Why Leveled Books Have a Specific and Limited Role in Teaching Reading

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Background

With the explosion of the use of levelled texts in literacy programs for elementary students, it may be helpful to reflect on the texts used for reading instruction in the past 150 years. For generations, teachers have made use of levelled books, beginning in the mid 1800’s with the McGuffey readers, an organized, progressive basal series where children “graduated” from one levelled anthology of sequenced selections to the next. In fact, these readers are still available, selling about 30,000 copies a year to some schools and to thousands of home educators. The famous *Dick and Jane Readers*, a series of levelled, sequential readers, based on repetitive words and sentences, with short sentences carefully chunked on the page, were used in the United States and Canada for half a century (Hoffman, Sailors, & Patterson, 2000; Vyduna-Haskins, 1998). The use of basal reading series continued for decades in most school classrooms, as teachers conducted highly-structured lessons with small homogeneous groups based on teachers’ perceptions of students’ reading abilities.

In the late 1960’s, the emergence of trade books (e.g., novels or picture books) for use in reading instruction began a change in many school districts’ language arts programs, as student choice became more of a factor in what children read (Holdaway, 1972/1980; Szymusiak & Sibberson, 2001; Veatch, 1954). However, without professional development support and materials such as manuals, workbooks and recordings, many teachers found it difficult to work only with unstructured reading resources. As a result, by the late 1990’s, many elementary teachers made trade books available for children for independent or silent reading times, but their formal reading instruction still incorporated levelled texts, either using a basal series or a published collection of individual levelled books for small-group guided reading lessons.

How Are Books Leveled?

Leveled books are written in accordance with reading-level criteria similar to those used in basal readers. These include sentence and word difficulty (e.g., regularity of the spelling of the words, and the number of syllables), as well as the number of pages, the number of words and the number of lines on the page (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). Within the reading level criteria, there is no recognition that children’s ability to read a particular text can be influenced by their background knowledge or experience, by their interest in a topic or characters, by the author’s purpose, by the book choices of their friends, or by the pragmatics of the reading situation (Dzaldov & Peterson, 2005; Goodman, 1970; Krashen, 2011; Smith, 1995). Educational publishers sell leveled books as teaching materials, directing teachers to match children with books at their instructional level (a level, determined by oral reading and compre-
hension assessments, that is not too easy, nor too challenging for the children).

**Students Should Have a Wide Range of Reading Materials**

The importance of providing texts that students can read without feeling frustration is well supported by research (Brabham & Villaume, 2002; Clay, 1991; Donovan, Smolkin, & Lomax, 2000). However, exaggerated attention to the text levels restricts students to an unnecessarily narrow selection of books to read. Additionally, “the design of these texts can contribute to an overreliance on the materials and an underutilization of professional judgment” (Glasswell & Ford, 2011, p. 209).

Leveled books were intended for beginning readers and for specific instructional purposes, such as guided reading with small groups of children. They are helpful for working with students in need of carefully structured lessons or diagnostic assessment for continued print success. However, these controlled texts need to be part of a classroom environment rich with resources of all kinds of modes and forms of text that build on and extend children’s interests—literary treasures, information texts, pop culture, magazines, the Internet, Blogs, and maps, for example (Allington, 2009; Krashen, 2011; Sanden, 2014). Furthermore, because today’s children are surrounded by images (e.g., in picture books, cartoons, comics, e-books, films, and photos, computer screens, television, ads, and photos), and because technology and images can offer supports to young readers, graphic texts can also be part of the reading materials available to students in classrooms (Booth & Lundy, 2007).

Filling classroom and school libraries should be guided by recommendations in journals, such as The Canadian Children’s Book Centre’s *Book News* and consulting websites that review children’s literature (e.g., Children’s Literature Comprehensive Database), along with considerations for age and reading level appropriateness. Students should have opportunities to make selections, reconsider their choices, share their discoveries and surprises, acquire strategies, and learn who they are as readers and writers, on their way to becoming independent and proficient readers of the texts they want or need to read.

**References**

Allington, R. (2009). If they don’t read much … 30 years later. In E.H. Hiebert (Ed.). *Reading more, reading better* (pp. 30-54). New York: Guilford Press.


