Teaching Flexibly With Leveled Texts: More Power for Your Reading Block

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Leveling mania has gripped many elementary schools. The use of carefully leveled texts designed to meet the developmental needs of many readers is a common feature in current reading programs. Although popular leveling systems—Reading Recovery, Benchmark texts, Lexiles—may vary in terms of the number of levels and discrimination among them, at the core they all attempt to classify texts in terms of their perceived difficulties for specific readers. In a desire to match readers to texts, books are scrutinized, classified, and sanctioned for reading only when the match between reader and text has been firmly established.

Recently teachers and researchers have criticized leveling practices for consuming excessive amounts of time, money, and teacher energy (Dzaldov & Peterson, 2005). As teachers and researchers, we are also concerned about a seemingly growing inflexibility in the use of leveled texts in and across reading programs. Our concern is that in maintaining a focus on assigning numbers or letters to texts as labels that represent their “difficulty,” we can lose sight of what matters in reader–text interactions. Although we would argue that some attention to text difficulty is needed, taking a simplistic approach to a complex phenomenon is hindering teacher judgment and masking the transactions that occur between a reader, a text, and the social context in which they read. Thus, rather than helping readers as they learn to read, such an approach can constrain teachers in their organization of reading groups and plot instructional pathways for students that are inequitable.

Leveling systems (e.g., Fountas & Pinnell, 2006) grew out of a need to address concerns about the overuse of whole-group instruction and more traditional ability-based small groups. Grouping arrangements became a feature of classroom and academic discussions as it became apparent that many young students, especially those who needed our help the most, were spending very little time actually reading (Allington, 1983). For example, in traditional small groups, most of the instructional time for below-level readers was spent on skill instruction with very little actual reading of text. In whole-group instruction, those same readers spent most of their time with texts that were too difficult for them to read on their own or even with support (Caldwell & Ford, 2002). In these kinds of situations, it became clear that those in need of the most practice in literacy were receiving the least (Glasswell, Parr, & McNaughton, 2003; Stanovich, 1986).

Our view is that we can afford to be much more flexible with text levels than we might have previously thought. When a reader engages in reading, and the text is challenging, we can support that reader in developing his skills, strategies, and confidence in two main ways. The first way is to find another or additional text that is the “right level” and one that the student can read more comfortably. In doing this, we scaffold the learner using the text. This is the most commonly used option around the small-group reading table. Another powerful way is to combine the use of instructional-level texts with more challenging texts. A challenging text might be seen as frustational because often students are left to negotiate the text by themselves. Rather than avoiding any use of more difficult texts, sometimes teachers may want to use instructional support to help students gain access to a more challenging reading experience. Many readers, particularly those who struggle, can access grade-level appropriate material if we facilitate their interactions with it. This is both necessary if we want to accelerate growth, and desirable if we want our below-level readers to see themselves as competent and confident readers.

In our view, these decisions can best be viewed as a balancing act between varying instructional support and varying text levels. In an engaging and challenging classroom, the teacher carefully decides the degree of instructional support needed for readers to
engage in the text selected. Further, we believe that creating balance is critical across the whole reading program. Remember that an exclusive concern about what happens at the table during 20 minutes of guided reading ignores the rest of the time in the day that could provide access to high-quality instruction (Dzaldov & Peterson, 2005). In the following section, we provide recommendations on what the students we work with might tell us if they just had a teacher’s way with words.

**PAUSE AND PONDER**

- What concerns do you have about the role of leveling in your reading program?
- What issues surface in your classrooms when matching kids and texts?
- How could you get more out of your use of leveled texts?

**More Powerful Shared Reading**

When you are using a text for the whole class that might be too difficult for me, remember you can make it easier by scaffolding my experiences with your teaching. This kind of instruction can actually help me grow stronger as a reader.

- Consider restructuring shared reading in a more flexible model like Grouping Without Tracking (Paratore, 1990). This model encourages teachers to sandwich shared experiences on the front and back end of the lesson around differentiated instruction during the reading of the text. When differentiating, students would be divided into two groups. Some will operate more independently, indirectly guided by the teacher. Others who might have struggled are given more direct support as they are reading and responding. Teachers would bring the two groups back together for a final discussion. Struggling readers who are given more teacher support will be better prepared to contribute to the large-group response, making it a truly shared experience for all (Caldwell & Ford, 2002; Opitz & Ford, 2008).

- Assist below-level students to at least read accessible parts of more difficult texts. This may be helpful when using more challenging informational texts. By using a jigsaw-like approach, teachers can take a whole-class text and thoughtfully assign different parts to different groups of students so that more manageable parts are assigned to those who might struggle with the overall text (Aronson, 1978). Jigsawing holds each group responsible for understanding a part of the text, but also requires reconvening the whole class for reporting and connecting for one another what was learned.

- Make shared reading texts ones that link thematically to those you use in other instructional contexts. For example, difficult core textbooks can be supplemented with sets of related accessible texts for different groups of readers. These texts, when read independently or at small-group time, can help all readers build background knowledge and develop core vocabulary before they come to read the more challenging text at shared reading time. It is important that these accessible texts do not replace the core text. Using this approach can help readers who might have struggled with the more difficult text to become more active and engaged at whole-group time as they learn from the shared reading text.

**More Powerful Guided Reading**

When you guide my reading in small groups, don’t let levels be the only thing that guides you in planning instruction and selecting my text.

- Be less concerned about organizing around discrete levels. Even Fountas and Pinnell (1996) suggested that when grouping students they should be similar in their development and read about the same level. In fact, teachers should be more concerned about organizing around areas of student need. Szymusiak and Sibberson (2003) described a fourth-grade classroom in which the teacher gathered readers who needed help in recognizing changes in setting, announced to the rest of the class what the group was focusing on, and invited others to self-select to join the group.

- Keep an eye on word counts to provide greater equity in instructional opportunities. Lower level books are often less text dense and yet
More Powerful Ways to Engage Your Readers

The bottom line is if you are going to help me become a reader, avoid assigning me texts that will cause me to disengage from reading. When you do this, all I do is get better at figuring out ways to avoid reading.

- Remember that in real life, readers read all kinds of things. A teacher who thoughtfully uses a variety of texts with varying degrees of difficulty is more likely to find engaging texts to put into the hands of children so that they can see themselves as readers. This may be the best way for making accessible texts seem acceptable in a classroom with children at different reading levels (Roller & Fielding, 1992).
- Consider increasing the use of individualized instructional formats like Readers Workshop (Atwell, 1998). These formats balance issues around choice, engagement, and text difficulty. They lead to the development of a community of readers providing additional opportunities for meaningful, authentic, and enjoyable reading experiences. They allow for a more powerful positive relationship to develop between the teacher and student through the use of individual conferences.
- Integrate the use of more accessible alternative texts for independent activities. With today’s world, we need to expand our vision of readers and texts.

The literate lives of many young students include alternative forms of reading and writing that could be used to help them accelerate their progress as readers. Consider adding these to your program: students’ own writings, magazines, newspapers, plays, poetry anthologies, and digital and online texts. Just because it is difficult to assign levels to these kinds of text, we should not avoid their use. They are

More Powerful Independent Reading

To get more fluent, confident, and comfortable, I need to spend some of my time with texts that I have chosen and can read easily with minimal support.

- Load content area text sets with texts at multiple levels. Allington (2006) suggested traveling carts that can move from one classroom to the next with 70% of the collection built from easily accessible books. Build your classroom libraries in a similar manner. This will provide more opportunity to equalize practice during these instructional times. While one student reads a more difficult text another could read multiple easier texts and both would have a more equitable amount of time and words for practice.
- Make sure you build collections so that all readers in diverse classrooms can see themselves in the texts you have selected. One of the criticisms of some leveled readers is that they often vary little in sociocultural features including the gender, race, and class of characters portrayed. Using interest surveys may provide additional insights into how to augment a collection that will reach more readers. Your familiarity with your students’ identities may be just as helpful in matching texts to readers as leveled book lists (Dzaldov & Peterson, 2005).
real-world texts and will provide many readers with motivating, meaningful experiences. Fortunately, these texts often contain multiple levels within their formats providing parts that almost every student can read (Opitz & Ford, 2006).

In this article we have suggested ways in which teachers can help students use texts to grow as readers in different components of their reading programs. Our concern has been that restrictive approaches to matching books to readers have privileged one aspect of the reading program—guided reading—in ways that are counterproductive to high quality instruction which seeks to balance text demands and reader needs. To refocus attention on this balance, we have suggested that teachers might consider the impact of leveling across all aspects of their shared, guided, and independent reading practices.

References


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