Let's start Leveling About Leveling

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Published

2011

Journal Title

Language Arts

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Let's Start Leveling about Leveling

Matching texts to readers happens every day in classrooms. Here we explore what it takes to make sound decisions for using leveled texts.

> *We seem to be in the midst of leveling mania in which massive amounts of time, money and energy are devoted to organizing books by reading levels. It appears that teachers are driven to attach a level to every text that students encounter during their school day.*
>
> —Dzaldov & Peterson, (p. 222)

Our recent interactions with teachers seem to confirm the leveling frenzy captured in the above observation. Patti (all names of teachers and children have been changed) told her colleagues in a graduate course a story about her son salivating over a book he saw in the D basket. Instead of allowing the boy to choose the book, his teacher told him that he had to stick with the books in the C basket, which was his assessed level. Just as the boy looked like he was progressing to the D basket, he was reassessed and jumped over it to the E level books. Patti said that in spite of this, his interest in the D book had never waned, and she had to go out and buy it for him.

In another interaction, Lorraine expressed her concern about the 44 readers entering her fourth-grade classroom in a school with a comprehensive literacy framework that focused on the use of leveled readers for small-group instruction in the early years. What surprised her and her teammates was that, despite three years of instruction in a literacy program that featured guided reading using leveled texts, 22 of her students started fourth grade reading below grade level. She wondered why the school's comprehensive literacy program had failed to serve so many of the children well.

Classroom stories like these have been surfacing with increasing frequency, but it is not just teachers who are discussing the relative merits, validity, and reliability of assigning levels to texts. Researchers (e.g., Allington, 2007; Syzmusiak & Sibberson, 2001; Mesmer, 2008; Hiebert & Sailors, 2009; Pitcher & Fang, 2007) have also been looking critically at issues around the topics of leveled texts, reading assessment, and the instruction that surrounds children.

Our goal in this article is to propose a revised way of thinking about levels, one that promotes a wider and more flexible view of teacher decision making about the use of leveled texts in classrooms. We share five key principles to consider when looking at the use of instruction that involves matching leveled materials with readers. Through discussions and case studies, we consider how concerns about the impact of leveling systems can be addressed by thoughtful teachers who make adjustments across their whole reading program.

LEVELS: WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD IDEAS

Halliday (2008) recently explained that educators have been trying to match books and children since Betts (1946) first described his framework for thinking about levels of difficulty as independent, instructional, and frustrational. While Betts's framework was based on a single study of 41 fourth graders over 60 years ago, its influence can be seen on today's assessment and classification systems. (For additional historical perspectives on tools for matching readers and texts, see Hoffman, Sailors, & Patterson, 2000; Mesmer, 2008.) Before we look more critically at the issue of leveling, it is important to state that at the heart of leveling systems is an important, good idea that is crucial in helping all readers become increasingly more competent and confident.

Our concerns about leveling grow not from the good idea at the heart of this practice but from the way the good idea has been interpreted and implemented. As with other aspects of literacy instruction, bad things can happen to good ideas because of a rigid orthodoxy that grows up around a useful practice. When orthodoxy takes hold, a focus on "one right way" to engage in that useful practice can lead to inflexible implementation of it (Opitz & Ford, 2001). (It's hard to imagine, for example, why anyone would stop a child from reading a book he really wanted to read just because it was not at

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his level.) Sometimes, bad things happen to good ideas because any surface approximation of the useful practice is seen as acceptable. When good ideas go bad, even those most closely identified with the leveling systems' design have expressed concern about the way the programs have been interpreted or implemented (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006).

In many classrooms, decisions about text levels may impact multiple aspects of literacy programs. The practice in which they seem to have most influence is guided reading. Indeed, the production and popular use of these leveled texts flourished as the practice of guided reading expanded, and now, leveling has found its way into the bedrock of our literacy programs. In a recent national survey of 1,500 primary teachers, leveled texts were identified as one of the most common materials used during guided reading or small-group reading instruction (Ford & Opitz, 2008)

Books are just books in the end. And while it's easy to be critical of certain materials, they are usually neither inherently bad nor good. What matters more is the way they are used; it is this that determines the potential impact they can have. A teacher's professional judgment still remains the critical factor in planning and implementing successful reading instruction. However, as some have noticed in the past, commercial materials can contribute to less teacher reflection and a reification of certain reading practices. The design of these texts can contribute to an overreliance on the materials and an underutilization of professional judgment (Shannon, 1992). Pearson (2006) suggests that such instructional tools can create the illusion of a "scientific cachet," and this makes them attractive to users who allow the materials to drive the decision making in instructional planning. In other words, materials become the focus rather than the reader.

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Given these concerns, we suggest in the following section that there are some fundamental principles that can help teachers focus on the good idea of using texts to support readers. We also suggest ways to minimize the potentially harmful effects of rigid approaches when matching texts to readers. To make these points clearer, we present and elaborate on five principles for using leveled text in classrooms. Finally, we make suggestions for more productive uses of leveled texts that are applicable across the entire reading program; these can be used during shared and guided reading blocks and during independent reading time within and beyond the school walls.

FIVE KEY PRINCIPLES TO REMEMBER ABOUT LEVELING

To organize our discussion of using texts to support readers, we propose five key principles:

- Leveling takes a complex idea and makes it too simple.
- Leveling takes a simple idea and makes it too complex.
- Reading levels are not the same as reading needs.
- Progress does not equal proficiency.
- Readers have rights (as well as levels).

Principle #1: Leveling takes a complex idea and makes it too simple.

Reading is a complex social and cultural act (Freebody and Luke, 1990). This complexity is reflected in the combination of factors that are in play any time a reader interacts with a text within a specific cultural context. Models of successful reading comprehension imply that the transaction between the reader and the text is influenced by a set of factors the reader *brings to* the page and a set of factors defined *on* the page (The Rand Corporation Study Group, 2002; Pardo, 2004). In any instructional activity, engagement and success can be influenced on many levels—by the task itself, the learner, the teacher, the materials and the context in which the activity takes place.

For a more concrete picture of the variability that can occur, let's do a little math for one typical curricular model (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 1986). This model of reading identified five major reader factors (motivation, subject knowledge, background experience, vocabulary, and purpose) and five major text factors (content, format, concepts, organization, and author's purpose) surrounded by four major contextual factors (physical setting, activity, outcome, and emotional climate). That would mean that every time a reader interacts with a text in a specific context, there is a potential for 100 different transactions to occur—5 reader factors × 5 text factors × 4 context factors = 100 possible combinations (Opitz & Ford, 2008). From this information, one can conclude that the successful interaction of a reader and a text in a specific context is a very complex relationship. If any single variable changes, the degree of success the reader has with the text can be affected.

And yet, this complex relationship seems to be made too simple where leveled texts are concerned. In classrooms where the teacher is aware of these complexities, the use of professional judgment will help guide a more critical use of leveled materials when making instructional decisions. In many classrooms, however, thinking about this complex relationship has been reduced to assessing a child's oral reading accuracy to determine a reading level, and then matching that child to a text that has been assigned that level by some external source. It leads to an assumption that the best way to secure a successful transaction between the reader and the text is to match the child to a text at his or her level. In the end, lists and numbers seem to replace teacher judgment (Worthy & Sailors, 2001).

[L]eveling falls short in acknowledging the number of factors at play when children are reading. In other words, it oversimplifies a complex interaction. . . . Leveling systems can't assess whether a child is reading in an emotionally safe and comfortable setting or in a high-stakes situation, such as an assessment done by an unfamiliar teacher.

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But as most teachers have observed, there is nothing magical in making these matches successful. Teachers learning how to use these systems may perceive that the most important factor in matching a book to a reader is the book's level, rather than a more rounded consideration of the many other variables that can contribute to successful interaction with a text. More experienced teachers will consider other factors when making a match, such as reader interest, vocabulary, or background knowledge. Research has demonstrated that children can have less than successful interactions with at-level texts and sometimes more successful interactions with more difficult texts (Eldredge, 1990; Halliday, 2008; Stahl & Heubach, 2005; Kuhn, 2008). If leveling advocates are right and success in reading is built on a foundation of finding a good match between readers and texts, then how could readers experience so much variation in their reading?

The major reason for this is that leveling falls short in acknowledging the number of factors at play when children are reading. In other words, it oversimplifies a complex interaction. Notice first that leveling systems often ignore that contextual factors play a role in the success of the transaction between the reader and the text. Leveling systems can't assess whether a child is reading in an emotionally safe and comfortable setting or in a high-stakes situation, such as an assessment done by an unfamiliar teacher. Second, leveling often acknowledges only those reader factors that can be quickly assessed and interpreted. Think about assessments that are used to determine a child's level. What factors are truly assessed by those measures—word identification accuracy, fluency, level of comprehension? It is a fairly limited number of reader factors to consider before identifying a level that often unintentionally labels the reader (Dzaldov & Peterson, 2005; Calkins, 2001; Worthy & Sailors, 2001). Finally, since leveling is often attached to texts used in instructional programs (or easily identifiable from accessible lists, such as www.FountasandPinnellLeveledBooks.com, a website containing a growing list of 18,000 titles), it masks the complexity of the text factors at play in determining why one book is considered more difficult than another for any given reader on any given day.

It is clear that some instructional tools try to acknowledge this complexity. For instance, informal reading inventories assess the reader's background knowledge to help interpret the success (or lack of it) with a specific text (Leslie & Caldwell, 2005). Some text leveling guides even include criteria about background knowledge or cultural experiences needed to engage in certain text levels, though this would assume a standardized vision of what content and culture a child knows for each level (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). It is nearly impossible, however, for leveling tools to consider all (or even most) of the factors at play when readers and books come together in classrooms (Mesmer, 2008). The job of the teacher then is to stay attuned to the complexity of influencing factors when choosing texts for readers and to consider being more flexible in thinking about what readers may need. The decisions are not as simple as they appear.

Principle #2: Leveling takes a simple idea and makes it too complex.

While above we reject overly simplistic approaches to matching texts to readers, we begin this section by restating our support for what we think is an elegantly simple idea that lies at the heart of using leveled texts in our classrooms—the importance of providing readers with texts they can read with and without support. This simple idea can get lost within leveling systems that add many layers of complexity to classifying the texts that students read. Teachers may become daunted at the prospect of teaching to the large number of discrete levels proposed in some systems. They may also have difficulty in understanding the nature of the levels they assign children to and the kinds of instruction appropriate for those levels, asking, what is the difference between a J- and K-level text? We should not be surprised when teachers deal with such confusions by overrelying on prepared plans and scripts for text sets at certain levels. In workshops with teachers, we often attempt to investigate what the difference is (practically speaking) in terms of instructional implications from one level to another.

> If leveling frameworks now carry so much weight in teachers' decisions and the subsequent consequences for children, then educators have a right to expect that those systems are valid, reliable, and practically relevant, given the constraints on classroom instruction.

Looking at one publicly available leveling framework, educators can see the complexity of the process used to level texts (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). For level J texts, consideration is given to 10 key text characteristics (genre/forms, text structure, content, themes and ideas, language and literary features, sentence complexity, vocabulary, words, illustrations, and book and print features). Across those 10 characteristics, 66 specific criteria are further identified. In contrast, a K-level text is analyzed using the same ten characteristics with 71 specific criteria. J- and K-level texts share 21 identical criteria and many more criteria that vary only in degree. For example, sentence length in J books is 10+ words; in K books, it is 15+ words. Length ranges in J-level texts from 24–36 pages; K-level texts are 24–48 pages. In the end, a book like *Henry and Mudge: The First Book* is assigned to the J basket, while *Frog and Toad Are Friends* finds its way into the K basket.

While frameworks like these clearly suggest qualitative and quantitative differences between different levels of texts, they raise questions about the decisions that led to 26 or more discrete levels (i.e., Lexiles). Are the distinctions used to determine a specific level based on empirical data or on somewhat arbitrary decisions based on common characteristics? Does empirical data suggest that all the criteria are equally important in determining difficulty or should some be weighted more than others? It should be noted that even though teachers are encouraged to "follow the guidelines" in leveling and add new titles to an existing list of texts, the framework as presented in and of itself would be difficult to use in reliably identifying an unclassified text, since many of the criteria are defined by less than specific quantifiers (some, little, largely, few, many, may have, occasional, most, wide, shorter, longer, variable, variety). Any rater would have to make some fairly arbitrary decisions. Perhaps this is why critical variations are seen across texts even at the same level (Dzaldov & Peterson, 2005; Syzmusiak & Sibberson, 2001).

If leveling frameworks now carry so much weight in teachers' decisions and the subsequent consequences for children, then educators have a right to expect that those systems are valid, reliable, and practically relevant, given the constraints on classroom instruction. Considering the complexities surrounding the transaction between readers and texts, and the difficulties in adequately discriminating between a J book's and a K book's textual features, there seem to be inadequate grounds for using a given level with one group of readers while withholding it from another group of readers one level lower. In some classrooms, the idea of helping children with texts that lead to growth has turned into a juggling act, with multiple baskets of books, assessments defining children at multiple levels, and grouping practices that become almost unmanageable (Opitz & Ford, 2001). In the end, efforts spent attaching levels to books and books to readers might be better spent on "making available abundant text selections that provide rich and varied reading experiences to develop students' independence and enjoyments as readers" (Dzaldov & Peterson, 2005, p. 223).

Principle #3: Reading levels are not the same as reading needs.

Our position on this is simple. Instructional levels are not the same as instructional needs, and they are not magic bullets that ensure quality teaching around the small-group reading table.

Let's explore this idea more by developing an example from our coaching work to discuss how one classroom teacher, Bob, groups and teaches children at their reading levels. In Bob's first-grade class, a small group of students is reading below grade level. Taylor, Marita, and Kimber are in this group. Recent oral records of reading behavior show Bob that Taylor can "read" Level I texts fairly fluently—his miscues are few and his rate of reading is acceptable. Puzzling, though, is the fact that Taylor recalls little when asked to retell the story, and he is often unable to answer comprehension questions correctly. This combination of scores makes Bob select Level I as Taylor's instructional level. Bob also identifies Marita and Kimber as Level I readers.

In some ways, the three readers are similar to each other in their reading accuracy profiles. For example, they have the same number of miscues on the assessment text, and they make substitutions for text words. Their comprehension skills checks are also adequate. But they are also different. Bob, who does not have time to do miscue analyses of the records he takes, does not at first notice that while Taylor's oral reading is almost word-perfect, with few errors but poor comprehension, Marita and Kimber differ in their problem solving as readers. When we examined each reader's use of cueing systems with Bob, we noted that Marita's miscues showed a pattern of using initial letters in words to guess at unknown words, and her attempts at words often resulted in responses that did not make sense in context and sometimes did not sound right in terms of grammatical structure. Kimber showed a different pattern of problem solving altogether. When she came across a word she did not know, she often predicted from context. As a result, her miscues often made sense and sounded right, but they just didn't "look right."

Even though each of these three readers has a different profile, Bob focuses firmly on the children's reading level as a means of organizing his groups and selecting his instructional focus. He uses his guided reading textbook to help him plan what to teach this group, and he selects only Level I books for them to read. What develops (unintentionally) is a one-size-fits-all Level I lesson-set for readers who have quite different instructional needs. When we began work with Bob, he was confusing reading levels with reading needs, and he was assuming that finding the correct level would move his children along. He was aware that there were problems with this small group, but his data told him the children were on the same level and, as such, could be taught the same way from the same materials.

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Over several weeks, we worked with Bob on using his analysis of students' miscues, as well as his calculations of oral reading accuracy, to consider students' reading behaviors more deeply. We suggested that he might group his students differently, working with Taylor in a non-leveled group of children who also required comprehension instruction. We suggested that he might place Kimber in a group where visual attention to words is the focus, and Marita in a group where the goal is to develop self-monitoring strategies for meaning and syntax. Though the levels of the texts read in any of these small groups might not be "exact" matches for the children's levels, the instruction would focus more directly on each child's needs. We suggest to teachers like Bob that diagnostic assessment, coupled with flexible needs-based grouping, is important when working to overcome the pervasive confusion between the right reading level and a reader's learning needs.

Principle #4: Progress does not equal proficiency.

Let's return to Lorraine, whom we met at the start of this piece, and her concerns about the reading levels of her fourth graders. An important question for us all to ask is: Just how do half of the readers from a school with a stable population and a comprehensive literacy program, including small-group instruction with leveled readers, arrive at fourth grade reading below grade level?

One possibility is that guided reading is focused on making progress through the levels rather than achieving proficiency. Recently, we were involved in a project that mapped out the trajectory of three different groups of learners using a commercially available guided reading program. Progress was defined by the pacing recommendations suggested by the guide for the materials. Each group of readers was put on a path that would lead to reading progress, but the paths, as laid out in the pacing guide for above-, at-, and below-grade-level readers, raised a confounding issue. Over the course of the year, if a teacher followed the pacing guide, s/he would leave the below-grade-level readers far short of proficiency. What's more, if teachers in a school used the materials over multiple years, the gap between the readers who were below grade level and other readers with more skill would actually widen. For the readers below grade level, there would have been progress, but not proficiency. Allow us to explain why.

The multiple discrete levels instantiated in some programs make it easy to see progress from one level to the next, especially with the small gradations built into the primary grades. Teachers may get comfortable seeing this progress but lose sight of the fact that progress is a means to an end—proficiency. End points or accepted benchmarks need to be very clear for teachers so that the instructional pace allows each child to progress *toward proficiency.* This means that a teacher may need to consider how to accelerate the progress of the below-grade-level readers in order to help them achieve that end-level benchmark. For example, a child who is behind his classmates in reading by 18 months needs to make more than just an academic year's progress in one year if he is to achieve proficiency.

Two contributing factors are at work in this widening gap. The amount of time spent reading is a critical factor in helping children not only make progress but move toward proficiency (Allington, 1983). It is time spent actually reading that often distinguishes proficient from less proficient readers (Stanovich, 1986). Leveling programs, however, can be both a tool and an obstacle in helping teachers address this time variation. At a workshop we attended, Carol, a reading coordinator, emphatically explained that in her school, they guarantee that every child will read appropriate-level text for 30 minutes each day. They had taken great pains to reorganize the school day so that children could move to their appropriate reading groups and work with teachers during that 30-minute block. While the effort to guarantee that every child received at least 30 minutes of guided reading instruction with appropriate texts was important, one wonders what happened to each child during the balance of the day in Carol's school. If consideration of text levels is not part of the instructional decision making for the rest of the school day, it's easy to see how those in need of the most practice will have little time for it.

Table 1. *Word-count ranges for guided reading materials*

Level	Range of words in books at this level	Average words per book	Average total word count for 3 books
H	165–247	206	618
I	201–257	229	687
J	238–282	260	780

The second factor is related to the concept of reading mileage. More advanced readers commonly process more words because they read longer and denser texts, and they do it faster. So, even when Carol's school guarantees a set time period for every child, they cannot guarantee the reading mileage that will occur in that 30 minutes. The number of words children are reading, even with appropriate-level text, can contribute to a widening achievement gap. The potential gaps in word counts between different leveled texts sometimes ensure that readers who are reading lower levels receive less practice than those readers on higher levels of texts. Table 1 displays word-count ranges in three texts at each of three consecutive levels of guided reading materials.

Notice that, without making any adjustments, the J-level readers would read 162 more words (almost 25% more) than the H-level readers if they each read three texts at their level. When we do the math, we see that readers in the highest group could be reading more than 800 extra words in five days. Over the course of a school year, the difference is approximately 32,000 words! In this way, the strongest readers get the most practice at reading words, and the gap between high-group and low-group readers can unintentionally widen. To accelerate growth, teachers need to address those instructional gaps more intentionally and more frequently, looking past the façade of progress and fixing their gaze on proficiency.

Principle #5: Readers have rights (as well as levels).

Our last principle is perhaps the most important. Readers have the right to be engaged and stimulated and to contribute their thinking to the class community. Taffy Raphael and her collaborators, working on Book Club instructional designs (Florio-Ruane & Raphael, 2004; Raphael, Florio-Ruane, & George, 2001), raise this important issue as they consider the types of texts that students are encouraged to read by teachers every day. Their point is that teachers need to demonstrate dual commitments by ensuring students' access to both age-appropriate material that challenges their thinking and texts that match their independent reading level.

A superb example of this dual commitment to engaging students in a range of reading levels comes from Patrick, a third-grade student who read on grade level but had lost interest in reading in or out of school. Patrick's enthusiasm for reading was renewed through school literacy activities related to autobiography and culture, themes he found appealing. His success demonstrates the power of using complex texts to engage readers in content learning and to renew the enthusiasm of not only struggling readers, but also those who have simply turned away from the joy literature offers (Raphael, Florio-Ruane, & George, 2001).

While guided reading using leveled texts provides many opportunities for learning, it also has the potential to limit children's exposure to challenging and grade-appropriate learning experiences (Bull & Anstey, 1996). In other words, although teachers select texts that are at the "right" level, the associated instructional practices can still lack challenge, be formulaic, and afford little opportunity for high-level thinking and independence. To illustrate this, we'd like to introduce you to a third-grader, Paula, who is working with a support teacher. Though she is in third grade, Paula is reading at Level D, and this considerable delay is causing her teacher, Miss K., to reflect deeply on how to help Paula pick up the pace of her reading. At the time of our discussions, Paula is working on the Level D book, *Mr. Grump.* According to Miss K.'s running records, Paula is indeed reading at a Level D. Specifically, she needs to develop more word-solving strategies in context and to focus on cross-checking information to confirm her hypotheses for unfamiliar words.

Paula's teacher has decided to use a common guided reading approach. Each session that Paula spends with her teacher, she experiences a book walk, examining pictures and making some brief predictions. She then sets a purpose for reading, introduces the focus skill for the day, and, as Paula reads, she listens and prompts her to use the strategies they are working on. Always, she praises Paula's reading. After reading, Miss K. engages Paula in some discussion about the book. This routine instructional sequence is standard for many a guided reading lesson, and Paula's expert teacher executes them diligently.

Paula, however, is less responsive and enthusiastic than any of us who teach children to read might want. Her teacher notes that she is visibly bored by her interactions with *Mr. Grump* and books like it. The reading interactions possible from using a text of this level provide very limited opportunity for Paula to develop the critical reading skills expected of third-graders. *Mr. Grump,* with its simple story line and repetitive structure, cannot provide real opportunities for Paula to develop her awareness of plot subtleties, make intertextual connections, or explore complex vocabulary items and unusual language structures that other third-graders are expected to grapple with each day (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). Indeed, the use of books like *Mr. Grump* as Paula's sole instructional text constrains her overall development as a reader by not engaging her in the kinds of instruction that are needed in third grade.

Paula's reading instruction, it seems, does not place her on a level playing field, with the other third-graders; in fact, she is not even being taught the rules of the game. Relying only on leveled texts does not provide the opportunities for growth that Paula so desperately needs and wants. As Raphael and colleagues might argue, Paula had an absolute right to be part of this game and to be part of the team that is already playing it. Readers have rights as well as levels, and thoughtful teachers will be mindful of this.

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WHEN GOOD IDEAS GET GREAT

In this issue, authors address the rights of readers in many ways. We believe the major implication of the five principles discussed here is that teachers must consider the impact of leveling on their students *across the entire reading program,* not just during the guided reading lesson. In this final section, we suggest teaching strategies to match each of the five principles. These are intended to support a more flexible view of leveling as a tool for supporting all classroom readers.

Leveling takes a complex idea and makes it too simple.

- Remember that levels are not the only criteria to consider when selecting easy or difficult books for your classroom collection. Include a range of topics and text styles that will engage your readers.
- Encourage students to read texts that interest them. Support them through shared and paired readings in order to build confidence.

Leveling takes a simple idea and makes it too complex.

- Choose authors during author studies who write at multiple levels. This will allow all children to find accessible titles by the author to share when discussing the author's craft. Some authors that transcend levels include Patricia Reilly Giff, Cynthia Rylant, Gary Paulsen, and Kate DiCamillo.

Reading levels are not the same as reading needs.

- Establish cross-age grouping arrangements that can provide mutual benefits for children at different levels. Suddenly accessible books for some struggling older readers become acceptable vehicles for practice as they prepare to share them with younger readers.

Progress does not equal proficiency.

- Adjust group rotations so you are meeting more often with children who have the greatest needs. Remember the amount of time reading and number of words read is critical to achieving proficiency.

Readers have rights (as well as levels).

- Reconsider the use of standard lesson formats for levels, especially when greater flexibility is warranted in addressing the needs of the children. Ensure that students (especially those who struggle) are provided with opportunities to engage in cognitively demanding work in reading.

CONCLUSION

Whether you call it a mania or a frenzy, leveling is currently getting a lot of attention from teachers and researchers alike. In this article, we have looked at a number of issues around leveling that have the potential to cause problems in instruction. We have also suggested ways in which we might rethink our understanding of leveled texts, their potential and pitfalls.

At the heart of leveling is the critical idea that children need to spend time with texts that will help them grow as readers. We support this idea, and encourage teachers to think carefully about the nature and consequences of the challenges that are presented to readers in their classrooms. As we have demonstrated through our cases and discussions, students come to reading needing different kinds of experiences with texts to make them grow. This idea is deceptively simple. It involves understanding how not to simplify complex transactions, or complicate simple judgments. It requires teachers to recognize that children's reading needs are different from their reading levels, and that making progress without any vision of proficiency can be counterproductive to closing the achievement gap. Further, we suggest that readers have rights to instruction that is cognitively demanding and emotionally engaging, and that these rights are paramount in all judgments about the balance of texts students read.

Finally, we suggest that a much more flexible approach to using leveled texts is indeed possible in your classroom. We would argue that being more flexible across the whole literacy block can lead to *greater* student growth, not less. When students are engaged with texts in authentic contexts, they are, more often than not, more motivated to learn. The challenge of reading instruction does not reside solely in the text, but in what each teacher does to move each reader forward.

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Acknowledgments

Ideas presented in this paper have been developed with support from the Australian Research Council Linkage scheme (LP0990585 Glasswell, Singh, McNaughton, and Davis).

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