Reading Isn't Easy

A Survey on Leveling Systems in US Libraries

KERRI L. WILLIAMS, MARYBETH KOZIKOWSKI, NICHOLAS CORMIER

Mention the words "Easy Readers" and "Leveling" to any children's librarian and you are sure to get a breadth of responses—from reverence to revulsion. No two librarians will feel the same way about a system. With this article, we wanted to get a birds-eye view of how children's librarians across the country felt about leveling: if they do or don't do it, how they feel about it, and how does it work (or not) for their library.

For this article, we created a survey on Google Forms consisting of thirteen mostly multiple-choice questions, with write-in options, that we distributed to various librarian-focused Facebook groups and through the ALSC community on ALA Connect.

The Survey

Some of the questions we asked included:

- What type of public library do you work in?

- Do your local school district/school libraries/reading specialists use a leveling system? If yes, which one?

- What do you level your Easy Reader collection in accordance with?

- How do you shelve your Easy Reader collection?

- If you level your Easy Reader collection in accordance with a different leveling system than your local school district, could you explain why that decision was made?

- What is your opinion on the leveling system your library uses?

- Do you have an opinion on publisher-assigned levels vs. whatever system you use?

Throughout this article, we will discuss the findings of our survey with no judgment and without reservation. Our goal here is not to offer a best practice for you, but to show what libraries are doing around the country and to offer some interesting solutions to say, "This works for one library, could it work for yours?"

As a supplement to the article, we have also created an interactive visualization exploring the data and some of the relationships between the answers given we found most interesting. The result was created using the visual analytics platform
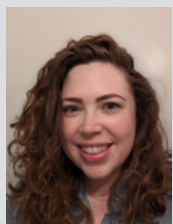
Kerri L. Williams is the Head of Reference for the Center Moriches (NY) Free Public Library and a part-time Children's Librarian at Sachem (NY) Public Library. Marybeth Kozikowski is a Children's Services Librarian at Sachem (NY) Public Library. Nicholas Cormier (not pictured) holds a BS in biology from Stony Brook University and has sixteen years clerical experience in public libraries and currently works as a Wetland Biologist specializing in GIS and Spatial Data Science.

Tableau and can be publicly accessed at the following link: https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/nicholas.cormier6756/viz/ALSCProject/EasyReaderSurveyVisualAnalysis.

We received 136 responses from across the country. Most came from suburban libraries hailing from the Midwest, Northeast, and West Coast. On the question of leveling systems used: 39% answered that they do not level their collections at all; 24% said their library created their own leveling system (the ingenuity of specific responses is discussed further below); and publisher-assigned levels came in a distant third. This formed our analysis going forward—there have always been arguments about leveling in all its forms; but how are librarians dealing with this issue in normal day-to-day business?

DIY Leveling

Of the 24% of librarians who created their own leveling system, several respondents shared their inventive leveling criteria when answering the survey question, "What is the opinion on the leveling system your library uses?"

"It's a simple system with four levels:

P for pre-readers learning phonics and letters
1 for reading simple sentences
2 for more complex sentences and longer stories
3 for short chapter books as a transition to our junior chapter book collection

There is a lot of variation within each level and we work closely with patrons to find the right books for their child."

"We assign our own levels to each book, ranging from 1 to 3.

Level 1: less than twenty words per page, repetitive and rhyming text, simple sentences, large print, lots of illustrations/pictures.
Level 2: smaller print, more complex sentences, increased variety of text, fewer illustrations/pictures
Level 3: more complex vocabulary and ideas, dialogue, text with limited illustration/picture support."

"We are informed by Fountas and Pinnell/Guided Reading, but it's not exact. We have three levels:

1. Just Getting Started (basic phonics, one to five words per page) loosely F&P/GR – A to C/D
2. Beginning to Read (short sentences, sight words) loosely F&P/GR D to H-ish
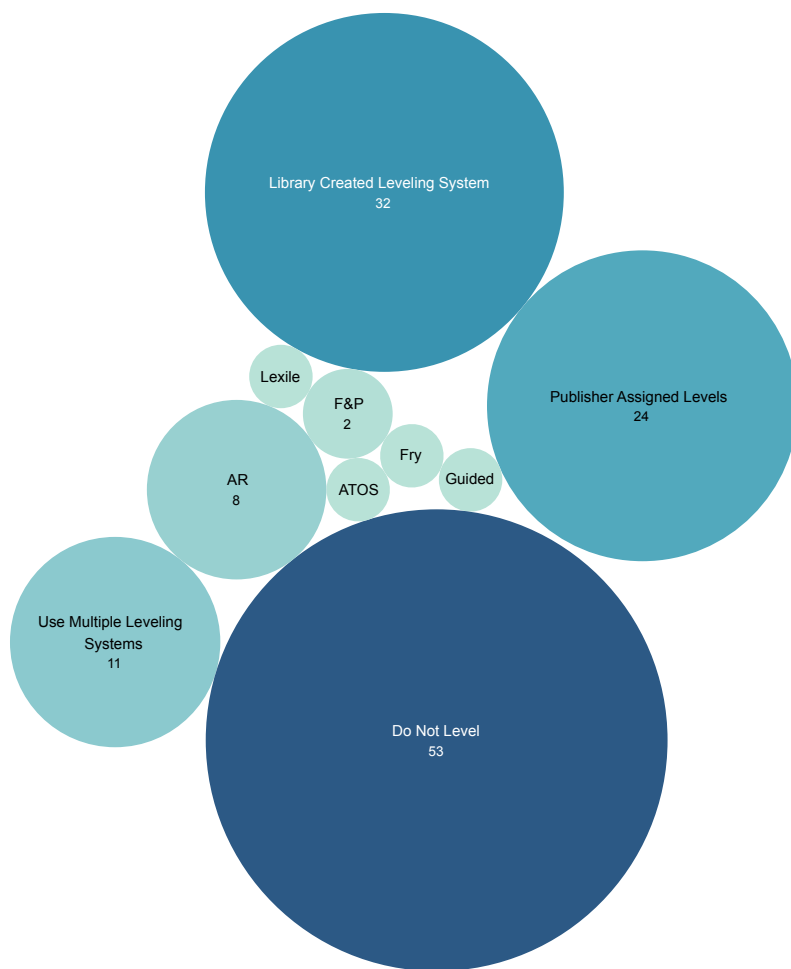3. Reading on Your Own (longer sentences, short chapters) loosely F&P/GR I/J+

Tableau bubble chart visualizing the number of survey respondents using each of the leveling systems. Larger circle size and darker color value indicate more libraries using the system. Respondents who chose not to answer this question in the survey were not included in the total counts.

We eyeball everything that comes in to make sure it makes sense."

Creative Alternatives

Many libraries don't level their ER collections, usually shelving by author, but do offer creative alternatives for the patron who is following the guidelines set by their local school district. Some shared their alternatives to physically leveling their collections, mostly in response to the question, "If you level your Early/Easy reader collection in accordance with a different leveling system than your local school district, could you explain why that decision was made?"

"Our schools used to do Accelerated Reader (AR), then Lexile, now Fountas and Pinnell (F&P). We tried to keep up with labeling, but gave up. So now we just have lists of our favorite beginning readers, organized by AR/Lexile/F&P level."

"No leveling system, but small browsing bins of recommended reads based on reading level (early fluent, fluent, etc.)"
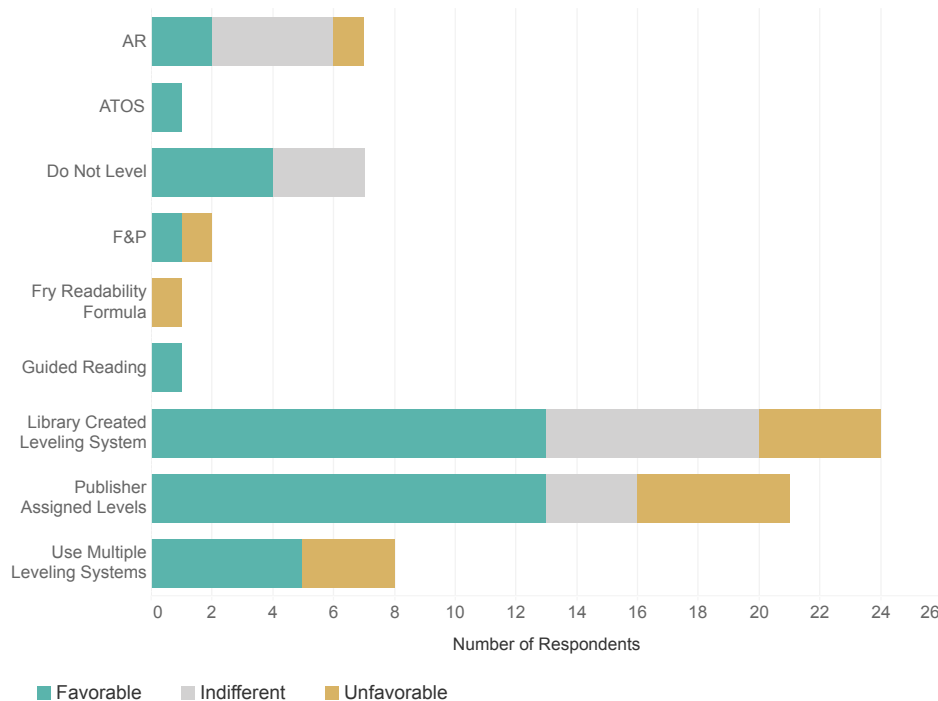
Opinions on Leveling Systems Used

Tableau horizontal bar chart representing the respondents' opinions of their library's current leveling system. Respondents who chose not to answer this question in the survey were not included in the total counts.

Publisher-Assigned Levels

This is an area of interesting nuances. While roughly 18% of respondents level their ER collections by publisher-assigned levels (PALs), those levels are overwhelmingly distrusted by librarians across the board as inconsistent. As one respondent said,

"Having emailed PLENTY of publishers for the criteria they use to file things into the levels they use, I get the feeling that the process is fairly subjective on their end."

However, of the libraries that level their ERs in accordance with PALs, 54% of those librarians had a favorable view of PALs and how it works for their library and patrons:

"I think shelving only by author in this particular collection makes it harder for parents and children to find the right book for them."

"It is flawed, but works for our purposes. It's quick and easy to determine where new books go, and it gives general guidance to caregivers. I sometimes wish the publisher's levels were more analogous since various level 1s can be very different reading levels. But we just don't have the time or expertise to reassign them."

The Next Big Thing?

The Science of Reading is gaining popularity in the United States.[1] This system is worth watching as any major change in how reading is taught in schools will impact libraries and reader advisory services. As it stands, no two libraries are the same or serve the same people. No two Easy Reader collections should be the same, either. There is one thing all librarians can agree upon, however: our profession has always been one of community and cooperation, trying our best to make children better readers. &

Reference

1. Sarah Schwartz, "Which States Have Passed 'Science of Reading' Laws? What's in Them?" *Education Week*, July 20, 2022, https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/which -states-have-passed-science-of-reading-laws-whats-in -them/2022/07.