



The Levelling Process for the WINGS series

Background

It is common, and right, for teachers to question the Guided Reading levels that publishers assign to reading materials. However, it is also important that such questioning be well informed.

This paper is a description of the process used to arrive at Guided Reading levels for the WINGS developmental literacy acquisition series. Its purpose is to allow teachers and other stakeholders a basis for making informed decisions on the appropriateness of WINGS for their literacy programs.

From the beginning, WINGS was conceived as a developmental literacy acquisition series. The objective was to create a coordinated collection of materials that allowed children to develop proficiency in reading, talking, listening and writing in a *supportive* and *engaging way*.

A 'supportive way' meant that children would operate at an instructional level. Children learning at an instructional level would experience a sense of confidence and achievement in the learning process. Independent professionals, in accordance with established, proven methods based on sound research, would level the texts to ensure they were consistent with established benchmarks.

An 'engaging way' meant that the texts would have literary value including entertaining characters, interesting information and conclusions that gave readers satisfaction. Children would experience a sense of purpose and value in learning to read and write.

The brief

The first stage of the process was to create a brief for the authors. The editor created this brief in close consultation with an educator who was trained and employed as a Reading Recovery Tutor. The authors are professional writers, some with national and international literary achievement and recognition. Some of the authors are also educators.

The editorial brief defined the criteria that would be used to arrive at Guided Reading levels. The levels, although carefully and professionally determined, were not to be interpreted by teachers as definitive benchmarks. They were to be recommendations that should be moderated by the teacher's knowledge of the learner and factors influencing the learner's needs – prior knowledge and experience, socio-economic indicators, personal interests, etc.

The brief to the authors provided guidance on many criteria that were to be considered collectively rather than for their individual importance. The brief included reference to running word count, sentence complexity, patterns of repetition, frequency of new vocabulary, text density and conceptual complexity.

The editor conducted group-briefing sessions with the authors. This ensured that, while the authors brought their individual styles to the task, they also operated as a team with a common

sense of purpose and direction. This increased the likelihood that manuscripts would adhere to the levelling criteria described by the Reading Recovery Tutor.

About Guided Reading Levels

The guided reading levels commonly used in schools in Australia and other parts of the world were originally developed by researchers at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. This research described 26 finely graduated levels of difficulty in texts.

Success at guided reading level 26 indicates a child's achievement of literacy acquisition and readiness for independent development – **there is no official guided reading level 27 or higher**. Text complexity beyond level 26 targets higher-order thinking for middle and upper primary students.

Initial levelling

The second stage of the process involved texts being levelled by the Reading Recovery Tutor and at least two other school-based literacy teams that included staff trained and employed as Reading Recovery Teachers. These levelling teams were situated in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. This ensured a credible cross-section of professional opinion.

The levelling teams were provided copies of edited manuscripts, including notes on particular illustrative content. The individual teams assessed the texts, reached consensus on the level to be ascribed to each text, and then submitted the results to the editor.

Moderation process

At the earliest Guided Reading levels, the independent levelling groups showed a high degree of consensus. As the reading difficulty of texts increased, so did the degree of divergence among the groups in their findings.

In cases of divergence greater than two levels for any manuscript, the Tutor examined the text to identify those elements that might cause a divergence in findings. The texts were then edited to remove these elements but without compromising the literary value of the text.

Banding levels

In keeping with the principle that levels were guidelines subject to teacher interpretation rather than definitive benchmarks, the books/levels were banded into colour groups. As texts became more complex and the levelling process revealed greater divergence among levellers, the books were grouped in bands of two, and then three, levels per colour band.

The colour banding underlined the belief that teachers, using their personal knowledge of the learners and their needs, should interpret flexibly the individual levels ascribed to books.

Illustration & design

Illustration and photography for texts also had to conform to the levelling brief. Once illustrations and photography had been completed, digital versions of each book with designed text and visuals combined were sent to the levelling teams. The levels were then reviewed to check that the addition of the visual components had not altered the reading level. The design of the text (font style, font size, letter spacing, word spacing, line spacing and text density) conformed to standards proposed by the Reading Recovery Tutor.

Link with support materials

The WINGS teacher guides provide tools for assessment using the books. These tools further reinforce the idea that, although reading levels have been carefully determined, teachers must still interpret them on the basis of child performance in the classroom.

It should also be realised that Guided Reading levels have no real relevance to Shared Reading (Big Books) except as general indicators for the teacher to gauge the likely ability of children to join the Shared Reading.

Ongoing review

Following publication of the books, the Reading Recovery Tutor interviewed classroom teachers to assess whether the levels ascribed to the books conformed to their expectations within the context of the classroom program. The feedback was highly affirmative.

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Further reading

Reading Recovery; A Guidebook for Teachers in Training (Clay, 1993)

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