Let’s Think Differently about Guided Reading

Often we encounter schools who say they do Guided Reading. However, in our discussions with school staff regarding this claim, we realize that administrators and teachers have varying definitions of what guided reading means. More and more, we learn that many of them really mean small group differentiated instruction.

Historically, Guided Reading (note the capital G and R) is a small group instructional protocol originated by Fountas and Pinnell in *Guided Reading: Good First Teaching for All Children* (1996). This seminal but provocative book generated a groundswell of support among literacy educators across the Unites States. Constructivist learning theory is the foundation of Guided Reading (GR) as envisioned by its architects. It uses concepts and approaches promoted in Reading Recovery that have questionable scientific support, i.e., three cueing systems. Two of the three “cues” in the three cueing system (semantic and syntactic) are contextually based and the graphophonemic or “visual” cue is taught to be used as a last resort if the other two contextual cues aren’t helpful to “decode” the word. Several studies in the 1980s refuted decoding words by context, and in a seminal review of the reading research (1995) Stanovich and Share stated, “the empirical
evidence has falsified the basic prediction that skilled readers rely more on context for word recognition than poorer readers” (p. 37). Read more about the three cueing system here and here.

Guided Reading (GR) is described as small-group lessons in which the primary activity is text reading. Instruction is focused primarily on reading for meaning (Denton et al., 2014). Wall (2014) describes GR “as guiding students to apply reading strategies that have been previously taught and modeled by the teacher...students independently read the selected texts silently and apply word-solving decoding strategies” (p. 135). An important feature of Guided Reading involves using text that theoretically matches students’ reading levels. In essence, the texts that teachers select are to be in students’ zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, the texts themselves serve as the scaffold for students, with teachers providing little support, prompting students only as needed. In light of the Common Core State Standards’ emphasis on text complexity, noted literacy researcher Tim Shanahan has criticized the notion of using leveled text for instruction in a series of blogs and presentations. He argues that there is little evidence that shows matching students to text based on a level results in learning gains. In fact, Shanahan argues that there is evidence to support that students can make learning gains by reading more challenging text provided the teacher is scaffolding those texts. You can read about Shanahan’s review of this issue here.

Interestingly, some proponents of Guided Reading still dichotomize reading instruction as “excess instruction in isolated skills” versus “constructing a deeper understanding of reading with purpose” (Wall, p. 137). This bifurcation only serves to prolong the “reading wars” rather than acknowledge that high quality, evidence-based reading instruction should teach both the foundational skills (contextualized within real reading) and reading for meaning.

A recent randomized control trial by Denton and colleagues (2014) evaluated two approaches, explicit instruction and guided reading, in the context of supplemental intervention for 218 at-risk first and second graders. You can read the study here. The study found no significant differences in outcomes for students in the two groups when compared with typical school instruction, as students in both interventions performed significantly better than the typical school instruction. However, they did find that effect sizes were larger for the explicit instruction group than the GR group for untimed phonemic decoding, passage reading fluency, passage comprehension, and a measure of silent reading fluency and
comprehension. In summary, explicit instruction, as delivered in the study, “could be expected to accelerate the progress of at-risk readers to a substantively larger degree than intervention provided with a GR approach” (Denton et al., 2014, p. 287).

The results of the above study lead to the premise of this article – in order to determine the focus of small group differentiated instruction teachers should consider students’ phase of reading development and use assessment data. The time for teachers to do small group differentiated instruction is limited and precious. Therefore, the focus of this time should be intentional and aligned with the research base on how children learn to read. The Florida Center for Reading Research (FCRR) wrote a guidance document about differentiating instruction and how to consider alternative lesson structures for small groups. The thrust of the article is that teachers should use data to determine what the instructional focus should be for small group teaching. Explicit skills instruction or guided reading approaches are the two alternatives described in the article. For example, if student data shows that students are lacking in foundational skills, then the teacher should focus on systematically and explicitly addressing those foundational skills needs. Alternatively, if the data shows that students are performing at benchmark, then reading text with a focus on comprehension strategies and skills, similar to what Guided Reading espouses, can be the major focus of the small group time. To their credit, GR proponents argue that skills taught in isolation do not further children’s reading development if no reading of text is involved. We at CORE concur with this argument and categorically promote the need to include real reading as part of any small group instructional time.

One K-2 literacy curriculum, Being a Reader* by the Center for the Collaborative Classroom, is designed in a way that follows this line of thinking around alternative grouping structures that the FCRR article promotes. In addition to the whole-class experiences, the curriculum has 15 sets of small group instruction. The weeks of lessons within a set are systemically designed to support an instructional build across sets. Each set covers several weeks of instruction. Students take a placement test and based on where they are in their reading development, they are placed into the sequence of instruction via carefully designed entry points. If students are in the early phases of word reading development and need foundational skills instruction, they enter into that selection of foundational skills lessons that systematically take them through a scope and sequence of sound-
spelling correspondences. These foundational skills lessons (Sets 1-5) utilize an explicit phonics lesson sequence which includes phonemic awareness, very similar to one that is described on p. 175 of CORE’s *Teaching Reading Sourcebook*. These foundational skills lessons use decodable (vocabulary-controlled) text that incorporate the appropriate targeted sound-spellings taught as well as irregular words taught. The latter two thirds of the small group sets, starting with Set 6, focus on the strategies necessary to understand text including word analysis, comprehension, self-monitoring/self-correcting with the goal of creating fluent, independent readers. In Sets 6-15 children read authentic literature that is leveled using several leveling schemes: Lexile, DRA, and Fountas & Pinnell.

The rational approach to differentiated small group instruction exemplified in this curriculum should be a model for the design of any differentiated small group instruction.

* The reference to *Being a Reader* is intended only to be illustrative and does not represent a specific curriculum recommendation by CORE.

**References**


Center for the Collaborative Classroom (2016). *Being a Reader*. Emeryville, CA: Center for the Collaborative Classroom


IN THIS ISSUE

Reading Expert
Dale Webster, Ph.D.

Marvelous Mathematician
Dean Ballard

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