

LEVEL BOOKS, NOT CHILDREN

The role of text levels in literacy instruction

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“Oh, that book is a level V. I can’t wait to read it. I love V books!”

No one has said that. Ever.

When readers choose books, levels never enter the equation. Instead, readers choose books in very personal ways.

They explore favorite genres and series and seek out types of stories they love to read—adventures, mysteries, romances, fantasies. They anticipate the newest book by a favorite author. They investigate topics that are important to them at a particular point in time, pulling together fiction and nonfiction texts that connect in deeply personal ways. Readers look into their lives and find books that speak to them.

And isn’t that what we want for the students in our schools?

Leading a literate life *in school* means that students have the opportunity to act like readers do *outside of school*. Through explicit minilessons that involve practice, students learn how readers choose books for themselves. Over time, they become adept at it. Sometimes they may take on a more difficult book because they love the topic and know quite a bit about it; sometimes they will read an easier book by a favorite author or just because it is enjoyable.

No label or level forces students to select only certain books. Students choose what they want to read.

So that leads us to ask: What role *should* levels play?

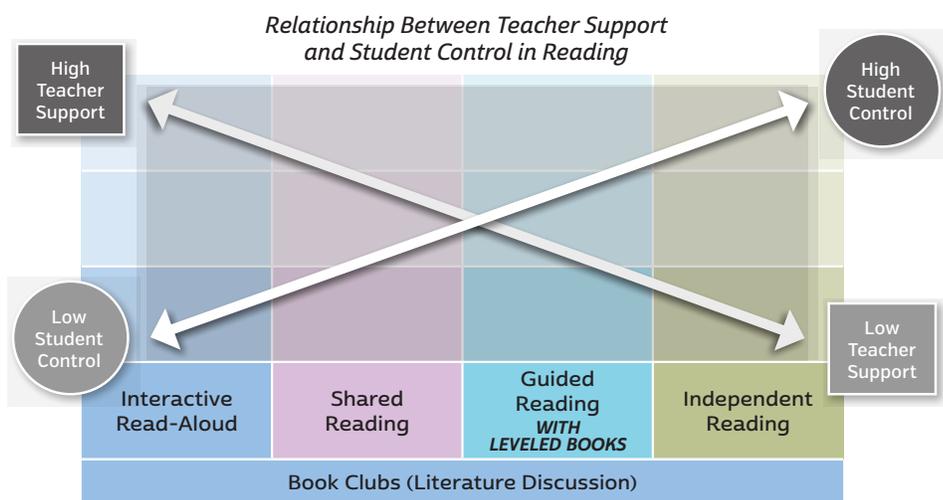
Where do levels fit?

A rich and complex system for reading is not developed by one type of book or in

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one context alone. Children deserve to engage with a rich variety of texts across different instructional contexts. In fact, of the five contexts for reading that we describe in our work—interactive read-aloud, shared reading, guided reading, book clubs, and independent reading—only one uses leveled books. *One*. Text levels play an important but quite limited role in students’ literate lives in school.

Guided reading is the one instructional context that uses leveled books. In guided reading, teachers select a text that presents the right type and amount of challenge for a small group of students. The text is just beyond books they can read independently. It requires the teacher’s support. But the book is not so hard that the process breaks down and students struggle to such an extent that they cannot comprehend or engage in efficient word solving.



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The structured approach that the teacher uses provides the scaffold for proficient reading, enabling students to make small shifts in processing power every day. This is accomplished using a gradient of texts that controls the amount of error and challenge through careful assessment of the strengths and needs of the students.

Levels are a powerful tool when used appropriately. Our F&P Text Level Gradient™, for example, allows for smart choices in guided reading lessons. A “level” stands for hundreds—even thousands—of in-the-head strategic actions that readers need at any given time to read with accuracy, fluency, and understanding.

The demands increase as readers progress to greater text complexity and they learn new ways of problem-solving and thinking. To use levels appropriately, teachers should use careful, systematic, ongoing assessment and observation to determine which books are appropriate for small groups of students in guided reading and to guide their teaching decisions as they take each student from where they are to somewhere new.

And, as we stated, outside of guided reading, students should have access to a multitude of books that speak to them as readers and help them to build their reading identity. With any reading activity, that is the ultimate end goal.

What do families need to know about levels?

Levels were designed to help teachers make good instructional decisions. Families have the right to know whether their children are making expected progress, making faster than expected progress, or need intervention to catch up. But levels have no place in conferences, on report cards, or in discussions with a student.

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Allow us to repeat that: Levels have *no place* in conferences, on report cards, or in discussions with a student.

A level is a teacher’s tool. It isn’t a “score,” and it certainly isn’t a child’s label.

Families should not be worried if, within a given week, students read at several different text levels for different reasons. In fact, on any given day, students experience texts at several levels in the various instructional contexts.

You can find suggestions for talking to families about a child’s progress at fountasandpinnell.com/resourcelibrary/id/432.

Making good decisions about literacy teaching and learning

If we are committed to high literacy outcomes for students *and* to nurturing the literate lives of students, then our practice must reflect our commitment.

The reading materials in our classrooms need to offer the richest learning opportunities possible, and the teaching needs to challenge students across all learning contexts. The combination of these two elements is the key to success.

It is the right of all children, every day, to have the opportunity to read many texts at a variety of levels with understanding, fluency, and comprehension; to experience highly expert teaching; and to find books that they love and that stay with them throughout their lives.

LITERACY LEADERSHIP

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