

Fountas and Pinnell Say Librarians Should Guide Readers by Interest, Not Level

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Our recent article on [reading levels and the dangers of using strictly prescribed leveling systems](#) in libraries for young readers sparked much [dialogue and debate](#). One of the most popular and widely used reading systems is the “A to Z” gradient, developed by Irene C. Fountas, professor in the School of Education at Lesley University in Cambridge, MA, and Gay Su Pinnell, professor in the School of Teaching and Learning at Ohio State University. Both researchers have been adamant that their leveling system was designed as “a teacher’s tool, not a child’s label.” We caught up with Fountas and Pinnell, who jointly gave their perspective on leveling, libraries, reading comprehension, and what they say to districts mandating leveled collections.

The system you developed to assess student reading ability and comprehension involves more than just a leveling system for books. In a nutshell, what is the system designed to do and how did you develop it?

We developed the F&P Text Level Gradient™ to describe differences in the demands of texts using 10 different text characteristics, placing books in categories along the A to Z spectrum. The behaviors and understandings for each letter level on the gradient provide a picture of how reading systems of strategic actions develop over time from the very young reader to the almost adult reader. By looking at the progression of competencies and behaviors and understandings, you have a map of reading progress. Following the development of the F&P Text Level Gradient™, we created the Benchmark Assessment System (BAS) as a systematic, standardized way to determine where children are along that progression of competencies. When we have this kind of data about our students, we can use that information to guide our teaching decisions and provide materials for students that offer the appropriate amount of challenge. Using language that facilitates their growth, the precise teaching can move students toward higher and more complex levels along the gradient of progress. It’s also important to note that using the BAS, teachers gain a rich body of information in a short amount of time and use it to inform the teaching of the children immediately, offering a road map of where to begin instruction.



Photo credit: Wikipedia Commons, user Mr. Absurd.

In the recent piece we published on leveling, we pointed out that you never intended the A to Z reading levels to be used in the way they often are. That is, teachers informing students (and sometimes their classmates) of their current letter level,

making parents aware of the level, and organizing classroom libraries by level. How is this different from how you intended the system to be used by teachers?

It is our belief that levels have no place in classroom libraries, in school libraries, in public libraries, or on report cards. That was certainly not our intention that levels be used in these ways. We designed the F&P Text Level Gradient™ to help teachers think more analytically about the characteristics of texts and their demands on the reading process, and the A to Z levels were used to show small steps from easiest to most difficult. The goal was for teachers to learn about the characteristics of each level to inform their decisions in teaching—how they introduce a book, how they discuss a book, how they help children problem-solve as they process a book. We created the levels for books, and not as labels for children, and our goal was that these levels be in the hands of people who understand their complexity and use them to make good decisions in instruction.

We certainly never intended that children focus on a label for *themselves* in choosing books in classroom libraries. Classroom libraries need to be inviting places where children are drawn to topics and genres and authors and illustrators that they love. And while students are choosing books that interest them, the teacher is there to help them learn how to make good choices so the books they select are ones that they can read and enjoy. If a child chooses a book that is too hard for them to read, they may stretch themselves and enjoy that book for a period of time. The teacher will be there to hold conferences with individual children to listen to them read and check on their understanding and help provide sensitive guidance to choices that each student will very much appreciate.

What is the best way, according to the research you've done and the expertise you have, to organize libraries? What are the best ways to help children become confident readers?

Libraries should engage readers and provide high-quality, high-interest, fascinating materials. A good library could be organized like a good bookstore—trying to sell books to readers. And the librarian is such a key person in the school in guiding students according to their interests, not their levels. The librarian may recommend books that are especially good for a particular age group or even for individual children that the literacy team is working with based on what they know about the books and the readers. We believe that choice is a really important part of going to the library and using the library. It's at the heart of what it means to become a confident reader. If you have an opportunity to choose what you read, and then to talk about it with others, maybe to draw and write about it, it builds your sense of yourself as a reader and your self-efficacy as a reader. That's where confidence really begins.

Do you think classroom libraries should be organized differently than general school libraries? How does independent reading fit into the overall approach to reading instruction and assessment?

For general school libraries, it's great to see baskets of books organized by topics students may be studying in other areas of classroom instruction, like social studies or science. Teachers can also organize titles by genre or favorite authors or illustrators, or put together baskets of award-winning books or work by an author who may be visiting the school later that year. Our hope is that the way a school library is organized will create interest in

students and entice them to want to read. Organizing books by level does not help students engage with books and pursue their own interests.

Independent reading is really the goal of all reading instruction. What children can do for themselves is what matters most, and they become more proficient in reading on their own by engaging and thinking and talking about books with others. By engaging with books across a whole variety of instructional contexts in the classroom, students practice living a literate life every day, which serves to build their own competencies and habits and attitudes about reading and about themselves as literate people.



How can educators communicate with parents and caregivers about a child's reading progress without relying on levels?

Educators can talk with parents and caregivers in conferences and can share a book the child was reading at the beginning of the year vs. a book that the child is reading later in the year and talk through some of the text characteristics of each book so that parents can see that difficulty is increasing. It's also important to use language that families understand. For example, "your child is reading at a level that is about what we would hope for at this point in time in this grade," or "your child is reading beyond a level that is appropriate at this point in time in this grade" or "your child is not yet reading at a level that we would hope he would be reading at, but we are supporting your child in these ways," etc.

Alongside talking about what a child is able to read independently and instructionally, teachers can also talk about a child's engagement with reading: how many books the child has read, what his tastes are, whether the student is putting in a lot of effort or showing initiative. Of course, parents deserve to know how their children are progressing, but there are so many different aspects of reading progress and many different ways to communicate this in family conferences.

What would you say to district leaders who mandate the use of labeling books by level and restricting kids to reading on specific levels?

It's important to try to have an open line of communication with district leaders about how best to serve students in the classroom and school communities. Most administrators we've worked with understand the harmful effects of sorting children into groups based on their abilities—labeling children in this way is detrimental to their self-esteem, their engagement, and, ultimately, their progress. Often, district leaders who mandate labeling books by level make those requirements because they may not understand the complexity behind a reading level. The truth is that children can read books on a wide variety of levels, and in fact, they experience many different levels of books across the day.

We would encourage teachers to share articles and ideas and invite administrators to learn more about what levels mean and how teachers use them in the classroom. We wrote an article called "Guided Reading: The Romance and the Reality," which might be a nice way to open up a conversation between administrators and faculty thinking together about the role of levels in small-group instruction. Of course, the whole school community wants to do what they think is right for their students, and it's easy to think that relying on levels alone is an answer—but it's too simplistic and works against what we're trying to achieve. We would never take a book out of a child's hands. And when we restrict kids to reading on a specific level, we're really restricting their opportunities. When teachers and administrators come together to define effective instruction, they take great strides toward creating the opportunities that children need to excel in schools.

Anything else you'd like to add to the leveling conversation?

Having a library is a treasure, and having a librarian is a gift. And when reading teachers, classroom teachers, specialists, and school librarians come together as a team, their collective knowledge about texts can help every child love to read independently, love to read in their classroom, and love to read at home.