Text Leveling: What’s the Public Library’s Role?

**What it is:** Text leveling systems are instructional systems used by schools. These instructional programs categorize text numerically (“level” the text) with the purpose of identifying books that match a student reading level.

**Where it comes from:** The systems, sold and supported by companies, include:
- Accelerated Reader
- Reading Counts
- Lexiles
- Fountas & Pinnell Guided Reading
- Reading Recovery
- Degrees of Reading Power (DRP)

**How levels are determined:** The mathematical formulas companies use for calculating reading level are based on numbers such as word length, sentence length, sentences per paragraph and pages per book.

**How reading levels become part of our landscape:** Reading levels are disseminated to students, teachers, and parents through by numbers that are published on or added to book covers, added to book lists or database records, or used as a shelving category for books.

**Positive aspects of leveling:**
Books used for instruction can be matched to the needs of students.

Identifying book levels can help parents, teachers and students select appropriate books. Readers make the most progress in learning to read when books are neither too easy nor too difficult. Students who are successful at reading will be motivated to continue reading.
Concerns about leveling:

Leveling limits children’s or teens’ abilities to explore their own interests. Leveled book lists may not contain all books of interest to a student. Focusing solely on text difficulty limits choice.

Leveling threatens the confidentiality of students selecting materials, as it allows others to see the child’s or teen’s reading level. Only the child, the child’s parents or guardian, the teacher, and the librarian should have knowledge of a student’s reading capability.

Inconsistency. Despite years of research and the development of multiple systems, leveling is still not a precise science. The difficulty of text can vary within the same level from one publisher to another and can even vary within books from the same publisher.

If reading level is the single selection criteria, students and parents have a skewed vision of the purpose of reading.

Leveling systems are designed for English-speaking students progressing through school grade levels. They may not be relevant to English Language Learners, adults and teens, or special populations.

The existence of leveling systems often leads to the suggestion that libraries label books and arrange them by reading levels.

What do our professional associations say?

In this, we look to the national professional school librarians association, AASL, which has published a position paper on labeling books with reading levels. Bottom line: School librarians should resist labeling. (Link to the entire statement below.)
The public library take:

Public libraries have been using an informal leveling system for years: the Five Finger Rule. (The child reads a page and puts up one finger for each unknown word. If all five fingers go up, the book is probably too difficult for independent reading.)

The wide school implementation of formal leveling systems has caused libraries to examine their practices, and prompted questions:

- How do we respond to pressure to make using our collection easier when doing so seems to violate basic library principles?
- If we feel uncomfortable, is that a strong enough indicator that it’s not the right course?
- Is there an acceptable middle course?
- What if we’re pressured by our boss to level our books?

As a comparison, leveling is a rating system akin to the MPA ratings of movies (G, PG, PG-13, R). We don’t shelve our movies by their rating, even though some parents would find it easier to direct their children to only check out G-rated movies.

Public libraries respond to pressure to level books in one of several ways:

1. Refusal, for reasons detailed above.
2. Adopting whatever system the school (currently) uses and labeling and/or shelving books by those levels.
3. Creating their own leveling system. Of the libraries that level their books, this is the most talked about option.

There are multiple facets that make this choice difficult:

Staff and organization’s ability to repeatedly disappoint parents’ and students’ expectations
Staff time for longer patron interactions to help students find the right book
Collaborative relationship with schools and political pressure
**Conclusion:** Each library will make its own decision. However, formal leveling systems were designed to be part of a school instructional program. Public libraries are not part of that instructional system. Our separate status and unique mission direct us to a decision not to label or arrange our collections by level.

Noting the levels in a catalog record that is then a searchable or limiting field is a possible public library response to this issue. This action, within our professional value system, also helps us – and patrons – find books when the only criteria for choice is “Level X.”

**Resources:**

http://www.ala.org/aasl/advocacy/resources/position-statements/labeling

http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/labelingrating

http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/qa-labeling