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Guided Reading: A Research-Based Response to the Challenges of Early Reading Instruction

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The purpose of this article was to illuminate for early childhood teacher practitioners how guided reading, as a research-based approach to reading instruction, could address the challenges of early reading instruction. The early years are the focus for the prevention of reading difficulties and research conducted over the past two decades has produced extensive results demonstrating that children who get off to a poor start in reading rarely catch up (Lentz, 1988; Neuman & Dickinson, 2001; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Torgesen, 1998; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001). One particular research-based strategy, guided reading, is an important "best practice" associated with today's balanced literacy instruction. The National Reading Panel (2000) argued that balanced approaches are preferable when teaching children to read, based on their review of scientific research-based reading instructional practices used by teachers in classrooms across the country. Additionally, guided reading practices as part of a balanced literacy program conforms to the recommendations on literacy as suggested in position statements by the International Reading Association/The National Association for the Education of Young Children (1998), and the National Council of Teachers of English (2002).

KEY WORDS: research-based; guided reading; early literacy; reading failure; struggling reader; best practice; teaching reading.

INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that one in three children experience significant difficulties in learning to read (Adams, 1990). Research conducted during the past two decades has produced extensive results demonstrating that children who get off to a poor start in reading rarely catch up (Lentz, 1988; Neuman & Dickinson, 2001; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Torgesen, 1998; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001); a child who is a poor reader in first grade is 88% more likely to remain a poor reader in fourth grade (Juel, 1988). Not surprisingly, the early years are the focus for the prevention of reading difficulties (Clay, 1993; Pinnell, 1989; Slavin, Madden, Dolan, & Wasik, 1996).

One particular research-based strategy, guided reading, is an important "best practice" associated with today's balanced literacy instruction. It has become one of the most important contemporary reading instructional practices in the U.S. (Fawson & Reutzel, 2000) and accepted as a particularly appropriate strategy for children who are moving toward fluency in the early years of literacy development (Mooney, 1990).

The purpose of this article is to: (1) define and describe the key elements of guided reading; (2)

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provide a rationale for guided reading; (3) describe the teacher's role in the guided reading process; and (4) demonstrate how to implement a guided reading lesson into practice.

WHAT IS GUIDED READING?

Guided reading is a teaching approach used with all readers, struggling or independent, that has three fundamental purposes: to meet the varying instructional needs of all the students in the classroom, enabling them to greatly expand their reading powers (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001); to teach students to read increasingly difficult texts with understanding and fluency; to construct meaning while using problem-solving strategies to figure out unfamiliar words that deal with complex sentence structures, and understand concepts or ideas not previously encountered.

Guided reading usually involves small groups of students who are at a similar place in their reading development. These students can demonstrate similar learning needs and process text at about the same level. Small-group instruction is effective because teaching is focused precisely on what the students need to learn next to move forward. Ongoing observation of students, combined with systematic assessment, enable teachers to draw together groups of students who fit a particular instructional profile.

The teacher's goal is to strive to provide the most effective instruction possible and to match the difficulty of the material with the student's current abilities. Materials should provide a challenge that is "just right" for the students. When working with a classroom of twenty to thirty students, it is impossible to select texts that will "fit them all." For some, the text will be so difficult that they cannot possibly learn anything positive about reading as they struggle simply to "get through it." For others, the text will be so easy it won't offer the appropriately stimulating reading challenge necessary for learning. Selecting and introducing texts for a particular group of students who share similar developmental needs at a point in time creates a context that supports learning (Fountas & Pinnel, 2001).

Traditional Versus Dynamic Grouping

Traditionally, only one kind of grouping—based on ability—was used for classroom reading instruction. Assumptions that undergird traditional reading groups was the focus on skills to read the selections in a basal text; static, unchanging groups; vocabulary was pre-taught; controlled vocabulary; workbook and worksheet exercises form the response to reading; instruction was focused on a systematic progression of skills in the basal text as measured by an end of unit test; and round robin reading where children take turns reading a page or a line (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Schulman & Payne, 2000).

Grouping that is dynamic or flexible, and varied allows students to support one another as readers and to feel part of a community of readers. Guided reading groups are temporary, an important difference from traditional grouping practice. Groups are expected to change. Dynamic groups avoid the traditional problems of grouping, because teachers change the composition of groups regularly to accommodate the different learning paths of readers. Skilled teaching, which begins with observation, is the key to successful dynamic grouping (Iaquinta, 2003).

Essential Elements of Guided Reading

The goal of guided reading is to develop a self-extending system of reading that enables the reader to discover more about the process of reading while reading. As children develop these understandings they self-monitor, search for cues, discover new things about the text, check one source of information against another, confirm their reading, self-correct, and solve new words using multiple sources of information. Throughout this process, the central elements of accuracy, speed, and fluency increase and over time these systems become increasingly automatic. Therefore, the role of the teacher is essential to guided reading. Teachers must know how to prompt and guide students as they work to build this self-extending system of reading (Table I).

Teachers need to direct children's attention to using multiple sources of information in a skilled way: this can be done by giving children the opportunity to read many texts that offer just the right amount of challenge (not too hard and not too easy). Teachers monitor students as they read, prompting for strategies and word identification as needed. They move from student to student, listening in as the student reads aloud. After younger children finish reading the selection, teachers often invite them to reread it to build fluency and to practice reading new vocabulary. Teacher prompts help children learn how to think about different sources of information as they put together a flexible system of strategies they can apply increasingly difficult text. The process of reading must be dynamically supported by an interaction of text reading and good teaching. Guided reading serves this important goal.

Table I. Teacher Prompts to Facilitate a Self-Extending System of Reading

Sources of Information	Teacher Prompts
Self-monitoring Strategies that allow the reader to confirm whether they are reading the story accurately.	"Did it match?" "What did you notice?" "I liked the way you noticed something wasn't right." "Something's not right. Why did you stop?" "Were you right?" "How did you know?" "Show me where it wasn't correct"
Cross-checking Relating one source of information to another.	"Check to see if you're right" "It could be__, but does it make sense?" "Does it sound right?" "Does it look right?" "What did you notice?" "What did you expect to see?" "I liked how you tried more than one way to work that out."
Self-correcting When readers notice on their own that some-thing is not right in their reading.	"Were you right?" "How did you know that?" "Something's not right on that page...in that sentence...can you find it?" "I like the way you corrected that all by yourself."
Searching Readers look for information that that will assist problem solving in some way.	"If it was___, what letter would you expect to see first? Last? Is that what you see?" "Something's not right on this page. Can you find what's wrong?" "What do you know that might help?" "You said___. Does that make sense?" "Does it sound right? Does it look right?"
Prediction Readers anticipate what is coming in their reading.	"Look at the picture. What do you know?" "Think about what happened in the story so far. What would make sense?" "What do you think will happen next?" "What would you expect to see?"
Confirming Readers expect consistency of new information with past inferences and predictions.	"Are you right?" "Did you check to make sure you're right?" "Did you reread to see if you're right?"

Table II. Three-cueing Systems of Reading

Semantic-word meaning	Prompts
Semantic cues help children determine which words make sense in a particular slot and which would not.	"Did that make sense?" "What do you think it could be?" "Let's read it again to make sense"
Syntactic-sentence structure	Prompts
Syntax enables readers to put words together in ways that are grammatical.	"Can we say it like that?" "Is that like the way we talk"? "Does that sound right?"
Graphophonemic-connecting symbols and sounds	Prompts
The relationship between oral language and its graphic symbols.	"Does it look right?"

A RATIONALE FOR GUIDED READING

As children work with text, they develop a network of strategies that allows them to attend to information from different sources. Information from these sources is, for the most part, implicitly or subconsciously held, but it is the foundation for reading text in a smooth and fluent way (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Clay (1993) clusters these sources of

Table III. Teacher's Role Before, During, and After Guided Reading Instruction

Before the Reading	Teacher Role
Guided Reading Framework:	
Selecting the Text:	Selects texts that will provide opportunities for students to expand their processing strategies.
Introducing the Text:	Prepare an introduction to the text that will help readers access and use all sources of information. Leave some opportunities for students to independently solve problems while reading. Introduce key words and their meanings. Practice using context to understand word meanings. Introduce key ideas and concepts. Help children understand how texts are structured.
Guided Reading Lesson:	
Selecting the Text:	The teacher selects *Arthur's Mystery Envelope* (Brown, 1997) a book that offer's a moderate challenge to this reading group because the word *mystery* is used differently than students would expect; the term refers to the fact that Arthur doesn't know what's in the envelope.
Introducing the Text:	An introduction that supports the challenges of the book is appropriately planned by the teacher with consideration to the reading needs of each group member.
Introduces Title and Author:	Teacher: Today we're going to begin reading another book that has several chapters that tell the longer story. It's called *Arthur's Mystery Envelope*, and it is written by Marc Brown.
Provides Information:	In this story, the word *mystery* is used in a different way. The ''mystery envelope'' just means that Arthur doesn't know what is in that envelope and he's very worried about it. Do you see the envelope on the front cover?
Provides Information about Word Meaning:	There's a word on that envelope that means no one else should look at it. The word is *confidential*. Say confidential [*students repeat the word*.] This envelope is private and confidential, and the school principal has asked Arthur to take it home and give it to his mother.
Prompts Students to Interpret Illustrations:	Teacher: Look at the picture on page 4. [children turn to page 4.] Notice Arthur's face. The principal is calling him to the office through that speaker up on the wall.
Defines the Problem or Plot of the Story:	Teacher: He looks scared. That's the problem in this story. Arthur is very worried that the envelope might have some bad news in it, because the principal told him to deliver the sealed envelope to his mom.
During the Reading	Teacher Role
Guided Reading Framework:	
Reading the Text:	Using letter/sound knowledge to notice mismatches. Using letter/sound knowledge to know how words begin. Using letter/sound knowledge to solve words. Using letter/sound knowledge to check on reading. Listens in to individuals read a segment of the text orally. Interact with individuals to assist with problem solving. Observe reading behaviors and make notes about the strategy use of individual readers. At the reading table, each student begins to read the text aloud. While they read, the teacher confers with each reader briefly. The teacher ''listens in'' and takes notes on how the student is processing the text and occasionally helps an individual reader problem solve or exchanges a quick comment about the story. Here are several interactions the teacher has with individual readers.
Teacher and Leslie:	On page 10, the text is: She looked surprised. ''Really?'' Everyone else nodded. ''Well, still...'' Francine tapped the envelope. ''The proof is right here.'' Leslie [reading]: ''Well, still Francine tapped the envelope.'' [*She does not pause to acknowledge the ellipsis*.]
Explains and Demonstrates how Punctuation is Used to Convey the Author's Meaning:	Teacher: Leslie, let me show you something about the print. Do you see those three little dots? They mean that Francine was talking slowly and paused there. Like this. [She reads the text, acknowledging the ellipsis.] She's showing that even though Arthur got one question right on the test, she is not convinced that he passes it. You read it that way. [Leslie reads, pausing at the ellipsis.] Those little dots help you know how to read it so that you can understand what the character really meant. Those dots are called ellipsis. They mean a little longer pause than a comma.
After the Reading	Teacher Role
Guided Reading Framework:	
Discussing & Revising:	Talk about the text with the students and encourage dialogue among them.
Processing Strategies:	Invite personal response.
Extend the Meaning:	Assess students' understanding of what they read.

Table III. *(Continued)*

Before the Reading	Teacher Role
Word Work:	Invite students to ask questions to expand their understanding. Discuss key ideas and concepts after reading. Return to the text for one or two teaching opportunities. Learning to connect words by their meaning. Learning connections between word parts and their meanings. Working with words to connect them by what they mean. Modeling, explaining, and demonstrating concepts about sounds in words-syllables, onsets & rimes, beginning, medial and ending sounds, categorizing words by sounds, segmenting, blending, deleting, adding, and substituting sounds. Lessons on connecting phonemes and letters. Listening to stories with repetitive refrains and language patterns, poems, rhymes. Explicit lessons on letters or useful phonics principles. Manipulating letters, sounds, or words to practice phonics.
Students Revisit Text:	At the end of each lesson the student reads the part of the text where he or she feels a friend gave the best advice. After a brief discussion, the group agrees that Francine gave the best advice.
Extending Understanding:	A guided reading lesson is also an opportunity to introduce students to story elements and literary devices: plot, characters, setting, metaphor, symbolism, and the like. In the examples that follow, note how the teacher directs the students' attention to the elements present even in a simple story like *Arthur's Mystery Envelope*. Understanding how these elements and devices work to create a complex story line with believable characters enhances students' enjoyment of the story.
Teacher:	Remember when we talked about how in a chapter book each chapter tells a part of the story? Together, the chapters in order tell the whole story of the book. [*She turns to a blank story map on chart paper clipped to the easel. She's already written the title and author's name on it.*]
Word Work:	Guided reading lessons are also the perfect opportunity to discuss and demonstrate effective word-solving strategies that are needed by a particular group of readers. Using a white board, the teacher writes the following words, one at a time: *absent, contest, insect, paper, plastic, subtract, surprise, fantastic, invention, vacation*, and *wonderful*. Spending one or two minutes, the teacher invites the students to look at the parts of each word to solve it. After working with each word, the teacher erases it and writes a new one.

information into three sources as the semantic (meaning), syntactic (language structure), and graphophonemic (visual information) systems that are necessary to become a skilled reader. These ‘‘sources of information’’ are referred to in the research literature as the three-cueing systems of reading (Table II).

TEACHER'S ROLE IN THE GUIDED READING PROCESS

In a truly balanced literacy program, *how* you teach is as important as *what* you teach. Skillful teachers use their knowledge of literacy development and literacy processes to decide where to go next, independently of the commercial materials they use; when to intervene and when not to; when to draw children's attention to which features of text; and how to model and explain strategies in ways that children can make their own. Guided reading, as a component of a balanced literacy program, starts with good first teaching (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

Paramount to the success of guided reading is understanding the point at which the teacher introduces such skills. Every guided reading lesson is different because each group of readers has different strengths and needs. A framework for guided reading lessons (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001) provides for different kinds of learning in different ways; each element has a function related to students' ability to construct meaning. These components work together to form a unified whole and create a solid base from which to build comprehension.

- Selecting the text.
- Introducing the text.
- Reading the text.
- Discussing and revising the text.
- Teaching for processing strategies.

- Extending the meaning of the text.
- Word work.

Framework for Guided Reading

The framework for a guided reading lesson can be used to scaffold the teacher's role to ensure that the essential elements are implemented and integrated throughout instruction. Excerpts from a guided reading lesson (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001) are illustrated within the framework to illuminate how each component is addressed within the context of the lesson (Table III).

SUMMARY

According to the National Research Council (NRC) (2002), one in five children is estimated to have difficulty learning to read in school; other researchers estimate that as many as 45% of our children are having difficulty learning to read (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 1999). The NRC report asserts that reading problems are more likely to occur among children who are poor, are minorities, attend urban schools, or arrive at school not speaking English (Snow et al. 1998). The National Reading Panel (2000) argued that balanced approaches are preferable when teaching children to read, based on their review of scientific research-based reading instructional practices used by teachers in classrooms across the country. Additionally, guided reading practices as part of a balanced literacy program conform to the recommendations on literacy as suggested in position statements by the International Reading Association/The National Association for the Education of Young Children (1998), and the National Council of Teachers of English (2002).

Guided reading provides the necessary opportunity for teachers to explicitly teach reading strategies at the students' individual levels. Guided reading reinforces problem-solving, comprehension, and decoding. And, it provides opportunities for establishing good reading habits and strategies. The critical element, however, is the skillful teaching that helps young readers learn the effective strategies they need to become independent.

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