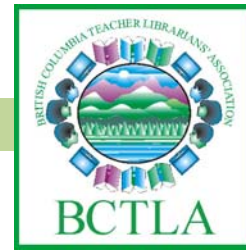


BOOK LEVELLING AND SCHOOL LIBRARY COLLECTIONS

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The practice of levelling books, used to support guided reading instruction in classrooms, is not consistent with the values of teacher-librarians and should not be applied in part or in whole to school library collections. Children have opportunities in well-developed school library programs to acquire, develop, and use important lifelong skills that will enable them to select independently their own reading materials. Levelled collections, whether located in school or classroom libraries, inhibit the use of authentic strategies for selection and directly contradict the message of pursuing reading for the interest and passion it inspires.

Students have access to school libraries and to teacher-librarians to learn and practice the skills for finding the “just-right” book to read. School library programs build in opportunities for child or young adult readers to engage in the complex task of finding a book that they can understand, that holds personal interest for them, that speaks to their life experiences or cultural identities or gendered reading preferences, or that extends a topic being studied in class or one catching their attention as something that simply needs to be explored more deeply. Teacher-librarians, as specialist teachers, work with these sets of understandings about book selection, as well as particular knowledge about individual students gained through relationships built over time, and with the students themselves to help them come independently to the right reading level and the right book. Teacher-librarians and teachers of literature eschew word counts and syllabic structures as measures of readability, looking instead for literary merit, sophistication of ideas, developmental appropriateness, capacity for engagement, or maturity of theme or language.

Research into the field of reading literacy supports the position that book levelling is something that ends with classroom guided reading programs and is not meant to apply to classroom libraries or, by obvious extension, to the school library collection (Fountas & Pinnell). “We seem to be in the midst of a levelling mania in which massive amounts of time, money and energy are devoted to organizing books by reading levels ... teachers are driven to attach a level to every text that students encounter during their school day” (Dzaldov & Peterson). Teachers, in so doing, are well-intentioned as they “whitewash” over the diversity factors of selection noted above in order to reduce the frustration students might experience that unquestionably confounds literacy development. But these teachers act to suppress students’ natural interests even as they are also reducing

the field of choice, researchers suggest, where they need to be building connections and scaffolding their background knowledge and experience, motivating students to read and enabling them to reach beyond their assessed level, usually measured by a single standardized test which, interestingly, many would argue is inappropriate assessment practice.

There is little evidence to support the decision to acquire and build levelled collections in our schools. While certainly supporting the literacy industry, the notion of applying a single strategy to entire collections eliminates the importance of both balanced and differentiated approaches to literacy development in schools, threatens to turn rich and dynamic collections into extended bookrooms, may be largely budget-driven, and is incompatible with the goals for school library programs. We know that it limits choice and may cause children to miss “great reads.” Capable readers may not choose books, perceiving them to be too low for them. Students may miss light reading opportunities that are, in Stephen Krashen’s view, conduits to more substantial reading or, in Jim Trelease’s terms the very “home-run” books that turn a child on to reading more. Worse still, it may exacerbate reluctance and resistance to reading, stigmatize struggling readers, and mislead others into believing that reading level is the important criterion in choosing a “just-right” book.

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