



Why Book Bands and Levelled Reading Books Should Be Abandoned

A real problem impeding application of the research-informed systematic synthetic phonics teaching principles which entail *no* promotion of multi-cueing reading strategies for word-reading (guessing unknown words) is that many schools currently present beginner readers with non-phonetic books for read-aloud practice.

IFERI notes that teachers still continue to provide non-decodable books designed on the basis of repetitive or predictable texts. This may be alongside, or mixed with, strictly phonic-based books which are cumulative and designed to be decodable (the texts consist of letter/s-sound correspondences that beginners have already been taught through explicit phonics lessons).

This practice is in the mistaken belief that a mixture of types of books for children broadens their reading experience and develops comprehension. Instead, when children are asked to read aloud books that are not decodable, it puts them in a position where they have no alternative but to guess many unknown words which research shows us commonly impedes and damages the development of good reading habits. Non-decodable books also encourage those 'hearing' the reading to teach multi-cueing, whether explicitly or implicitly.

Such deleterious practice is supported and encouraged by Book Bands – a cataloguing system for levelling, or banding, published reading book schemes originating in the 'whole language' era of teaching reading. Many publishers continue to promote the ill-advised and potentially damaging multi-cueing reading strategies (referred to as the 3-cueing system or the searchlights reading strategies) both through the early non-phonetic 'scheme' books which they continue to sell, and through messages given in their promotional material and through their agents: i.e. that other reading books can/should be used for beginner learners alongside the good phonic schemes that they also now (may) produce/promote. In effect, teachers teaching the English language, and others, continue to get mixed messages about reading instruction and reading practice which are not based on the international research findings and leading-edge practice.



Good practice, for those in the early stages of learning to read, involves:

1. **Practise reading aloud**, be it to teachers, parents or other helpers, exclusively with books matched carefully to phonic learning which do not require children to use any alternative strategies. Such books do not need book banding as they will already be graded by their particular scheme listing the letter/s-sound correspondences (the alphabetic code) introduced incrementally.

2. **Shared reading with adults** (adults reading books aloud to/with the children, discussing, retelling, exploring through art, play and the wider curriculum) of the widest possible range of high quality ('real') books. These also do not need book banding as they will be mediated by adults and therefore need not be of any particular 'level'. Indeed, the wider the diversity of content, style and language, the better.

Whilst there is a highly significant role for both phonic 'schemes' and quality 'real' books, there is no place at all in good practice for other non-phonics scheme books in the early stages - nor any need at all for any form of book banding. Indeed, use of non-decodable books for beginners to read independently and routinely necessarily implies poor practice.

The later stages of learning to read could be considered a different case – that is, once a child is confident in blending all unfamiliar words phonically and able to use all the more common letter/s-sound correspondences to do so. In England, for example, this would be by the end of Year One (age 6) for many children if phonics is well-taught.

Even when children are ready to read independently more widely, after their phonics knowledge and application is secure, Book Bands should not be used to limit children's book selection to an eclectic mix of old scheme books, which is all too often the case. Ironically, although many people complain that phonics books are restrictive and uncreative, observations suggest that the reading practice material children are being offered is commonly a dreary, restrictive, off-putting diet, organised in colour-coded boxes, based on Book Bands or equivalent levelling systems in English-speaking contexts.

Overall, Book Band levelling is in fact responsible for an enormous amount of poor practice, or at least for encouraging and supporting it.



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