Issues with a Leveled-Only Text Approach

The instructional approach of matching text difficulty levels to student ability levels is not directly addressed by the Standards, but is a widely practiced approach. While all reading experts agree on the crucial role of high-volume reading in developing student reading skill, the CCSS' emphasis on complex text challenges the notion that all instruction should be with texts at current student ability levels. High-volume independent reading must necessarily be at levels that students can read independently, and hence difficulty levels will vary by student. But the CCSS suggest a balance of high-volume independent reading with heavily-scaffolded instructional reading of more challenging text. The research below suggest that with such scaffolds even struggling readers can access significantly more complex text then that to which they have been traditionally given access.


   Relevant finding:
   - Reviews a wide body of research and concludes that using only leveled reading keeps some students from catching up. Summarizes over 20 studies which show a variety of ways in which scaffolds and supports lead to student success with more challenging text. (see Appendix B of this document below)


   Relevant finding:
   - Students given a variety of supports—including multiple exposures, pre-teaching of vocabulary, echo reading, and partner reading—benefitted from instruction with texts typically considered “frustration level” (85% accuracy). (pg. 199)
   - Authors argue that “the instructional reading level for a given child is inversely related to the degree of support given to the reader. That is, the more support given, the lower the accuracy level needed for a child to benefit from instruction.” (pg. 200)


   Relevant finding:

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1 The “accuracy level” of oral reading of the text is a typical measure used to assess the difficulty level of a text. Texts with lower accuracy levels would be texts a student initially finds more challenging.

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• Students who engaged in dyad reading (“buddy reading”) with a more proficient peer made more progress with texts 2–4 grade levels above their instructional level than with texts on their instructional level.


Relevant finding:

• As cited above in the “Knowledge” section of this document, this study showed that poor readers (30th percentile or lower) who had high knowledge of baseball showed greater comprehension of a passage about baseball than strong readers (70th percentile or higher) who knew little about baseball. This finding implies that a student who typically reads at “level J” may be able to read at significantly higher levels if they have prior knowledge of a topic.


Relevant finding:

• Critiques the research base behind determination of instructional reading levels, finding that the determination of levels was never validated by rigorous research.

For additional research, see also:

• O’Connor, R. E., Swanson, H. L., & Geraghty, C. (2010). Improvement in reading rate under independent and difficult text levels: Influences on word and comprehension skills, *Journal of Educational Psychology, 102,* 1–19. *Independent and Difficult Text Levels: Influences on Word and Comprehension Skills,* *Journal of Educational Psychology 102, no 1 (2010).*

Below are bibliographic citations for the 26 studies referenced in Shanahan (2014) regarding students making gains with more complex text when given appropriate scaffolding. In addition abstracts and full-text PDF’s of all studies are available as well. These references were provided by Shanahan in "Building Up To Frustration Level Text" in *Reading Today Online* available here:


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