

Helping Kids Slip the Surly Bonds of Leveled Reading

New book touts the critical role teachers play in literacy development

By **KATHLEEN PORTER-MAGEE**



WE OFTEN TALK about the “reading wars” as if there were a single battle. In reality, it’s a multi-front conflict with several interlocking skirmishes. There’s the long-running dispute over whether early instruction must include systematic phonics (it must). There’s the debate over how much reading comprehension depends on content knowledge versus skills mastery (both are important, but content is king). There’s the question of the teacher’s role—whether a “guide on the side” or a “sage on the stage,” to oversimplify it. And there’s the combustible argument over text selection: Should we teach from grade-level texts or match books to each student’s “instructional level”?

All of these battles matter, and each could carry a book of its own. In *Leveled Reading, Leveled Lives*, Timothy Shanahan focuses squarely on the last two—what role the teacher should play, and how we can and should choose the texts. The result is a devastating takedown of leveled literacy—not because the book is bombastic, but because it’s careful: historically grounded, methodically argued, and relentlessly focused

on what actually helps students learn (which, as Shanahan repeatedly points out, is largely *missing* from efforts to promote leveled literacy).

Shanahan's core claim is bracingly plain. Leveled reading might work if three things were true: (1) we could accurately level texts, (2) we could reliably pinpoint a child's "reading level," and (3) students learned more by engaging with texts independently with minimal teacher guidance. The problem is, none of those conditions holds up under scrutiny—particularly when compared against what is, in his view, the far superior option of teaching grade-appropriate content through careful, teacher-guided instruction.

For anyone who has argued for phonics-based, knowledge-rich instruction anchored in complex literature, this book is frankly maddening. Not because Shanahan is wrong, but because his case is so obviously true and yet still far too often sidelined.

Why Leveled Reading Won

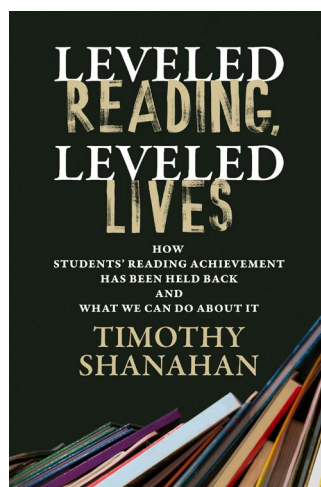
One of the book's most useful contributions is historical. Shanahan traces the history of leveled literacy to early America—opening his timeline with the Pilgrims, then carefully tracking the evolution of the approach through the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. He leaves the reader with a clear understanding of how a combination of pragmatism, education theory, and the rise of data-informed practice helped codify leveled literacy into dogma.

On the pragmatic side, the idea that reading should be taught as a progression—introducing students first to easier texts and gradually increasing the level of difficulty—is logical and core to *any* reading program no matter its approach. "[S]ince Aristotle, it had been recognized that texts varied in comprehensibility," Shanahan notes. Educators began early to find ways to sort books by readability and help students advance toward more challenging texts. Shanahan walks through the process by which this logical practice slowly and systematically led to the institutionalization of leveled literacy in classrooms across the country.

Specifically, beginning in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the rise of educational psychology, coupled with the development of readability formulas, helped systematize an already commonly held (and seductive idea): that student "readiness" for rigorous texts could be measured, and that teaching should proceed only when a learner demonstrates it.

It is easy to see the appeal. If you combine the belief that students cannot learn what they are "not yet ready to learn" with tools that purport to measure readiness and with formulas that promise to quantify text difficulty—suddenly matching each child to an "instructional level" looks scientific, precise, and humane.

For all practical purposes, however, none of these is possible. As Shanahan explains, instruments to level texts disagree; "levels" drift by topic and task; and a host of studies does not vindicate the proposition



**Leveled Reading,
Leveled Lives:
How Students' Reading
Achievement Has Been
Held Back and What We
Can Do About It**

by Timothy Shanahan

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that students make the greatest gains when confined to material they can already read with high accuracy.

Yet, too many educators and leaders remain committed to the theory and practice of leveled literacy for a host of reasons, including its perceived benefit to classroom management. “A survey showed that teachers preferred within-class homogeneous grouping because of its effectiveness, motivational value, and positive impact on discipline—cherished beliefs not necessarily supported by evidence,” Shanahan writes.

He acknowledges the temptation to feel resigned that we can’t get everyone up to grade level. But his response to that is, as it should be, unsparing: “That may or may not be true. Nevertheless, it is repugnant to endorse a pedagogy that not only accepts this lag but enforces it.” Instructional-level placement, Shanahan argues, “imposes upper-bound limits on how much progress students will be permitted.” While that ensures “most kids learn something,” it forecloses “greater progress” that would be possible with more challenging texts.

The theory, he continues, “minimizes teaching”—banking on glacial improvement through self-directed reading at comfortable levels while ignoring how much more progress could be made with teacher-directed support. The result is “ghost retention,” in which students are not officially held back but are effectively blocked from grade-level curriculum, year after year. Fourth graders “incarcerated in second-grade reading books” are placed on a “separate but unequal” track; later, we demand they compete on equal terms with peers who spent 4th grade steeped in 4th-grade language and content.

Three Pillars Crumble

Shanahan dispatches the three premises of leveled instruction in turn.

1. *We can accurately level texts.* Readability formulas and publisher labels disagree, and the most commonly used measures—sentence length and word frequency—ignore the main drivers of comprehension: background knowledge, concept load, discourse structure, and syntax.
2. *We can precisely identify each student’s “level.”* We can’t—at least, not in a way that usefully predicts how much a particular child will learn from a particular text. Even if we could, the level shifts with topic and task. Perhaps more importantly, Shanahan explains that “moderate amounts of frustration or anxiety do not reliably inhibit learning but *stimulate* it under at least some circumstances.”
3. *Students learn more by reading independently at that level than by being taught.* This may be the most pernicious assumption of all, because it subtly rewrites the goal. Too many systems strive to assign kids to levels where they will likely learn best with minimal teacher support, as opposed to where they will learn the most with teacher help. Shanahan shows that student learning gains are larger when students confront more challenging texts with appropriate instruction and scaffolding. The teacher is not a bystander but the primary cause of learning.

A Positive Plan for Change

What elevates *Leveled Reading, Leveled Lives* above mere polemic is that Shanahan doesn’t stop at “no.” He sketches what “yes” looks like—what teachers do and what students experience when the target is grade-level texts for all, with supports that fade as proficiency grows.

Shanahan begins by distinguishing between teaching early readers *how to read* and helping more advanced readers learn *how to read more complex texts*. “It would be imprudent,” he acknowledges, “to try to teach beginning readers with more challenging texts . . . [because of] the importance of developing the foundations of decoding.” Older readers who lack decoding skills will similarly need explicit phonics instruction.

Once students can decode at a basic level, however, instructional support should help them access more rigorous and complex texts. In one example, Shanahan cites research by University of Florida professor Matthew Burns demonstrating that “teaching words from frustration level texts can efficiently transform these into instructional level texts.” In other words: explicit, carefully designed vocabulary instruction can make once-frustrating texts accessible.



Timothy Shanahan

Shanahan concedes “the very real possibility of learners being overwhelmed by too many demands or for demands at too high a level to allow for success.” Grade-level instruction, he clarifies, doesn’t mean students should read *only* increasingly rigorous texts. Part of the problem with leveled literacy is that it forces students into rigidly defined reading levels when students benefit from reading texts across a variety of levels—including, especially, grade-appropriate ones. And he explicitly leaves room for students to read easier texts for pleasure. His key point is that they should not be *relegated* to those texts.

The goal, then, is to teach students how to read grade-level texts, not to force them to *only* read them. What’s more, teaching students to read grade-level texts requires scaffolding that helps them comprehend texts with challenging syntax, sentence structure, and vocabulary. As Shanahan puts it, “[R]ather than avoiding the difficulty needed for learning, instruction must provide the scaffolding students need to confidently take it on effectively.”

Shanahan provides a detailed outline of scaffolds teachers can use, such as pre-teaching difficult vocabulary, previewing necessary background knowledge, providing explicit instruction in syntax and sentence structure, and asking students to pause and re-read challenging passages.

In short, Shanahan argues that the theory behind leveled literacy treats reading comprehension as a “two-variable process”—text and student. In reality, it’s a three-variable process involving text, student, *and the tasks in which students are asked to engage*. The tasks teachers assign are their most useful tools for helping students make meaning from increasingly complex, grade-appropriate texts.

Shanahan’s *Leveled Reading, Leveled Lives* shows—historically, empirically, and pragmatically—why leveled literacy never deserved the power we gave it, and it gives teachers and leaders a better path: grade-level text for all, with expert teaching that makes it possible. **E**

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