

What If “Just Right” Is Just Wrong? The Unintended Consequences of Leveling Readers

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For more than a century, reading educators have found various ways to level texts and readers, but to what end?

I walked into an elementary school recently and was confronted by a huge chart on the wall that posed the question, “What level of reader are you?” The chart then displayed a set of numbered levels (actually letters with a color-coded background for each level) and samples of texts from each level for the guest reader to try out. “Find the level that’s comfortable for you. Find your ‘just right’ level,” the chart read. Would it surprise you to know that on the other side of the wall was a library with books color-coded to reflect the levels on this welcoming chart?

I was angry. I thought about all of the different audiences for this chart and how they might be positioned. Everything about the chart was so sure and so wrong. I understand that in the world of literacy teaching, research, and teacher preparation—where almost every decision we make is complicated by a consideration of “It depends”—we are always trying to work toward consensus around our practices. But what if we are just wrong?

Through this article, I attempt to unpack my visceral response of anger at the chart I encountered into an argument for a different approach based on reason and evidence. I will trouble the construct of reading levels and “just right” texts. I will argue that the consensus is, and has been from the start, deeply flawed with unintended consequences for students and teachers that limit more than they enrich, that penalize more than they promote, and that divide more than they unite. My frustration with the leveled text consensus has been heightened by recent work we have been doing with students in critical inquiry in elementary classrooms and the remarkable accomplishments these students have made as they engage with texts far outside their “just right” zone. I will expand on these experiences later in this article. I have set fairly modest goals: to introduce doubt in your mind where there

might be certainty; to engage you and your colleagues in conversations around some of the unintended consequences of leveling in reading (see Figure 1); and to lead you to question some of the decisions, word choices, and actions we take on a daily basis in classrooms that are shaping the developing literacy identities of our students (unintended consequence 1).

The Consensus Around Text Leveling: How Did We Get Here?

In her classic book, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, Chall (1967) described the consensus around the teaching of reading that had been building over the course of the 20th century. Although her attention in this book was focused primarily on the dominance of the look-say method for beginning reading instruction and the lack of attention to code in the basal reader programs that dominated schooling, she also raised serious questions around the consensus view on leveling of texts with attention to vocabulary control and recommendations for organizing (i.e., grouping) students for instruction. In a move reminiscent of President Dwight Eisenhower’s warnings regarding the influence of the military-industrial complex on national policy (Giroux, 2015), Chall went on to raise questions about the fact that the senior author teams on the most prominent basal programs were the same people in leadership roles in interpreting the research on the teaching of reading. Could it be that the leveling features of commercial programs are more about efficiency and serving the interests

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of publishers rather than serving the interests of teachers and students (unintended consequence 2)?

The leveling of text began to shift to the leveling of readers when Betts framed two important concepts that were not entirely new to the field but were brought together in a way and at a time that led to their rapid incorporation into a consensus view. The first concept was centered on the Directed Reading Activity (DRA). The DRA was essentially a lesson plan structure for teachers to follow (before, during, and after reading) in guiding the reading of students in basal texts (Betts, 1943). The second concept was around the use of an informal reading inventory to identify the student's performance in a text that has been leveled. Relying on assessment techniques that had been pioneered by Gray (1919) around oral reading performance, Betts (1946) proposed criteria for determining a student's independent, instructional, frustration, and capacity (listening or potential) levels that could be used with any text. Betts argued that the instructional level (enough of a challenge but not too much) was the "highest level at which systematic reading instruction can be initiated." (p. 439). Betts argued that through use of the DRA, with students placed at their instructional level, the students will maximize growth: "If a child is to profit most from directed reading activities, he should be given challenging materials to read" (p. 509). The

DRA structure suggested by Betts reflected what was already present in many of the teacher guides for many of the popular basals at the time (Smith, 1965).

Although Betts (1946) framed informal reading inventories as a procedure that could be done with any child in any text, the market was soon flooded with commercial informal reading inventories with leveled passages and procedures for determining student levels (e.g., Bader, 2005; Burns & Roe, 2007; Cooter, Flynt, & Cooter, 2007; Ekwall, 1986; Johns, 1981; Leslie & Caldwell, 1995; Silvaroli, 1965; Woods & Moe, 1995). Although serious questions have been raised about

the validity of these instruments and their focus on generating numbers that level students to texts rather than appreciating the strategies students are using (e.g., Clay, 2001; K. Goodman, 1969), the practices associated with leveling are at the center of classroom teaching of reading in many schools and classrooms. Guided reading, an updated version of Betts and the DRA, has become normalized for work with students placed at their "just right" level (Iaquinta, 2006).

In this era of standards and accountability, these levels that students carry with them are used to aggregate performance and gauge the quality of teaching and learning (unintended consequence 3).

PAUSE AND PONDER

- What if there were no leveled readers, leveled libraries, or leveled students in your classroom?
- What would you do?
- What would your students do?

Figure 1 Unintended Consequences of Reading Levels and Leveled Reading

1. Readers take up and take on levels as their reading identity.
2. Leveling features of commercial programs serve the interests of publishers rather than those of teachers and students.
3. Levels that students carry with them are used to aggregate performance and to gauge students' progress and teachers' effectiveness.
4. Reading levels feed into deficit discourse around students in schools, particularly in schools serving minority students from low-income families, as *low*, *poor*, or *struggling*.
5. Teachers are not allowed to make decisions about how to support students as a function of the challenge level of texts and tasks.
6. Literacy becomes a goal and not a tool.
7. Reading becomes the "curriculum bully" in its impact on attention to other subject areas.
8. "Just right" leveling may divert attention away from other important goals in the curriculum.
9. "Just right" leveling denies access to informational texts that readers want to read and can read.
10. Access denied to challenging text leads to the "poor" getting "poorer."
11. We tend to dismiss as unimportant or not literacy what we don't recognize as "just right" reading.
12. "Just right" levels eliminate the responsibility for the reader to make important decisions and adjustments to reading associated with flexibility.

Further, these levels, as they have become tied to end-of-year standards, are feeding into deficit discourse around students in schools, particularly in schools serving minority students from low-income families (unintended consequence 4).

Support From Psychology? Maybe Not So Clear

The constructs of instructional level and guided reading have been linked to the work of Vygotsky (1978), specifically to the zone of proximal development (ZPD), and Bruner's (2009) writing on scaffolding as teaching support offered in the ZPD (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). The learning process is associated with a task that is challenging, but not too challenging, for the learner. The teacher (or knowledgeable other) steps in to offer tools (e.g., cues, strategies, heuristics) that the learner can take on to succeed in the task. The scaffolding offered is then taken up by the learner for application in the future.

However, there are two major problems in connecting this framework to guided reading and "just right" levels. The first problem is in the presumption of a fixed form of scaffolding. The challenge level in tasks that students may engage with will require different kinds of support for those students to succeed. ZPD is not just a single level of challenge but a range of levels that might require different forms of scaffolding. If all you, as a teacher, can offer as a scaffold is a formulaic DRA, then the text-to-reader match is crucial. If you, as a teacher, can offer a range of different levels of scaffolding support in response to the challenges facing the student, then the level of the challenge is important to consider in selecting the scaffolding procedures but not so much in selecting the text. Advocates for scripted and packaged programs are very concerned, as they should be, about the challenge level of the texts and tasks because the presumption is that there is only one form of scaffolding to be offered and it is in the script. Teachers are not allowed to be thoughtfully adaptive (Hoffman & Duffy, 2016) in supporting students as a function of the challenge level and challenges in the moment (unintended consequence 5).

The second problem with connecting ZPD and scaffolding to guided reading and text leveling is the contradiction between the socially and culturally situated nature of learning that Vygotsky, Bruner, and others who follow this work have emphasized (e.g., Engeström, 2001; Gutiérrez, 2008; Lave & Wenger, 1991, 2002; Leontiev, 1981; Luria, 1976; Rogoff, 1993)

and the very technical approaches represented in leveled texts and guided reading. Literacy is a tool that is useful in solving the challenges we encounter. Literacy is not the challenge or the goal; learning is the goal (unintended consequence 6). The moment you ignore or downplay the importance of context, content, problem posing, motivation, and human interaction in meaning making and place literacy as the goal, the more likely you are to lose authenticity in teaching and learning. Writing in 1934, Smith, the preeminent historian of U.S. reading instruction, cautioned the field of reading on the dangers of treating reading as a subject area:

Reading instruction has, throughout our history, been organized about the subject of reading...centered about daily assignments in "the reader."...Now as a matter of fact reading is a tool: it has no subject matter of its own....Geography, history and science all have their own content; even arithmetic has a subject matter peculiar to its field. But reading is not a subject matter; it is simply a tool which we use in getting subject matter from the other fields....Since this is the case, we are bound to have an artificial situation so long as we organize reading instruction in terms of the subject of reading. (pp. 264-265)

Over the past 80 years and despite Smith's (1934) plea, reading instruction has become even more firmly entrenched as the subject area that claims the most attention in the elementary curriculum. Pearson, Cervetti, and Barber (2007) referred to reading as a curriculum bully in consideration of its impact on attention to other subject areas. The guided reading and leveled texts that fill hours of the classroom day may represent more of a problem than they do a solution (unintended consequence 7). Teachers have taken up these practices, trusting that the experts in our field have access to evidence demonstrating that these approaches work (Shannon, 1983). In fact, there is sparse data suggesting positive effects for this kind of work in leveled text beyond the early primary level and a growing body of work suggesting the benefits of working in more challenging texts (Fisher & Frey, 2014; Hoffman & Roser, 2004; T. Shanahan, 2014, 2017).

Just Right for What?

There is an important concept in measurement that relates to consequential validity. The validity of assessment tools must always be considered in relation to an action or a decision using the data that

have been generated. The simple answer as regards a “just right” level may be that a level is “just right” for the teacher to promote certain kinds of reading strategies. Is this “just right” level the same level that is useful for the teacher in promoting curiosity, comprehension, appreciation, imagination, writing, or critical thinking? Is there anything in the counting of words read accurately (and how quickly they are read) that would suggest these are central to what students are thinking or feeling? “Just right” leveling may be excluding attention to other important goals in the curriculum (unintended consequence 8).

Spache (1972), a contemporary of Betts, took a slightly different approach to informal reading inventories and their interpretation. Spache was consistent with Betts in naming the instructional level as the optimal level for teaching skills and strategies, but his version of the independent level was quite different. Betts and almost all of the others working in this area referred to the independent level as the highest level of text difficulty that can be read fluently and with at least 98% accuracy: “Independent reading must be done in materials that present few, if any, hazards to comprehension and development of facility” (Betts, 1946, p. 484). For Betts, the independent level was lower than the instructional level. For Spache, the independent level (which he also termed the exploratory level) was the level of text that the student could still understand reasonably well but could not read with high levels of accuracy and fluency. The independent level was determined through silent reading when

the student begins at the level just above the last selection read aloud and failed. Testing continues until the child correctly answers less than 60% of the comprehension questions correctly. The highest level at which the student answers 60% of the questions is the independent level. (Lipa, 1985, p. 665)

Spache considered the independent level as material “offered to the student for independent, silent reading.” (Lipa, 1985, p. 666). The independent level was higher than the instructional level and was important for students to engage with these texts for different reasons than the instructional level. The independent level, for Spache, was the “just right” level for exploration.

Access Denied

One of the most pressing challenges in reading instruction at the elementary level has been the lack of attention to and engagement with informational

texts (Duke, 2000). Despite repeated calls for curriculum integration and expanded attention to informational texts and disciplinary literacies (Duke, 2016; Maloch & Bomer, 2013; C. Shanahan & Shanahan, 2014) and evidence that such integration works to the benefit of learners (Cambria & Guthrie, 2010; Guthrie & Klauda, 2014), there is little evidence that the overwhelming focus on narrative texts in practice is any different today from what Duke (2000) described more than a decade ago (Brown & Spang, 2008; Dreher & Kletzien, 2016; Pentimonti, Zucker, Justice, & Kaderavek, 2010; Yopp & Yopp, 2006).

Duke (2016) suggested that one of the limiting factors for informational texts in classrooms has been the lack of preparation offered to teachers in how to use informational texts in classrooms. I agree, but I suggest that a more fundamental problem is the lack of understanding of what flexible reading looks like and how it works with students exploring informational texts for purposes of inquiry. Further, I suggest that current leveling systems do not work for informational texts or other kinds of text that do not follow a strict narrative structure. The normalized view of “just right” reading level is excluding the possibilities for students to engage in this kind of reading for us to observe and support. “Just right” thinking may deny access to informational texts that readers want to read and can read (unintended consequence 9). I should be clear in stating that access is not distributed equally. Stanovich’s (1986) notion of Matthew effects in reading (or, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer) applies to this issue of access. Access denied is much more prevalent in contexts where reading achievement is lower (i.e., in schools that serve students from low-income families in minority communities). The poor get poorer (unintended consequence 10).

When Reading Doesn’t Look Like Reading

It took decades for the literacy community to recognize the reading and writing of very young children as real reading and writing (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Emergent literacy, as a construct, has revolutionized the way we think about the processes of becoming. What will it take for us to recognize that students exploring books that are beyond their “just right” levels are engaged in real reading? Perhaps we have not spent enough time observing students’ practices as they engage with these texts to appreciate the reading that is going on. Perhaps we have no idea how, as

teachers, to support this kind of reading and therefore want to dismiss or exclude it from classroom life. Perhaps we dismiss as unimportant or not literacy what we don't recognize as "just right" reading (unintended consequence 11).

There is a construct in the reading literature called flexibility (Hoffman, 1979), which is the strategic ways in which readers access meaning in text in relation to their purposes or the accessibility of the text. This is not an unfamiliar concept in our own daily lives as readers. We approach a text with a purpose and make decisions about how we are going to read the text based on that purpose and what we know about the text structure. Our approach may not be reading word for word, starting at the beginning and reading to the end. We might skim, scan, or study the text. We might combine modes of reading. These are reading strategies that are not often represented on skills charts or in standards but are fundamental to success as meaning makers and inquirers through text. Just as an emergent reading of a storybook is reading, so is the skimming and scanning of an informational text that is off the traditional "just right" scale. "Just right" levels eliminate the responsibility for the reader to make these very important decisions and adjustments to reading (unintended consequence 12).

A Puzzle

Consider the photograph of two students in Figure 2. The students have multiple texts in front of them, and they selected these texts to read as part of an inquiry they were doing. None of the texts they are engaged with are at their "just right" level, following the standard definition for what is appropriate. Both of these students are bilingual, in a dual language program, and by traditional standards "underperforming" in reading and writing. Would you take these books away from them and substitute leveled texts? Which ones? Why? How? Or would you have never given these students access to these books in the first place?

Alternatively, we could pose the following questions: What could you learn from these students about reading? How would you support the reading of these books in ways that do not just enrich these students' reading strategies but lead them to understand what they are puzzling through? How could these students' success with these texts reframe their understanding of what reading is (as a tool) and who they are as readers?

Figure 2
Student Engagement



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

Creating Possibilities

The photograph in Figure 2 was taken during our work with elementary students in a literacy program that is based on interests, inquiry, and advocacy. In our current work with critical literacy and inquiry, we have developed a teaching model that emphasizes choice, instruction, exploration, interaction, and co-construction (for a sample teaching routine, see Figure 3). These two girls, Esperanza and Rosa (all student names are pseudonyms), chose to explore gardening and farming as part of a simulation of environmental renewal. In Figure 2, they are using the texts to locate information that justifies why we need gardeners and farmers—what they know how to do that others do not and why this is important for sustaining our society. In composing their argument, the girls included information on the health benefits of the fruits and vegetables they would grow. In this photo, they are also taking notes on the nutritional benefits of fruits and vegetables. They and the other two members of their group used texts in English and Spanish to support their argument. At the end of the unit, the four girls combined their notes together, organized them, and then each took responsibility for writing and sharing a piece of the argument. Esperanza (left) chose to share hers in Spanish and Rosa (right) in English.

Our research suggests that this is difficult but valuable work as students learn to construct arguments

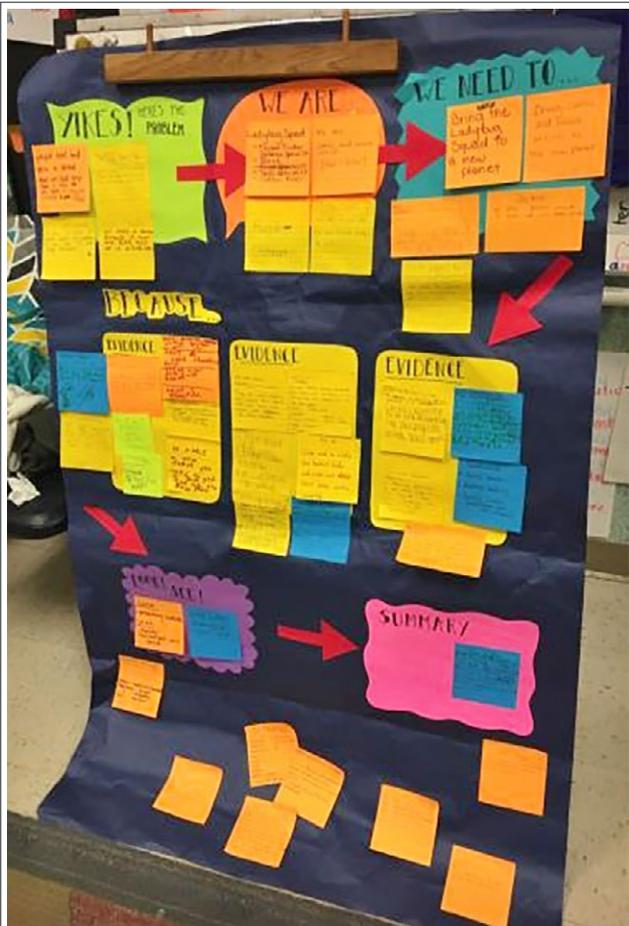
Figure 3
Teaching Plan for Interests, Inquiry, and Advocacy

Catching Up (5 minutes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What have students been thinking about and noticing since the last meeting?
Book Introduction and Minilesson (5 minutes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce two or three books. • Minilesson on informational text and text features • Incorporate learning log.
Exploration Time (10-15 minutes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent reading of new texts or ones previously read • Use sticky notes to record connections, observations, and wonderings during reading.
Sharing Time "Co-reading" (15 minutes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share sticky notes. • Include strategy talk around informational text, including word meaning and comprehension. • Build on minilessons.
Small <i>i</i> Inquiry (5 minutes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore areas of interest (previously noted from another session) on the Internet. • Model searching and the examination of a credible website.
Activity (10–15 minutes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching tools of the discipline • Hands-on exploration of tools through structured activity
Reflection, Planning, and Argument Building (5 minutes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identity building time (as a researcher, inquirer, scientist, and professional): • What have we learned today? • What might be important to share with others? • Where do we go from here?

and take advocacy positions around social scientific issues (see Figure 4). Initially, the preservice teachers we worked with were reluctant to acknowledge what their students were doing with challenging texts as reading: "They are engaged, but they are not really reading the text." This view changed. We allowed the students to take the lead in their explorations of topics. We gave them sticky notes to record what they wanted to share with the other students and their teachers. Gradually, the preservice teachers began to see the reading that was taking place. They used

the sticky notes as entry points into the text with the student and began to engage in responsive scaffolding of strategies. These assessments led to minilessons that built on and extended what their students were doing. The reading of these texts was more like co-reading than traditional forms of reading activity, such as guided reading, read-alouds, or independent reading. The texts were read together, or work with texts moved in and out of forms (e.g., drama) and modalities, building on what Harste (2013) described as transmediation.

Figure 4
Co-construction of Arguments



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

Going Forward

I am not proposing our work as a model for the future but as a form of inquiry that could be undertaken in many different forms in many different places. I am not suggesting that we abandon attention to providing accessible and supportive text to learners, especially in early primary levels (Bill Martin Jr. and Dr. Seuss still have much to teach us here). I am not suggesting that we totally abandon narrative texts or guided reading to support strategy development in ways that value readers and build on what they know (e.g., Y. Goodman, 1996, 2015).

I am suggesting that we need to recognize that what we are currently doing to support literacy development with leveled texts is not having the

effects we desire, that we take account of the serious unintended consequences of the path we are on (see Figure 1), that we expand our understanding of reading skills and strategies to include what Paris (2005) described as unconstrained meaning-based skills (Stahl, 2011), that we welcome the challenges of informational texts used in inquiry as spaces for growth in teaching and learning, and that we engage with teachers in exploring alternative approaches that focus on issues important in the lives of students today and in the future. If we trust teachers more than programs (Hoffman & Pearson, 2015), if we trust our students to teach us about what matters in reading practices, and if we trust researchers (including classroom teachers) to study and learn from our efforts at change, we can build a professional community of practice that better serves our purposes in education.

TAKE ACTION!

- 1. Start conversations:** Share this article with your teaching colleagues. Discuss the points being made. Dig deeper into the references.
- 2. Remove barriers:** Remove any leveling barriers from books available in your classroom library. Explain to your students why you have done this.
- 3. Expand the options:** Consider your classroom collection of books, and consider the variety and number of informational texts that are available to students. Work to expand your collection based on students' interests and topics of inquiry in your classroom.
- 4. Kid-watch:** Observe students as they engage with informational texts. Move into their space to talk with them, read with them, and understand their purposes and the strategies they are using. Encourage students to put sticky notes in texts where they find something they want to share or puzzle over with you or other students. Use this data to begin to teach minilessons that extend the strategies you are seeing.
- 5. Collaborate and investigate:** Work with other teachers and librarians in planning for, engaging in, and studying students' work within a critical inquiry unit (see some of the resources in the More to Explore sidebar at the end of this article). Take what you learned and grow another, and another, and another.
- 6. Publish (go public):** Share with other teachers through writing and presenting about what you are doing and learning at conferences.

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