Rethinking Guided Reading to Advantage ALL Our Learners

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No teacher deliberately sets out to disadvantage students and, yet, we unintentionally do so all the time.

Students do not become self-directed, joyful readers because teachers and administrators prioritize daily, guided reading groups. Students become readers, in every positive sense of that word, when most of their reading time is dedicated to uninterrupted, voluminous reading of texts they can and want to read.

Guided reading is and always has been a means to an end — readers who love to read for pleasure, information, enrichment, life fulfillment, and their own personal goals.

Only when we develop common beliefs that align with research-based, principled practices can we effectively apply guided reading – or any instructional construct – to benefit *all* learners. Since a vast majority of students in the U.S. are ability grouped for "guided reading," we need to be clear on our purposes, principles, and practices.
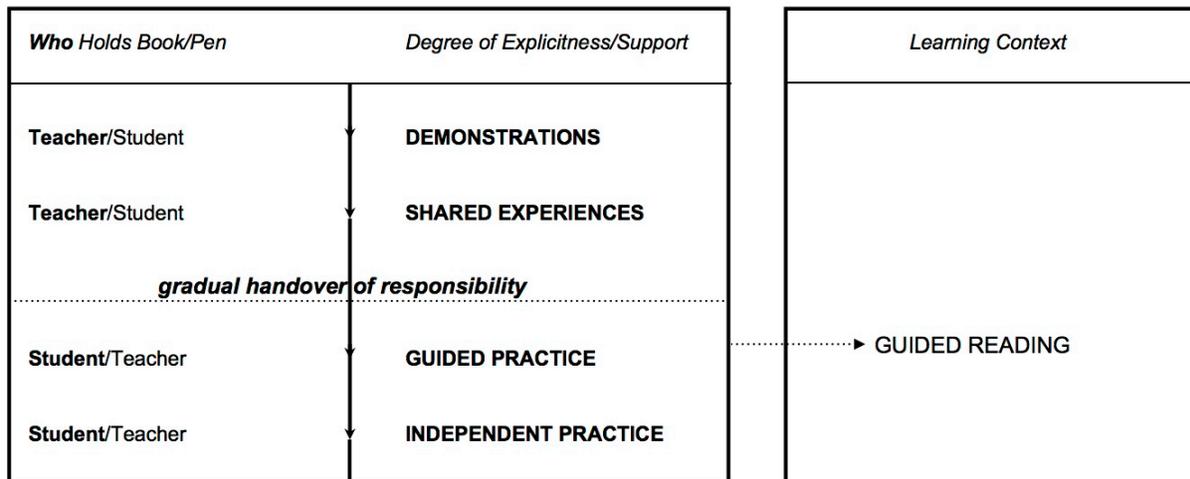
Expanding Our View of Guided Reading

The commonly held, narrow definition of guided reading relies on meeting with a small group of students at a similar reading level and guiding them through a manageable text. Consider instead relying on a more expansive view of guided reading:

Guided reading is any learning context in which the teacher guides one or more students through some aspect of the reading process: choosing books, making sense of text, decoding and defining words, reading fluently, monitoring one's comprehension, determining the author's purpose, and so on. In guided reading, the teacher builds on students' strengths and supports and demonstrates whatever is necessary to move the child toward independence. (Routman, Reading Essentials, 2003, p. 151 and Literacy Essentials, 2018)

This broader definition means, for example, that using a nonfiction text in a content area or meeting with a student in a one-on-one reading conference can be a guided reading lesson. *Keep in mind that guided reading is a temporary scaffold to assist students to become self-regulating, self-reliant readers.*

In guided reading students are expected to try-and-apply with our guidance the solid instructional skills and strategies of proficient readers that we've been explicitly teaching and practicing every day with them, across the curriculum through multiple contexts — thinking aloud, demonstrations, shared reading, shared writing, and small group work. Very important at this stage, the student assumes responsibility for most of the reading work.

Who's in Charge?
The Optimal Learning Model's Progression of Responsibility

Who Holds Book/Pen	Degree of Explicitness/Support		Learning Context
Teacher/Student	**DEMONSTRATIONS**		
Teacher/Student	**SHARED EXPERIENCES**		
gradual handover of responsibility			
Student/Teacher	**GUIDED PRACTICE**	▸	► GUIDED READING
Student/Teacher	**INDEPENDENT PRACTICE**		

From *Reading Essentials* (Routman, 2003)

Rethinking Guided Reading:
4 Crucial Considerations

EQUITY Issues

► *Low-income students are most often placed in the lowest groups and are most likely to remain there, limiting their achievement as readers*. ([See this recent research](#).) Keeping low income students in low performing groups belies the belief that all children can learn and, instead, continues the pernicious poverty of low expectations that limits and slows students' reading growth, sometimes for their entire school careers.

I have no issues with "ability" grouping early on, mostly in grade 1 and early grade 2, just until students can read pretty well on their own — as long as the vast majority of daily reading opportunities are inclusive for all students. To achieve a positive outcome for every reader, flexible grouping based on learning needs is a necessity, as is ensuring equal access to quality content.

► *"Low" reading groups often focus on low-level skills* and over rely on levels and labels (by kids, teachers, parents, librarians). Prioritizing skills and word work in isolation is common while

teaching a repertoire of high level thinking tools and engaging with high quality literature are rare.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING Issues

► *Overreliance on commercial reading programs shortchanges students and teachers.* While we all need a comprehensive framework for teaching, scripted programs and rigid lesson plans have proven to be detrimental to teaching for deep understanding.

It was my professional, intensive educational training and experience as a Reading Recovery teacher that finally made me a competent reading teacher. Until that time, I taught reading almost exclusively through decoding and skills in isolation. Reading Recovery moved me beyond the ongoing code-based vs. meaning-based debates to an integrated, personalized approach that incorporates explicit instruction in word work and comprehension as part of reading all texts. Ongoing professional learning is a necessity for us all!

► *You can't teach reading well if you are not a reader.* As an avid reader of fiction and nonfiction, I apply multiple strategies interactively in an effort to deeply understand a text. For example, I infer, summarize, figure out meaning from surrounding context and visuals, and link prior knowledge to new learning. I teach what I do as a competent reader – and writer – through demonstrations, thinking aloud, shared reading, shared writing, and much more*.* Professional reading – books, articles, research, blogs – continue to inform how I think, read, teach, and lead.

READING Issues

► *The focus in guided reading tends to be on teaching reading, rather than on teaching readers.* That is, the instructional focus is often on decontextualized skills and strategies in

isolation, which has not been proven to transfer to increased comprehension in reading texts. Also, once students can read fluently, almost all their reading is silent and the teacher is checking for understanding and supporting as needed when meaning breaks down.

► *Over relying on a designated reading level for book selection is common*. Even when done thoughtfully, leveling books is a subjective process, not a scientific one. Levels by themselves do not typically take into consideration students' interests, background knowledge, and cultural relevance of the texts — all of which impact how easy or difficult it will be to comprehend a book. A book we think might work well with a group may prove to be a poor fit. For perspectives on leveling [see my recent MiddleWeb article](#).

► *Too often the teacher is doing most of the work*, often because the selected guided reading book is too hard and students are unable to read 95% of the words so they can focus on meaning. If we look again at the Optimal Learning Model in the graphic above, we see that in the guided practice stage, the student is now in charge of the learning process, not the teacher. At this stage, we are mostly supporting students so they can self-monitor, self-correct, and self-direct themselves when they are reading on their own.

► *Sufficient sensitivity to readers who struggle can be lacking.* I am not a fan of "walk-to-reading"—with large, ability-grouped classrooms—or of any groupings which stigmatize students. I believe the knowledgeable classroom teacher needs to assume the main responsibility for guided reading because s/he knows her/his students best—their preferences, interests, needs, background, and goals.

Think about creating more flexible, needs-based groups established on more than levels. As an example, offer an invitation to any students who want to learn more about, for example, figuring out multi-syllable words or revising prior knowledge based on new information in the text. Then invite any student who has not volunteered, but who you know would benefit, to join the group. In my experience, that equitable scenario almost always works beautifully.

MANAGEMENT Issues

► *Students are expected to engage in and independently complete various activities*, "seat work", and/or work at various "stations" while the teacher is fitting in multiple groups each day and is not available for guidance. How these assigned tasks increase readers' competence is rarely assessed so is largely unknown. As well, even though it may be unintentional, managing the management system often winds up taking priority over effective instruction and time for reading, not to mention the enormous amount of time teachers spend planning for management. Sometimes, when teachers are not sufficiently knowledgeable, the management system even becomes the reading curriculum.

This management focus is particularly egregious in kindergarten, where it's unrealistic to expect five year olds to work on tasks on their own for extended periods of time while the teacher is "getting in" all her groups. More importantly, [we are depriving young children](#) of play and exploration that is necessary for their optimal development.

► *Guided reading groups tend to go on too long*, most often for 20-30 minutes. Time is tied to purpose. For example, If we see guided reading as the supportive event, then 10-15 minutes is enough time to affirm, support, and explicitly teach what's most needed at this time so most of students' reading time is spent on the main event—deliberate, uninterrupted practice time, independently reading to understand for pleasure and information. Use your guided reading time wisely. Avoid potential time wasters — for example, whisper reading and/or oral reading for middle school students who are readers.

Self-Evaluate and Take Action

Do all you can to ensure your – and your school's and district's – current implementation of guided reading aligns with research, principled practices, and common sense and also that applied practices are fair and equitable to all students. Review the bulleted headings in this article, self-evaluate, and take action to ensure we are equipping all students with the high level thinking tools they need to become efficient, effective readers.

Finally, while we might pride ourselves on having excellent guided reading groups, we could still fail in developing students who are engaged, inquisitive, comprehending readers. Until we prioritize daily choice, access, and sustained time to read interesting texts as the mainstay of any reading program, our students will not become self-sustaining, joyful readers.

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