



Lose the Levels

Organizing libraries by reading level can be more hindrance than help

By Molly K. Ness

Walk into the vast majority of elementary schools today, and you'll see leveled libraries. Books—grouped in colorful bins or baskets—are likely organized by reading level. Each spine or cover displays a Lexile level or a letter from Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell's A-to-Z system prominently. Given time to select a book, children gravitate toward books that match their reading level.

These leveling systems are the common organizational structure for books, as opposed to genre, content, author, or theme. Created to be a qualitative gradient, the

leveling system created by Fountas and Pinnell initially served to match readers to texts that best met their reading levels. The intent was to direct students to books that are “just right”—ones they can read fluently, with appropriate accuracy and meaningful comprehension.

But in recent years, leveling systems have been so misconstrued, misapplied, and misunderstood that they have become detrimental to the development of students' reading habits. What was originally created to be a teacher resource has instead become a rigid system that hinders

text choice and adds to the negative self-efficacy of young students. The A-to-Z levels were meant to be a teacher tool, not something shared with parents.

Even more damaging, the levels were never intended to be a label of which children are aware. One kindergartner recently confessed, “I'm a Level C. If I'm not at Level D by the end of the year, I'll have to get special reading help.” Just when this 6-year-old should be devouring *Fly Guy* and the clever rhymes of Dr. Seuss, he is instead aware of his struggle and developing a negative connotation about reading. Just

as my body image should not come from my pants size, a student's vision of himself as a reader should not be based solely on a quantitative measure.

For Instruction Only

Furthermore, the current leveling system has been applied at inappropriate instructional times. The only time children should be reading from a leveled text is during guided reading instruction, not during independent reading, minilessons, or texts sent home for additional practice. The teacher should use these levels to direct his or her guided reading instruction; students should not be going to labeled libraries to choose books at a preselected text level.

Fortunately, many voices have recently warned that the text-leveling pendulum has swung too far. "Students' reading levels have no place in teacher evaluation or on report cards to be sent home to parents," Fountas and Pinnell recently wrote. And author Donalyn Miller (also known as the "Book Whisperer") writes that "restricting children's reading choices to books that fit within their reading level warps children's positive reading identity development and their perceptions of what reading is."

More concerning, the American Library Association (ALA) points out that text leveling violates a student's academic privacy. "When students

are required to select books from a visibly leveled collection, their academic information becomes public to everyone in sight—including other students, staff, and volunteers," its 2017 position statement on book levels says. Just as grades and test scores are confidential matters, so are students' reading levels.

Allowing Exploration

Some teachers fear that without the leveling system, a student might select a text that is too difficult. Should it be a teacher's role to tell a dedicated student that they can't read *Wonder* because it's too hard for them? If a book is too hard, the reader might struggle. Perhaps they stick with it,

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aiming to fit in with classmates who raved about the title. Perhaps they miss key points and reread that text when they are ready. In any case, the reader learns more about his or her self-identity and begins to shape text selection accordingly.

Those hypothetical worst-case scenarios are easier to swallow than the alternative. When we tell students, “That book is too hard for you,” we minimize the power of choice and chip away at their confidence and willingness to attack a challenging text with grit, purpose, and perseverance.

School leaders play an important role in spreading the word about the danger of text levels. Encourage teachers to have candid conversations about the role and intent of the

leveling systems and about the perils of their misuse. Support teachers in creating libraries that organize books by genre, topic, format, and author, as opposed to level.

Showcase the engaging, effective ways in which other schools have organized their libraries; a search on social media platforms such as Pinterest can show alternatives for organizing books. Communicate with parents so they better understand the use of text levels and how to help their children choose books at home. And most importantly, serve as an instructional leader who advocates that leveled libraries no longer belong in classrooms today. **P**

Molly K. Ness is an associate professor at Fordham University in New York City.

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