
Book review: *Leveled reading, leveled lives*

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Shanahan, T. (2025). *Leveled reading, leveled lives: How students' reading achievement has been held back and what we can do about it*.

In his book, *Leveled reading, leveled lives: How students' reading achievement has been held back and what we can do about it*, Dr Timothy Shanahan has brought together all of the relevant information about the use of instructional-level texts to teach reading, something that has persisted for many years despite mounting evidence that it is not best practice. Shanahan argues that although almost all our children are learning to read, they are not learning to read well enough to fully participate in society in the 21st century. But actually, he goes further than this, to say that not only are they not learning to read well enough, but they are being *prevented* from improving “by a longstanding commitment to a pedagogical theory that insists students are best taught using books they can already read” (p. 2–3). Instructional-level texts are those at which students read with a fairly high degree of accuracy, approximately 90–95%. This was intended to provide students with a manageable amount of learning and prevent them from becoming frustrated by more difficult texts.

Chapter 1 provides a comprehensive history of the instructional-level approach. Chapter 2 covers the misuse of theory and how phenomena such as illusory correlation and cognitive dissonance have contributed to the use of instructional-level texts. In Chapter 3, Shanahan reviews the evidence on the use of instructional-level teaching. This covers both correlational and experimental studies looking at the relationship between reading accuracy and reading comprehension, studies looking at the relationship between text placement and learning and studies investigating the impact of text level on reading.



He concludes that teaching students at their instructional level does not benefit students – they either did not improve, or they learned less than students taught at other levels.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to explaining why instructional-level teaching does not work. The alternative to placing students on texts at their instructional level is to use challenging texts, and this is the focus of Chapter 5. Chapter 6 outlines why the approach recommended in this book does not apply to beginning readers (about the first two years of formal schooling). This is so that very young students can master the foundations of decoding and practise their reading on simpler texts (e.g. decodable readers) before being exposed to complex texts.

Chapter 7 is one that teachers will find particularly useful, as it deals with how to scaffold reading comprehension. Shanahan has included sections on vocabulary, syntax, cohesion, text structure, comprehension strategies and prior knowledge. Chapter 8 looks at the role of text level on motivation, and the final chapter presents Shanahan's conclusions and some answers to questions asked by teachers, for example, on the role of rereading, independent reading, and what to do with students who read above grade-level.

Shanahan refers readers to the research when it is available and flags when there is little or no research. The evidence has told us that we need to use complex texts for instruction. Yet there are challenges for educators in implementing the change recommended in this book. Choosing the right texts is one challenge, particularly in Australia, where grade-level texts are not as widely used. An even bigger one is providing the scaffolding needed for students to comprehend more complex texts. No published program can do this as the type of scaffolding required differs in response to the text used and the needs of each unique group of learners. It comes down to teachers using their skills and expertise. Shanahan has given many suggestions and examples that can assist teachers in providing the required scaffolding.

The message in this book is not new – Shanahan and others have been talking about the problems with using instructional-level texts for several years now. What has been lacking is all the information, including what to do

instead, in one place. Shanahan's book is definitely provocative, but it is also needed. Consider the following quote:

“...what if the instructional level holds kids back, suppressing learning and leading to other unfortunate consequences? The issue has to do with the validity of the instructional level concept itself. If students do not learn more when taught at their instructional level, then it has no purpose. If they learn less, then it is malpractice” (p. 43).

Although this book is written with the US in mind, it applies equally to other countries such as Australia. It would be of interest to classroom teachers, particularly those teaching students in Year 2 and up, special educators, reading specialists, school leaders, policymakers and those involved in teacher education and/or research.

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