

WHICH LEVEL ARE YOU?

written by Lorraine Wilson

Imagine this--- you enter a book shop. The proprietor enquires your reading level and then directs you to the shelves housing books on that level. You look around this book shop. There are no signs indicating collections of particular types of books such as 'Contemporary Fiction', 'Romance', 'Travel', 'Psychology'. Rather the only signs are those designating reading levels.

Or imagine this ----you enter your local library. The librarian checks her computer files and says,

'You are on Level 142. Wait here and I will choose a book for you from the Level 142 Shelf.'

I wonder for how long you would continue reading; for how long you would continue to buy or borrow books if you could not borrow according to your interests and needs.

Think then of the children in your classroom. Are they reading on levels? Do they ever get to choose the books they read? How do they feel?

WHY READ?

Reading is not an end in itself. Reading serves multiple purposes all in the course of our daily activities. Sometimes reading is for our personal protection as when we read the instructions on the gas heater in the process of re-lighting the pilot light. Sometimes we read a street directory to navigate our way around strange neighbourhoods. Reading enables us to vary the way we prepare different foods for the table. Reading facilitates the smooth planning of our holidays. Reading informs us about our past. Reading takes us out of ourselves and stretches out minds as when we read a great novel.

Reading then is part and parcel of the daily social practices with which we engage; cooking, driving, studying, buying real estate, relaxing and fantasising and learning about other people, places and times.

In this reading we do as part of our life styles, do we always read to our maximum potential as readers? Let's say we are good readers and can read those readers on Level 250. Think for a moment—during a day or a week is everything we read a similar level of difficulty? As an adult with a Reading Level of 250, do we only select magazines from the Level 250 shelf in the Newsagency? Or in that same shop do we buy birthday greeting cards from Level 250 Shelf? Of course we don't. All of us read texts of varying degrees of difficulty. We choose those which relate to

our interests and purposes, not those at some supposed upper limit of our reading ability.

I don't think that the proponents of levelled texts would argue that reading is an end in itself or at least not for adult readers and yet they see the teaching of early reading as decontextualised from the day to day lives of the children.

However, the teaching of reading, via levelled readers necessitates a linear path along which all students progress, irrespective of their life interests, needs and cultures. It follows then that because the class reading texts are levelled in a linear sequence, the class reading program is separate from the content program or what the children are studying in science and social education.

When we look at studies of spontaneous readers (those children who can read on school entry) these children have not learned to read by having sequenced lessons around levelled readers. (Clark, M. 1984) These children have all had a multitude of preschool experiences with language, with books and being read to. They have listened again and again to their favourite bedtime stories.

They have engaged with texts as they have engaged with life. Not only have they been read to at bedtime they have interacted with environmental print. For example, they have listened and observed from their child restraint seats in motor vehicles as their parents have read the road signs. They have read with their parents, product names in shop windows and street signs as they have engaged in neighbourhood walks.

ASSUMPTIONS UNDERPINNING THE LEVELLING OF BOOKS

1. Reading is visual. Hence the books on the lower levels have one or two words per page or a sentence pattern is repeated on each page. The same words are repeated again and again.
eg I have a ----- .
I have a ----- .

This repetition of words is founded in the belief that reading is visual: words must be seen many times so that they can be visualised and remembered. The repetition of key words is of greater significance in early reading books, than is meaning and purpose.

2. Reading is an accurate process. Reducing the length of sentences and repeating the same words over and over enables the young readers to get the words right. It is important when reading, to get the words right. Oral reading errors are bad. They must be corrected.
3. Reading is an end in itself. It can be taught independently from the children's personal interests and lives.
4. There is no connection between reading and writing. Reading is learned separately from writing. Special texts are needed for early reading programs. These texts have no other purpose than to teach children to read.
5. Reading difficulty is related to the length of words or the number of words on the page.
6. A child is passive in the learning process. What the child learns and the order in which learning occurs is best determined by the teacher.

REBUTTING THE ASSUMPTIONS

1. Reading is not a purely visual process. What the brain sends to the eye while reading, (non visual information) is as important as what the eye sends to the brain (visual information).
Efficient readers sample the visual information sufficiently to allow the brain to kick in and predict the text ahead, drawing upon the non-visual, or semantic and syntactic information.
(Goodman 1977)
Efficient readers make use of redundancy in text, that is they sample as little visual information as is needed for the brain to predict and make meaning.
For example when a reader meets the following text
 'Once upon a time'
the reader's eye may see the 'O' and the ' up..' and jump on to the words following. Through reading many stories one comes to expect that at the start of stories the word 'Once' is followed by 'upon a time', so one does not waste time processing each individual letter of these words.
To process each letter and each word carefully is to waste energy for no good purpose. The purpose when reading is always toward constructing meaning.

2. Reading is not an accurate process. This belief relates to individual definitions of reading. If one defines reading as naming words correctly, then one perceives reading as an accurate process. If one believes reading is the construction of meaning then one understands that in the process of making meaning, readers sometimes change the language of the writer to their own or that with which they are more comfortable.

Many children who struggle with reading in our schools are those for whom reading is a visual process. Often this view of reading has been imparted by teachers who have insisted that the children name every word correctly when reading aloud.

Naming every word correctly is no guarantee that children are understanding what they read.

Children who never make oral reading errors should be asked to re-tell what they have read in their own words, to ensure that they are reading to make meaning.

Visual readers have only one strategy when they come to an unknown words: they try to sound them out. These children should be encouraged to draw upon contextual information in the identification of unknown words.

3. Reading is not an end in itself. Why read if there is no point to the reading?

Reading is a social practice. It enables us to live more richly, to participate more fully in our particular communities. We read to negotiate the traffic en route to work. We read to study the rules of the sports we play. We read to understand other cultures. We read to be informed about political activities so we may respond more authoritatively and take part. We read to imagine other ways of being.

4. There is a very close connection between reading and writing. We learn about writing by reading. Reading informs about writing. Reading nourishes writing.

The texts of many levelled readers which feature the repetition of patterned sentences are appalling examples of written language. They are not authentic texts: they serve no social purpose. The language in these books is unlike any other language in use in our society.

Many of the levelled texts infant children read in classrooms today are 'Claytons' books; they look like books they sell like books but they do not serve any authentic book purpose.

5. What makes words or sentences easy to read is related to how familiar the reader is with the words, their meanings, the context and the language construction in which they are embedded. Think for a moment of children's first names. Is 'Alexandra' an easy or difficult word? What about 'Tom' or 'Panagiotis'? How many of you can read 'Panagiotis'? I learned from five year old Panagiotis that 'Panagiotis' is a Greek female first name and that the correct pronunciation is Pan/ ee/ oa/ tee. For five year old Panagiotis her name was an easy word for her to read, as 'Alexandra' is for the five year old of that name. However they may not be able to read each other's name. Our names are important to each of us. They are the centre of our beings; they are us. We've seen them written many times. We read them with ease whether they have three letters or ten letters. We all read particular words easily in some contexts but then pause and stutter when reading these same words in other contexts. Why is this? A familiar word positioned in an unusual word order, may cause us to pause or stumble.

As well the one text may be difficult for some and easier for others depending on the match between the language structure of the text and the accompanying ideas being explored. Levelled texts assume that the degree of difficulty of a book is the same for each reader on that supposed level of reading. However when it is understood that in the process of making meaning readers bring into play their own language structures and their life experiences, one appreciates how the one text takes on different degrees of difficulty for different readers. Consider for example a text about baseball. For whom will this be easiest to read with understanding?

6. Children are not passive in the learning process. Each child comes from a particular culture, a particular family group and has particular interests. Children are not all the same. They cannot all absorb the same information at the same time and make the same meanings of it. According to their different life experiences and life interests so particular children are attracted to particular texts. If we want to develop life long learners and life long readers, then from the earliest days in school children must see that there are very good reasons for reading, that there is something to be gained

from reading, and that they, the learners, have some choice over the texts they read, and that the texts have something to contribute to the children's lives.

WHAT IS THE ALTERNATIVE?

When choosing books for classrooms one must ask of each book
What purpose does this book serve?
Would any person (child or adult) want to read this book a second time?

Texts in early literacy rooms should consist of the very best of published texts, together with class made texts.

I think of the picture storybook 'No David' by David Shannon. It is a text with little text on each page but the language is so appropriate for the story and children love it! They ask for this book again and again.

Another such book is 'The Very Hungry Caterpillar'. These are the sorts of book which will inspire young children to read. The children will choose to revisit these books again and again, and the numerous re-readings will facilitate the children's learning to read.

A Book which invites a child back again and again nurtures a young learner through the

Read to

Read with

Read by

Stages. Initially an adult reads the book to the child. Gradually the child reads along with the adult and eventually the child reads by himself. All this happens as the child is enjoying a favourite book. If meaning and enjoyment and purpose are priorities in literacy acquisition the independent reading doesn't occur on the first reading of a book, by a beginning reader.

Sadly many levelled texts are being written for that purpose, that is to have supposed independent reading on the first or second reading. Such books are simplified to the extent that they are about nothing and for nobody.

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