

# Guided Reading:

Using levelled texts to build reading skills





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## The purpose of this paper

This paper explores the benefits and limitations of levelled texts as part of a reading program, and strategies for using them effectively.

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# Levelled Texts as Part of Reading Programs

## Introduction

For decades, there has been debate about the 'best' way to teach reading, with proponents of particular stances questioning others: should teachers use a skills-based approach or a whole-language approach? What is the optimal way to promote reading development?

Over time, researchers and teachers have come to recognise that students need a range of reading strategies; that is, they need skills-based knowledge embedded within a rich literature environment. Independent and successful readers, when trying to comprehend an author's message, should be immediately able to name many of the words in texts. When some words are unfamiliar, students will use a 'mediated' process where they apply their decoding (phonic) knowledge to blend sounds in a word, while also drawing on their background knowledge and vocabulary knowledge to confirm how to correctly name the word (as well as reading on and reading back, etc.). For example, decoding the word 'bow' by mapping sounds onto letters also requires students to understand the meaning implied in that text. (Is it 'bow' as in tying a bow or is it 'bow' as in bowing down?)

All component strategies for reading development must be systematically and explicitly taught (decoding, high-frequency words, reading on and back, prior knowledge, using context, reading the visuals and so on) so that students may draw on a range of strategies for understanding an author's message. Further, all students should be reading a wide range of text types that provides them with knowledge about the world, sparks their curiosity, and takes them into the lived, or imagined, world of others. Students need to value what they are about to read (Pondiscio, 2014) and, as Schwannenflugel (2017) states, 'Interest and motivation also greatly affect a reader's ability to read a text.' The opportunity to read diverse texts supports students in simultaneously learning to read while reading to learn about the world. This

burgeoning volume of reading, both wide and deep, along with systematic and explicit teaching, will promote reading improvement (Pondiscio, 2014) and can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy; that is, the more that students read, the better they become at reading, and the more positive they are likely to feel about reading (Stanovich, 1986). This is evident when students have many opportunities to apply and improve their reading skills. Consequently, for teachers to develop students' reading abilities, they need to have clear learning intentions, and use carefully selected materials, to meet students at their points of learning need. With the remit to teach a range of reading strategies, teachers use evidence-informed pedagogical approaches to support diverse students in their classes. One way of addressing varied learning needs is through using decodable and predictable levelled texts. This paper explores the benefits and limitations of levelled texts as part of a reading program, and strategies for using them effectively.



# Decodable Levelled Texts

The International Literacy Association (2018a, p. 2) states that 'phonics is an essential part of instruction in a total reading/language arts program,' as the ability to independently decode words is part of being an independent and successful reader. Decodable levelled texts provide students with opportunities to apply previously taught and learned decoding strategies where, for example, a text would have many words that can be systematically sounded out. As the focuses of these books are intentionally narrow, there is controlled vocabulary so that readers are only processing already

familiar letters and letter combinations. Because of these constrained words, initial texts often have simple storylines. It is the conversations that teachers have with students regarding what they already know about the topic (e.g. camping, pet dogs, trains, boats, earthquakes) that make these texts meaningful to read, while also providing multiple opportunities to practise students' decoding strategies. This daily phonics instruction and practice is a key component that all students need, but to varying degrees.



Zoom Food, Oxford Level 3



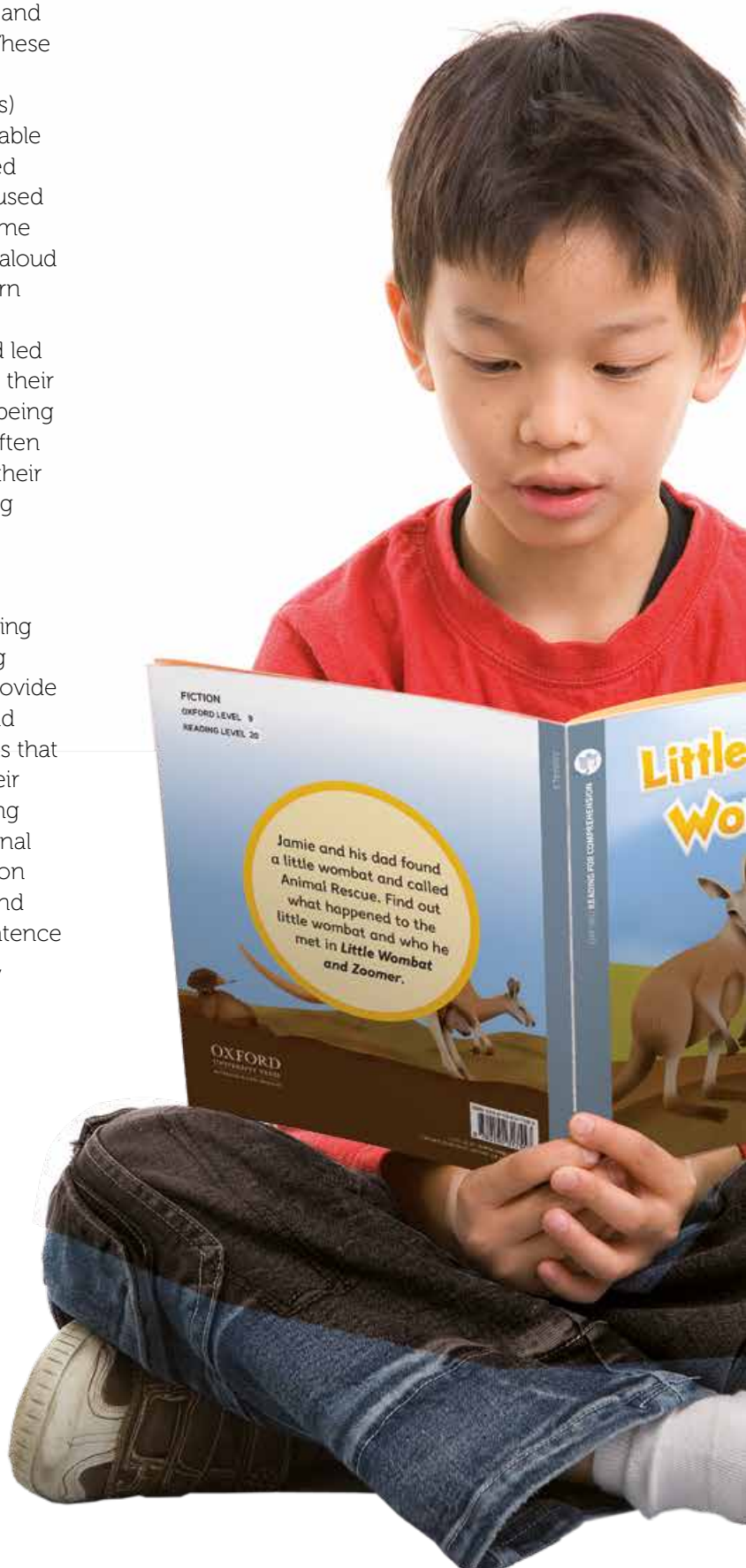


# Predictable Levelled Texts

When students have developed sufficient decoding strategies to be confidently reading texts with less controlled vocabulary, they are ready to start reading predictable levelled texts where they can develop and apply their previously learned reading strategies. These texts generally have a wider variety of titles, make stronger use of visuals (e.g. illustrations and photos) and include more complex words. Prior to predictable levelled texts being introduced, teachers often used one year-level text for whole-class instruction or used fixed-ability groups where all students read the same text, and it was common to have students reading aloud around the class or group ('round robin' or 'popcorn reading'). This one-size-fits-all approach did not honour the range of students' reading abilities and led to concerns for students who were not reading at their year level, and for capable readers who were not being stretched. This approach to reading lessons also often meant that students spent more time waiting for their turn to read than they did practising and improving their reading strategies (Glasswell & Ford, n.d.).

Levelled texts were introduced as a way of better matching students with texts that develop their reading strategies and motivations, and as a way of finding texts that are neither too hard nor too easy, but provide enough challenge for students to have to think and problem-solve as they read. The general premise is that students will draw on multiple cues to confirm their comprehension if their decoding and word-naming abilities are not immediate and automatic. Additional cues that readers may use include the interpretation of visuals (photographs, illustrations, charts, etc.) and reference to repeated language (such as initial sentence stems, e.g. I see a dog, I see a cat...) (Cunningham, Spadorcia, Erickson, Koppenhaver, Sturm & Yoder, 2005). Predictable levelled texts do not include a high number of 'like' words that share common phonic combinations.

***Levelled texts were introduced as a way of better matching students with texts.***



# Levelling Systems

Publishers apply extensive criteria to develop levelled texts. Oxford Levels is a system that has been developed by Oxford University Press over many years and is well established. The publisher works with leading literacy consultants and dedicated levelling and phonics experts to create the criteria, apply them, and then check that the criteria are applied consistently and appropriately.

Oxford Levels aim to:

- support students' phonic learning and the skills required for fluent reading
- widen students' reading experience and expose them to a variety of stimulating stories, text types, illustrations and visuals
- offer carefully scaffolded content to ensure students read at an appropriate level to their age and ability
- reinforce independent reading for pleasure.

Each new level offers new language, new themes and a chance to practise what a student has learnt already. The finely gradated sequence supports each student's reading journey, and gives teachers and parents confidence in the knowledge that students are reading at an appropriate level of challenge for them.

## Oxford Levels

Oxford Levels follow a structured phonic progression matched to the Letters and Sounds phonics sequence, letting teachers know exactly when new letters and sounds will be introduced in decodable books. Oxford Levels are also the foundation of Oxford's comprehension resources. As students progress through the levels, they are gradually introduced to more complex vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, spelling, layout and themes, enabling them to develop, practise and consolidate their comprehension skills.

## A built-in process for reading progression



Oxford Levels support and ensure appropriate challenge in all core reading skills:

- word reading skills
- sentence structure
- vocabulary
- stamina
- inferential comprehension
- punctuation
- layouts
- prior knowledge and context.



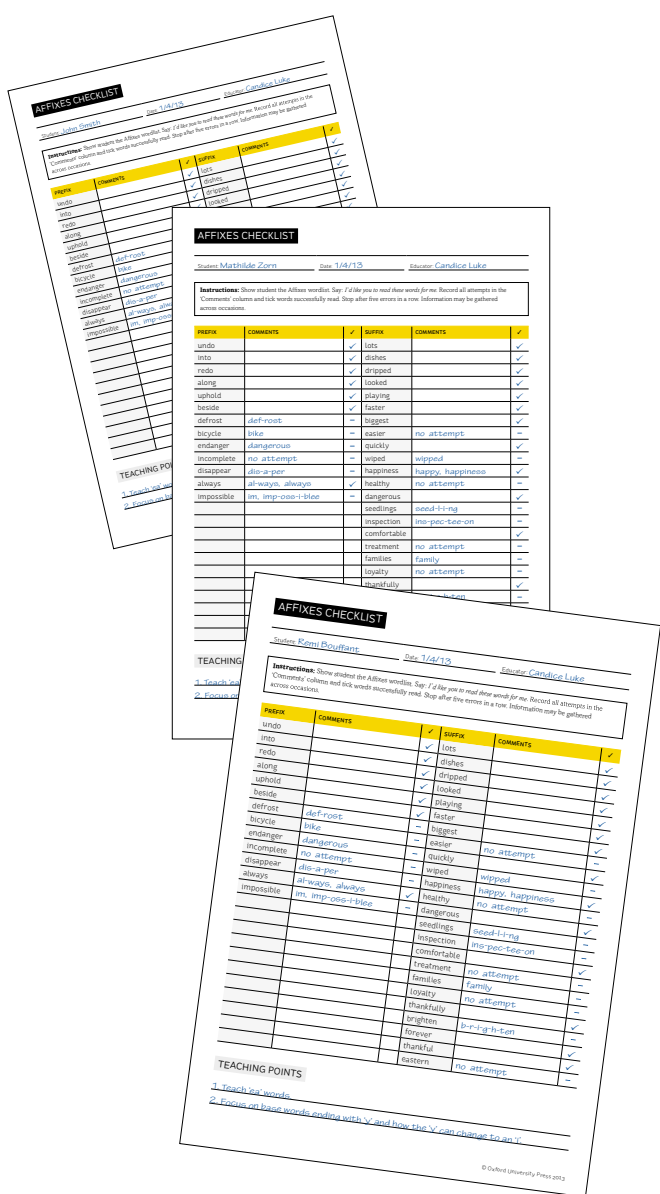
## Text Level Allocation

Many teachers use reading records to determine the level of text most likely to be the best fit for each student to read. Levelled texts provide an optimal level of accessibility but also some degree of challenge. Reading records offer a wealth of information, such as indicating patterns in students' problem-solving approaches. (For example, when students are faced with an unfamiliar word, teachers can observe a student's first response for working it out. Do they look at the first letter and name a word they know that starts with that letter even if it does not make sense in the context? Does the student attempt to sound out a word that is unlikely to be successfully named e.g. s-a-i-d (said)? Does the student keep omitting words they do not know or immediately look for help from the teacher?)

While decoding and word-naming skills (accuracy) are essential to check, this is not enough, because the ultimate aim is for students to comprehend what they have read. After checking students' accuracy, teachers will confirm understanding of the author's message by asking students to retell what they have read. If the retelling is scant, then teachers ask literal, inferential and evaluative questions to better confirm a student's understanding and where any confusion occurred. Fluency is also noted (reading rate and use of expression, e.g. pitch, tone, volume, emphasis), as well as reading behaviours (finger pointing, engagement, spontaneous comments about what was read).

As Hastings (2016, p. 68) states, 'it is imperative that teachers look beyond the numbers and levels to determine what cueing system students are and are not using.' Also, the controlled level of difficulty, no matter how carefully constructed by publishers, still needs teachers to carefully assign books according to what they already know about their students. It is not appropriate to allocate students to a level based on a single reading record without recognising that context, prior knowledge, self-esteem and other social-emotional factors may play a large part (Routman, 2018a). Teachers need to be mindful that a number does not define a student's actual and overall reading ability (Routman, 2018b). Hastings (2016, p. 68) makes the point that 'when teachers only focus on the numerical scores derived from assessments that determine students' reading levels, the scores can conceal individual differences about decoding and comprehension.'

Regular collection of a range of quantitative and qualitative assessment information, inclusive of reading record data, better places teachers to make on-balance text selection decisions to achieve improved learning outcomes. The International Literacy Association (2018b, p. 3) suggests that 'Data can provide insights into student learning strengths and needs but, more critically, can act as a highlighter of instructional gaps.' Stepniewski (2017) suggests that when teachers do not confirm a student's current reading ability (incorporating the range of component skills), this explains why some students do not make progress. As Platt (2018) states, 'there is no substitute for the informed judgment of a teacher who knows the whole child and knows, as well, that a reading level cannot sufficiently represent a reader. We must also consider volume of reading, reading interests, motivation, anecdotal evidence from discussions, conferences and observations, student self-assessments and reflections, and more.' Professional judgment does matter.



### Many teachers use reading records



## Frustrational Texts

When students' word naming within a levelled text is 89% or below, this text is considered difficult for them to read and understand. That is, too many words are not automatically known or able to be easily named, and so students will likely lose the meaning of what they have tried to read. Teachers are often advised not to use difficult texts for strategy instruction as they may lead to student frustration and, more than likely, diminished comprehension. There is a caveat here, as while some students may receive scores of 89% or lower at a particular level, they may well score more highly when reading another text at that same level, depending on prior knowledge about a topic, familiarity with a particular text type and interest in what is read. Teachers may well be able to use a 'difficult' text to scaffold successful learning of new reading strategies; it is when students are left to independently navigate difficult texts that they may falter (Stepniewski, 2017). In fact, Schwannenflugel (2017) reports that 'researchers are finding that challenging students to tackle more complex texts, while supporting them in their efforts to do so, leads to greater growth in reading than simply having them read texts at or just above their current reading levels.'

Students' access to difficult texts should not be prohibited, because reading assessments only sample reading behaviours at that point in time and may not accurately reflect all that students can successfully achieve. It may be that teachers do allow some students to read texts that have been levelled as difficult, but with an appropriate amount of scaffolding, and with students' interest in the topics, teachers could

well see students successfully reading and understanding. If students are not successful when reading difficult texts, but they are interested in the topic, then these texts can be put aside to be read at a later time.

## Independent Texts

When students' word naming within a levelled text is 95% or above, this text is considered easy for them to read and understand. That is, they are able to effortlessly name most words or work out how to name most unfamiliar words. It is critically important, however, that teachers not only monitor students' decoding capabilities but also assess that students have comprehended the meaning of the text. Another consideration is the importance of supporting students to re-read easy texts, because this process can develop many positive behaviours and traits: increased self-belief about reading ability and development of expression and fluency. Re-reading easy texts can also be used for focusing on an author's use of vocabulary, plot development, characterisation, and so on. No matter the reading level of students, practising what they already know strengthens the reading skills they already have (Schwannenflugel, 2017).

## Instructional Texts

When students' word naming within a levelled text is 90–94%, this text is considered suitable for instructional use. However, as Stahl (2012, p. 47) suggests, 'the instructional level is elastic depending on the degree of instructional support provided,' as students reading the same levelled instructional text





may have quite varying encounters with it. The ease with which readers read a text is affected by many factors: prior knowledge, interest in reading that text, decoding abilities, text type, task requirements and so on. Students who enjoy reading particular text types, and have previously been successful when reading them, are more likely to successfully read and understand them. So, when teachers are using instructional texts, they need to consistently monitor reading development to ascertain whether students are learning from the instruction and showing that they are becoming more effortless and fluent readers, or whether they now warrant more challenge either through reading different text types at the same level or moving up a level.

Levelled texts can be a valuable part of teachers' reading programs as they offer scaffolded learning opportunities for all readers.

## Students Reading Below Year Level

In any class, there will be students who are reading below the expected standard for their year level, and this could be because they are still learning some of the component skills (e.g. phonics, use of context). Generally, teachers have students read a short text each lesson but this may be counterproductive as they are missing an essential learning opportunity: high-volume reading. Massed and distributed practice is needed to apply what students have been taught and to gain the knowledge and satisfaction of learning more about the world. Further, they need to have many scaffolded opportunities to read more texts that have complex concepts (provided these are appropriate for

their age and cognitive levels) (Shanahan, 2017). This involvement with more challenging texts will increase the likelihood of heightened levels of engagement, deeper thinking, enhanced comprehension skills and the learning of new vocabulary (Glasswell & Ford, 2011; Hastings, 2016). If students are not reading an increasing number of words, it may widen their achievement gap.

There is also another issue here, as some struggling readers may find it easier to read texts deemed as too difficult because they have substantial prior knowledge and deep interest in the topic. Advisedly, teachers will plan to spend more time with struggling readers to ensure they are correctly applying the strategies that have been taught. Teachers must have these students read more texts at the same level to further strengthen their word-naming, comprehension and fluency strategies.

## Students Reading Beyond Year Level

No matter the reading ability of students, they still need to have instructional time with their teachers. Teachers will focus on using more complex texts to further develop students' reading and thinking and introduce them to a wider range of text types to ensure that these students are developing highly transferable and successful skills. Prior knowledge and interest are still paramount for these more precocious readers because if they are not interested in their reading material, it could be that their reading proficiency appears to drop away. Again, higher volume reading can be achieved by teachers providing other same-levelled texts to be read independently as well as encouraging students' reading of self-selected texts.



## Reading a Range of Text Levels

Shanahan (2014) maintains that while teachers' use of instructional texts is based on good intentions, it is also imperative that these levelled texts are not the only ones used, because students are able to learn from engaging with difficult texts, provided that teachers offer the necessary scaffolding to keep their focus and to build success. Glasswell and Ford (2011) refer to it 'as a balancing act between varying instructional support and varying text levels.' Platt (2018) makes the point that 'Students can read texts with comprehension in a range of levels, not one hard and fast level.'

To become independent and successful readers, students must have opportunities to read a wide range of texts with as much support as is needed for them to be successful: teachers cannot compensate for lack of opportunities for students to practise what has been taught. There is a place for reading easy texts to strengthen and consolidate taught strategies (and for these texts to be read at home) as well as for using difficult texts as read-alouds to introduce new vocabulary and more sophisticated comprehension strategies.

## Benefits of Teaching a Range of Text Types

It is essential that all students have many opportunities to read a range of text types and for new texts to be added to already established collections to maintain interest and further develop curiosity. Teachers need to ensure that at every text level, a range of fiction and non-fiction texts are read. Students who can only successfully read fiction texts will certainly have developed some worthwhile skills, but this narrowness limits their ability to read non-fiction texts, where page layout, vocabulary and use of visuals will vary widely. This becomes a significant consideration as students progress through school because non-fiction texts such as textbooks become core teaching tools, and students are then offered increased opportunities to engage with research enquiry projects.



## Reading Programs

A comprehensive reading program is composed of many parts that collectively scaffold students towards reading independence. Teachers must read aloud to their students every day so they can model fluent reading, use think-aloud strategies and draw on a range of checking for understanding (CFU) processes (International Literacy Association, 2018c; Layne, 2015; Wright, 2018–19). Read-alouds afford many opportunities for students to extend their general knowledge, increase their listening comprehension, learn new vocabulary, understand how texts are constructed, strengthen word study skills and think about what authors have written. Further, teachers systematically and explicitly teach word study approaches (phonics, high-frequency words) and students have time to independently read, write and talk with others about what has been read, is being read and will be read. Students need ample time and extended opportunities to apply what teachers have taught. One core way that this may be done is with guided reading lessons.

### Guided Reading

Guided reading is a process that supports teachers to work with a group of students who share common learning needs. Levelled texts may be used as the platform for teacher-directed instruction in guided reading lessons, supporting students' reading skills development until they become proficient. Teachers should have clear learning intentions and success criteria when working with students in guided reading lessons; levelled texts can help provide this focus.

Having gathered triangulated assessment information about students' current reading abilities, teachers will likely find that the range of reading abilities in their class is wide. This wide range of reading abilities may seem daunting for teachers but it can be managed. For example, there may be students who are reading across a range of levels, but they would all benefit from spending time with the teacher learning about how to better apply a reading strategy. After the teacher has modelled how to apply the strategy, students then independently read their text level while practising what has been modelled. Using this approach also helps students understand that a particular learning need can be shared by readers in many different stages and levels of reading development (Baker, 2002).

Another way of organising guided reading groups is to group all students who share the same learning need and are reading at the same level. When using this approach, the teacher introduces a levelled text that matches the student group ability, and models the reading strategy through the use of think-alouds. Afterwards, students then silently read their own text

while the teacher listens to each student read, and confirms that they can explain how they are applying the strategy. During this independent reading time, the teacher also observes students' reading behaviours and responds as needed to clarify any confusion or to affirm practices. At the end of the lesson, the teacher asks students to explain to the group how they applied the reading strategy, and the teacher may then summarise the key points (International Literacy Association, 2019). Essential to remember, however, is that any group is composed of individuals who share some learning needs but have other individual learning needs. If only focusing on the group negates remembering the individuals within the group, then it is likely that reading progress may be minimal for some students (Glasswell & Ford, n.d.). Another aspect to consider is that reading instruction through guided reading groups is a small part of the school day, so teachers need to plan how they can provide diverse opportunities for students to apply these learned reading skills in other learning areas.

As with any instruction, there are a range of factors that affect students' engagement and involvement in guided reading. Teachers need to consider students' general and specific purposes for reading, prior knowledge, vocabulary, knowledge of different text types, self-esteem and self-efficacy. Further, texts need to be age-appropriate, offer meaningful connections and lead to opportunities for engaging in worthwhile thinking and discussion.



## Mixed-ability Groups

While guided reading groups, when comprised of students who share similar learning needs, afford students opportunities to have closer teacher attention, these groups would not be the only instructional approach used. There is much to commend about students with a range of abilities working together.

This process supports less able readers, giving them the benefit of hearing their more able peers discuss how they read a text. Glasswell and Ford (2011) also state that cross-age matching, where a weaker older reader reads to a younger reader, has benefits for both readers. An older reader has the opportunity to further strengthen their decoding, fluency and expression skills by reading an easy text while the younger student has the benefit of listening to a more accomplished reader.

## School Libraries

Levelled texts are for teachers' instructional purposes and, as such, they should not be used as general reading texts in libraries. That is not to say that they cannot be used beyond guided reading groups. However, only being allowed to borrow levelled texts from libraries may be counterproductive as it may lower students' beliefs about themselves as readers. Further, it may curb interest and minimise students' willingness to engage and persist.

Libraries organise texts by genre, author or theme and allow students to practise selecting texts that build on, or develop, their interests. Libraries may include texts just for their visual appeal (as readability is currently beyond a student's present capability); it may be that some texts are borrowed for re-reading enjoyment, and others are borrowed for pleasure reading. Outside of school environments, it is unlikely that students will only read levelled texts, so they need many opportunities to learn how to select what currently suits their reading interests and needs. Teachers can support students' self-selections by introducing them to ways of inspecting and appraising a text (Parrott, 2017; Rumberger, 2018). As Glasswell and Ford (2011, pp. 208–9) state, 'It's hard to imagine ... why anyone would stop a child from reading a book he really wanted to read just because it was not at his level.'

## Talking with Families and Caregivers about Reading Levels

There are a number of reasons why teachers may be reluctant to share a student's exact reading level with families or caregivers. Families and caregivers may expect their child will have a fixed reading level but this is most often not the case. For example, while the teacher may have a student reading a Level 16 text for comprehension development, it could be that the same student is concurrently reading a Level 12 text, as they can name most or all of the words and this will help them practise their expression (prosody).



There are other negative outcomes that may arise from giving families and caregivers an exact reading level for a student:

- Pressure on teachers to accelerate their child based on the level of successful word naming only
- Misconstrued belief about their child's reading abilities
- Comparisons (competition) between families about the text levels of their children.

It is better if teachers speak with families and caregivers about their children's current reading stages rather than their current text levels.

## Talking with Students about Reading Levels

It is also essential not to define students by levels ahead of their individual reading needs. When telling a student their reading level, teacher and student beliefs may become linear. Even more problematic is when students know other students' reading levels, as it can become unintentionally competitive, where some students feel 'dumb' and others feel superior (Parrott, 2017). While the intention is well-meaning, and perhaps some teachers believe that it will motivate some students to try harder, some students may feel disempowered and sensitive to the opinions of others about their abilities (Rumberger, 2018). Students may also cease to see themselves as successful readers, and this diminishes their enthusiasm for reading. In a worst-case scenario, teachers, having assigned a text level to a student, may well not source additional information about a student and miss out on the knowledge they could garner if they really got to know the student. The student is not 'the group' (Ripp, 2017). Teachers need to discuss with students that they will be reading a range of texts depending on what they need to learn next.



## Benefits and Limitations of Predictable Levelled Texts

Levelled texts provide a gradient of difficulty that assists teachers in matching students with texts for instruction and additional practice of taught strategies. However, they are a guide (not a guarantee) and should not be used to define and level students (Dzaldov & Peterson, 2005). As Routman (2018b, p. 220) states, 'Don't get caught up in levelled book frenzy,' or what has been referred to as 'level land' or 'level lock'.

If reading programs are solely developed on the basis of using levelled texts, it may unintentionally lead to some teachers relinquishing their responsibilities for keeping abreast of students' literacy and minimise opportunities for having meaningful conversations with students about what is being read and making recommendations to students about what they may like to read next (Parrott, 2017).

It may be tempting to rush students through levels (in fact, there may be pressure from colleagues or managers to reach designated levels by the end of particular years at school), but progress through levels does not necessarily guarantee that students have secure reading skills across text types. Harvey (2007) reminds teachers that reading is about appetite and diet: having the desire to read and reading a wide range of text types. A narrow selection of text types will limit students' reading development.

Levelled texts, though selected by teachers, will never replace teachers' knowledge and understanding of their students: their backgrounds, interests and vocabulary. However, as part of reading programs, levelled texts have much to offer both teachers and students with their gradually increasing reading challenges. Further, access to multiple texts at the same level supports students to read across a range of text types, in order to ensure they have developed secure generalisation of strategies, along with the motivation and confidence that comes with successful reading experiences.

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## Conclusion

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When planning what students need to learn next so that they become increasingly independent and successful readers, teachers may choose to use levelled texts as part of their reading programs. These texts should be flexibly used and always serve learning intentions that have been developed in response to diagnostic assessment information. It is tantamount for teachers to consistently review the efficacy of using levelled texts to ensure that they are meeting students' learning needs. While levelled texts can

play an important role in the development of reading strategies and skills, ultimately, students should reach the point where they no longer need to read levelled texts. They will have the skills to wisely select suitable and interesting reading material and have a range of strategies to understand an author's message. While students may, for a time, read levelled texts, it is the texts that have numbers: not the students. Students must not be restricted to reading only levelled texts.



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# Oxford Levels

Oxford Levels provide the foundation of our reading schemes. They have been used to develop our newest phonics series as well as many of our well-loved ones, and are also the foundation of our comprehension resources. Oxford Levels offer a finely-gradated sequence that supports students' reading journeys and gives parents and teachers confidence, knowing that students are being appropriately challenged while reading.

If you'd like to look inside books from every Oxford Level and learn how students' literacy skills develop with each level, download our Understanding Oxford Levels brochure at [oup.com.au/oxfordlevels](http://oup.com.au/oxfordlevels).

Explore our levelled literacy resources at [oup.com.au/literacy](http://oup.com.au/literacy)



# Trust Oxford to build literacy learning

At Oxford University Press, we believe that the more children read, the better their educational outcomes. Developing comprehension, language and literacy skills in the primary school years can foster an enthusiasm for reading and writing, shape future educational success and ignite a lifelong love of learning.

For students to be independent, successful readers they need the ability to:

- decode and name words with accuracy and fluency
- derive meaning from what they have read.

Phonics is used as the methodology for teaching children how to read the words on the page. As new phonic skills are introduced, the number of words that children are able to sound and blend increases.

Reading comprehension is a sophisticated, multi-dimensional skill. While it is possible to break comprehension down into discrete skill areas, the whole skill (i.e. the ability to understand what is read) is dependent on the reader using several skills at the same time. All readers meet words they aren't familiar with in texts. Skipping or misreading the odd word – as long as it is just the odd word – is ok, but this is also why comprehension monitoring is so important.




Explore our Literacy white papers at [oup.com.au/literacy](http://oup.com.au/literacy)

“Teach a child to read and keep that child reading and you will change everything. And I mean everything.”

– Jeanette Winterson

For more information please connect with your local Oxford Primary Consultant at [oup.com.au](http://oup.com.au)

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