This article contends that guided reading is one of the principal teaching techniques of primary classroom reading programs, and is an excellent way to provide classroom reading instruction to Reading Recovery children as well as children who do not need intensive intervention. The first section describes what exactly guided reading is and discusses why it is effective. Noting that for the full effect of guided reading to be realized, classroom teachers must have a generous supply and variety of books, the second section outlines how teachers can get more books. It discusses how to get books, how to level them, the importance of a variety of books, and the challenge of devising a system for organizing and storing books. In conclusion, the article discusses the importance of thorough teacher training (as well as time, money, training, dedication, and books) in implementing an effective guided reading program. (SR)
An Important Aspect of Guided Reading:
Books Galore!

Classroom Connections

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An Important Aspect of Guided Reading: Books Galore!

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Why guided reading?

During guided reading, small groups of four to six children meet regularly for thirty-minute lessons. All children in the group share a common characteristic: they can read all text used during the guided reading lesson with 90–95% accuracy. Although the children are grouped homogenously, membership in the group is flexible and dynamic (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996). As the strengths and needs of the group members change, so do the groups. One purpose of flexible, guided, small group instruction is to help students acquire the behaviors and strategies of a good, independent reader. Accurate reading is not enough. To become truly independent, the reader must develop “fix-up” strategies (Keene and Zimmerman, 1997) that enable complete processing and comprehension of the messages in text. The opportunity for children to read in this way is accomplished as the teacher continually adjusts, or differentiates, instruction to accommodate the interests, needs, and abilities of the students (Caldwell & Ford, 1996). Differentiation of instruction is difficult during reading lessons with the whole class; the small group setting makes differentiated instruction more manageable.

Merlin Wittrock (1990) maintains real learning results when students are led to make connections among ideas in text as well as between their existing experience and knowledge of what is presented in the text. All students reading the same book in the context of a small group promote this type of generative learning. The small group setting provides ample opportunity for all students to participate in discussions. As group membership changes, different interactions are possible, giving students diverse perspectives and additional opportunities to generate new connections.

There are many characteristics of guided reading that are in line with Vygotskian thinking. What is Vygotskian thinking? Vygotsky considered learning a shared process that takes place in a social context. He felt that a child’s intellectual and skill development are directly related to how they interact with adults and more capable peers in specific problem-solving situations (Rueda, 1990). A guided reading lesson is structured to allow the teacher and/or other participants in the group to mediate the process the reader is using to clarify text meaning through problem-solving strategies (Smith and Elley, 1998). The teacher enhances a child’s thinking and language development by deliberately and appropriately interacting with the child during the lesson. Initially, the teacher models, shows and explains, continued on next page
An Important Aspect of Guided Reading Continued ...

A first grade classroom teacher knows: Books are critical!

In order to implement a guided reading program, a classroom teacher must have the necessary resources. A wide range of books that differ in readability, genre, and student interest must be readily available. Then, teachers can effectively match appropriate books to readers in a guided reading group.

Books: How to get them

Obtaining guided reading books does not have to be a difficult process. There are many innovative ways to build an extensive guided reading library. In most instances, guided reading texts can be purchased through district budgets or grant funds.

Books can also be purchased with funds offered by some school districts through incentive pay projects. For example, a colleague and I applied for and received a district mini-grant to obtain additional nonfiction guided reading texts. Although my school had a sufficient collection of guided reading books, it was nice to expand the repertoire of books available to students by taking advantage of these monetary resources.

Administrative support (e.g., curriculum supervisors, principals, reading consultants, etc.) is imperative. If administrators see merit in guided reading, they can play an integral part in creatively securing funds for the purchase of many books. Although guided reading materials might be shared among grade-level partners, it would not be necessary for teachers to compete for books if there is a sizable allocation of resources.

Fountas and Pinnell (1999 and 1996) offer other creative suggestions for increasing multiple copies of books. They propose that teachers recycle selections from anthologies and add these to their collection of leveled texts. Books can be obtained at bargain prices from companies such as Scholastic or Troll Books. Accumulating bonus points from these companies allows teachers to get additional books. Another source of multiple copies of books is for teachers to put together collections of books they have gathered throughout the years. Remember, the acquisition of books is a gradual and costly process that can be spread over time (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996).

Books: How to level them

Collecting large supplies of books is not enough. Teachers must have some idea of the difficulty level of these books. Readability level, interest, and genre are three critical factors to consider when purchasing and leveling guided reading books. A well-rounded guided reading library includes a wide range of books at different levels of the continuum of reading development.

Groups of teachers can collectively level books they have accumulated. Fountas and Pinnell (1999 and 1996) suggest lists of characteristics and procedures for leveling books that teachers can use independently. They suggest using characteristics such as the physical layout of the book, the structure of the language, and the story complexity when determining the readability (or level) of a book. Another alternative is to enlist the help of Reading Recovery teachers, language arts consultants, and other colleagues who have experience leveling books.

Publishing companies, reading authorities, special programs, or state adopted curriculum frameworks use different terminology to classify the various stages of reading development and book levels. For example, Reading Recovery uses a number system to represent the difficulty level of text, whereas others assign letters or "broad-band" names (emergent, upper emergent, etc.) to different levels of texts. Fountas and Pinnell (1999, p. 26) and Yuki and Lanning (1999, p. 10) offer charts that assist teachers in sorting out these different types of leveling systems.
An Important Aspect of Guided Reading Continued ...

Books: Getting a variety

Student interest is another factor to be considered when purchasing books. Students are more likely to be motivated to read if they are reading books that interest them. Therefore, selected books should represent a variety of topics and genres. For example, my students enjoy non-fiction material, and I would estimate that approximately fifty percent of my students borrow informational books from the library every week. With this in mind, I make sure to include nonfiction books when I select materials for my guided reading groups. Fairy tales, fables, plays, realistic fiction, how-to books, and poetry are just some of the other genres that are available for my guided reading lessons.

The next big challenge: An organized book room

Once materials are secured, it is important to devise a system for organizing and storing books. Each classroom teacher needs to have easy access to leveled books in a central location.

Finding storage space is the first step. For example, books can be housed in a project room, an office, an extra classroom, or a very large closet. After finding a place to store books, they need to be organized in an efficient manner. In my school, our Reading Recovery teachers have leveled our books and arranged them in order by readability levels. Sets of books are contained in plastic bags and stored in baskets labeled with the reading level of the books. A laminated list of all the book titles is also included in each basket. Finally, the level and the number of running words are recorded on a dime-sized sticker on each book. To expedite finding specific titles, I also recommend arranging books in alphabetical order within each leveled basket.

In order to keep track of our many titles, we have a sign out book for borrowed texts. Teachers record the book titles and number of copies they borrow. This system appears to be working well; teachers are able to readily locate specific books.

Books are not enough

Availability of books must be accompanied by sound, thorough teacher training in implementing an effective guided reading program. There are a number of resources that educators can consult to further their understanding of guided reading instruction. For example, the textbook Guided Reading: Good First Teaching for All Children (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) is an invaluable teacher resource that I refer to on a regular basis. My school system also offered a number of workshops on how to implement guided reading in the classroom. Reading Recovery teachers, language arts consultants, and presenters from outside our district have been continual sources of information on topics such as interpreting running records, the components of a guided reading lesson, and general management issues that must be considered when establishing guided reading groups.

An Early Success grant and our district Title I funds have enabled us to hire additional staff to support early literacy learning. We have the good fortune of having three Reading Recovery teachers and one Title I teacher who co-teach guided reading with first grade teachers. This arrangement allows us to meet with every guided reading group five days a week. Working closely with other colleagues provides the opportunity for constant professional dialogue between teachers on how to refine guided reading instruction and practices. This is a unique but ideal situation made possible through external resources (i.e. grant funds).

Implementation of a guided reading program requires time, money, training, dedication, and books. But, guided reading is well worth the effort and commitment. Children's reading improves as the teacher provides appropriate and focused instruction in a small group setting. As children become better readers, their thirst for reading more books begins to grow.

We both wish you BOOKS GALORE to satisfy the independent readers you create with your successful guided reading program.

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