want to read – and can read.
When students are reading above their “just right” level, teachers tend not to recognize that as legitimate reading.
“Just right” levels eliminate the responsibility for the reader to make decisions and adjustments to reading based on the reading task.

These are consequences, says Hoffman, “that limit more than enrich, that penalize more than they promote, and that divide more than they unite.”

The last three on the list make a particularly important point. Hoffman says that adults approach texts in a variety of ways: depending on our goal, we might skim, scan, or study it word for word. Often we can get what we want from a text that’s technical or above our reading level. The same should be true for students. Limiting children to “just right” texts underestimates their ability to get value from more difficult texts, and also keeps them from practicing the important life skills of skimming, scanning, and selective reading. It also deprives teachers of teachable moments as they support students wrestling with challenging texts, ideally as part of engaging and meaningful projects.

“I am not suggesting that we abandon attention to providing accessible and supportive text to learners,” Hoffman concludes, “especially in the early primary levels (Bill Martin Jr. and Dr. Seuss still have much to teach us here). I am not suggesting that we totally abandon narrative texts or guided reading to support strategy development in ways that value readers and build on what they know. I am suggesting that we need to recognize that what we are currently doing to support literacy development with leveled texts is not having the effects we desire, that we take account of the serious unintended consequences of the path we are on, that we expand our understanding of reading skills and strategies…”


Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell on the Use of Text Reading Levels

In this interview with Kiera Parrott in School Library Journal, literacy gurus Irene Fountas (Lesley University) and Gay Su Pinnell (Ohio State University) have this to say about the use of their widely used A-Z text difficulty scale: “It is our belief that levels have no place in classroom
libraries, in school libraries, in public libraries, or on report cards. It was certainly not our intention that levels be used in these ways.”

How should the levels be used? As “a teacher’s tool, not a child’s label,” say Fountas and Pinnell, “to show small steps from easiest to most difficult. The goal was for teachers to learn about the characteristics of each level to inform their teaching decisions – how they introduce a book, how they discuss it, how they help children problem-solve as they process a book.”

What about school libraries? “A good library could be organized like a good bookstore, trying to sell books to readers,” say Fountas and Pinnell. “And the librarian is such a key person in the school in guiding students according to their interests, not their levels.” Librarians and teachers might recommend books based on their sense of a particular age group or what they know about individual students, but choice is “at the heart of what it means to become a confident reader,” they continue. “If you have the opportunity to choose what you read, and then to talk about it with others, maybe to draw and write about it, it builds your sense of yourself as a reader and your self-efficacy as a reader.”

So how can educators keep a parent or caregiver informed about a child’s reading progress? Fountas and Pinnell suggest showing a book the child was reading at the beginning of the year and a book he or she is reading now and describing the specific ways the second is more advanced than the first. Teachers can also give parents a sense of whether the child’s current reading level is on a par with, behind, or ahead of the expectations for that grade and month of the year.

The big point is not to oversimplify children’s reading status with one letter. “[L]abeling children in this way is detrimental to their self-esteem, their engagement, and, ultimately, their progress,” say Fountas and Pinnell. “And when we restrict kids to reading on a specific level, we’re really restricting their opportunities... The truth is that children can read books on a wide variety of levels, and in fact, they experience many different levels of books across the day.”

“Fountas and Pinnell Lament Labels” by Kiera Parrott in School Library Journal, November 2017 (Vol. 63, #11, p. 15), http://bit.ly/2g6Lyos; Fountas is at ifountas@lesley.edu; see Marshall Memo 467 for a 2012 Fountas and Pinnell article on reading levels.