

Supporting Effective Guided Reading Instruction for All Students

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Abstract

Fountas and Pinnell (2012) warn that guided reading is not always synonymous with small-group instruction. While it may appear simple, much thought goes into a guided reading lesson. This chapter details the steps for teachers to follow in order to develop more effective guided reading and small group instruction for all students by identifying specific goals in the areas of accuracy, fluency, and comprehension at each instructional reading level. Through the chapter, teachers will be exposed to valuable resources that will aid in creating effective guided reading lessons for all students.

Keywords: *guided reading, accuracy, fluency, comprehension*

Introduction

Guided reading has been a long-standing practice in the field of literacy. Small groups of children gathered around a table reading with their teacher is not a novel idea and can most likely be seen in thousands of elementary school classrooms on any given day. However, Fountas and Pinnell (2012) warned that guided reading is not always synonymous with small-group instruction, and while it may appear simple, much thought goes into a guided reading lesson. In any given classroom, an instructor can have students reading at a wide array of instructional levels as well as varying needs within each of those levels. This can often make it seem difficult to adequately meet the needs of all students in a classroom. This chapter will detail

how educators can develop more effective guided reading and small group instruction for all students by identifying specific goals in the areas of accuracy, fluency, and comprehension at each instructional reading level.

The Basics of Guided Reading

Fountas and Pinnell (2017a) defined guided reading as “a small-group instructional context in which a teacher supports each reader’s development of systems of strategic actions for processing new texts at increasingly challenging levels of difficulty” (p. 12). While highly effective, guided reading alone is not enough to fully develop students’ literacy abilities. It is a piece of the literacy framework that also includes practices such as read-aloud,

shared reading, independent writing, and writing conferences (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017a).

Guided reading has a few essential characteristics that distinguish it from other types of small-group instruction. First, students are grouped by similar instructional reading levels so that the same text can be read appropriately by all students in the group. Secondly, each student in the group reads the whole text or a designated portion of the text to themselves quietly. Guided reading does not include any type of round robin reading or popcorn reading methods which has the teacher call on one student to read at a time while the other students listen in and follow along. It is important to note that there is no research supporting the use of round robin reading as an effective means of developing a student's reading abilities. Rather, Hilden and Jones (2012) listed several drawbacks of this method including slower reading rates, lower quantity of words read by a student, an increase in off-task behaviors, problems with comprehension, and an abatement of self-efficacy and motivation. Another characteristic of guided reading is that the instructor provides just enough support before, during, and after reading for students to gain the skills needed to read increasingly challenging texts over time. Finally, guided reading groups are not permanent. Children are grouped and regrouped in a dynamic process that involves ongoing observation and assessment.

Guided reading seeks to develop a system of strategic actions for students to be able to process and understand written text (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017a). This is pertinent since comprehension, understanding the written text which one reads, is the ultimate goal of reading (Rasinski, 2017). Due to these facts, teachers should strive to meet with each group of readers several times per week with the lowest achieving readers being seen as frequently as possible (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017a).

Planning for All Students

Knowing your readers is at the heart of all guided reading lessons. Being able to identify students' strengths and weaknesses is pivotal when planning for a given group's guided reading lessons. This is because "everything you do in the guided reading lesson works toward the goal of students' development of a reading process- one that expands and grows more efficient with use, and one that assures efficient use of information in the text, fluency and phrasing, and a high level of reading comprehension" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017a). It is important to remember that guided reading seeks to teach the reader, not the book. Thus, the majority of planning for guided reading happens before the book is even selected. The following sections describe the process of effectively planning guided reading so that every student can be successful.

Step One: Gathering Data

Prior to beginning guided reading instruction, a teacher must determine his or her students' instructional and independent reading levels. A student's instructional reading level is found using an individually administered reading evaluation such as the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System (BAS) or Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA). In these formal assessments, a teacher conducts a running record on a student by listening to them read aloud orally from one of the fiction or nonfiction books provided by the evaluation and documents the student's reading behaviors for analysis. After the student finishes the provided reading selection, the educator conducts a comprehension conversation about the text and records the student's answers. Based on this one-on-one assessment, the teacher will be able to determine a student's instructional and independent reading level utilizing the guidelines for scoring. Once these levels are found, a teacher can begin planning for guided reading instruction.

Step Two: Using the Data to Select a Goal with *The Literacy Continuum*

After this initial assessment, the educator must analyze the data collected from the running records to answer the following questions suggested by Fountas and Pinnell (2011):

- 1) What does the reader already know how to do?
- 2) What does the reader need to learn how to do or do more consistently?

When answering these questions, instructors need to be cognizant of a student's performance in the areas of accuracy, fluency, and comprehension.

After a teacher determines a student's strengths and weaknesses, *The Literacy Continuum* is a crucial tool in selecting teaching points that will help push readers forward (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017b). *The Literacy Continuum* provides educators with an in-depth look at learning across eight curricular areas from prekindergarten through grade eight. The eight curricular areas include interactive read-aloud and literature discussion; shared and performance reading; writing about reading; writing; oral and visual communication; technological communication; phonics, spelling, and word study; and guided reading. While each section is highly informative and useful, this chapter specifically focuses on the guided reading section of *The Literacy Continuum*. The section on guided reading is organized by level, A to Z, and, in addition to providing ideas for word work at a given level, it describes explicit behaviors expected of readers when thinking about the text, within the text, and beyond the text at that level. In order to help educators select appropriate goals for instruction, *The Literacy Continuum* further divides the behaviors expected of readers at a given level into categories that relate to the areas of accuracy, fluency, and comprehension within that level. Bullet points listed under the

categories of Searching For and Using Information, Monitoring and Self-Correcting, as well as Solving Words can generally be thought of as accuracy goals. Similarly, items found under Maintaining Fluency or Adjusting can be viewed as fluency goals and behaviors listed under Summarizing, Predicting, Making Connections, Synthesizing, Inferring, Analyzing, and Critiquing can be regarded as comprehension goals for the given reading level. These detailed goals allow teachers to be conscious of the specific behaviors to notice, teach, and support at any given level. Furthermore, it is beneficial to notice literacy development from one level to the next because it helps instructors determine what new skills students will need to acquire across the varying text levels.

Determining which goal or goals to select for a student will depend on the behaviors noticed during the student's individual running records (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017b). The teacher will look for areas in which the reader needs to learn how to do something or needs to learn to do something more consistently. During this process, it is essential to consider not only accuracy, but also fluency and comprehension. Once an area of weakness is identified, the teacher can look in the specific sections of *The Literacy Continuum* mentioned previously to determine appropriate goals for the student. For example, if a student was weak in the area of fluency, a goal for that student would most likely come from the sections on Maintaining Fluency or Adjusting for his or her instructional reading level.

A teacher may go through the following process when selecting a goal for Michael (all names are pseudonyms). Michael is reading independently at a Level F and instructionally at a Level G. On Michael's instructional running record, he made many visual errors that involved the correct beginning sound, but incorrect word; however, the substitutions made sense most of the time. Michael read the text with satisfactory fluency and comprehension; therefore,

Michael's area of weakness would be accuracy. When looking within the sections related to accuracy (Searching For and Using Information, Monitoring and Self-Correcting, and Solving Words) in *The Literacy Continuum* at a Level F, there are several goals, which the instructor could select to help develop Michael's reading processes (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017b). For instance, "say a word slowly to identify sounds in the word (beginning, middle, and end)" from the section on Solving Words or "use visual features of words to self-monitor and self-correct" (p. 442) from the section on Monitoring and Self-Correcting would be appropriate goals to help move Michael forward as a reader.

Step Three: Teaching Points and Prompts

Once a goal from those listed in *The Literacy Continuum* has been identified, the educator can now plan for a guided reading lesson that teaches to that specific goal (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017b). The goal turns into a teaching point when the instructor changes it into kid-friendly language that explains and models the steps to achieve the goal. A teaching point is explicitly communicated and modeled for the students before they start reading. For example, the goal stated above for Michael, "say a word slowly to identify sounds in the word (beginning, middle, and end)," (p. 442) can be turned into an effective teaching point by saying "Readers can say a word slowly part by part to read tricky words. You can look at the first part, then the next part, then the end in order to read the word."

Literacy consultant Melissa Leach of Leach's Literacy Training stressed the importance of ensuring that every guided reading lesson has a teaching point. She believes that without an explicit, stated teaching point we are just listening to children read and allowing them to practice the things that they already know how to do, rather than helping to develop children's reading processes (personal communication, September 7, 2016). Additionally, it is important to make sure that during a guided reading lesson, the focus is on

one goal at a time. Fountas and Pinnell (2017a) warned that addressing too many teaching points during one lesson will distract the students and often disrupt their comprehension of the text.

Educators must also realize the difference between a teaching point and a prompt. Both are highly effective teaching tools but significantly different. Each serves a purpose during a guided reading lesson and, if used correctly, helps move students forward as readers. Teaching points use a step-by-step process to explicitly demonstrate for the reader how to problem solve while reading, and prompts are simply reminders about a teaching point that the student has previously learned. Prompts are delivered at the point of error when the student has already tried independently and is struggling to get through a part of the text. For example, a prompt that would support the teaching point described above for Michael may be "Say it slowly part by part from beginning to end" (p. 442). *The Fountas and Pinnell Prompting Guide* is a very useful resource teacher can use for matching teaching points with prompts (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009).

Step Four: Book Choice and Planning for Comprehension

Book choice is a very important step in planning for a guided reading lesson because guided reading seeks to teach the reader, not the book. Teachers should analyze guided reading texts to select a book that aligns with the goals and teaching points that have been identified for a given group of readers. For example, if the goal is for students to work on cross-checking, it is important to select a book where the words often match the pictures so that students have an opportunity to practice the teaching point.

Every time a guided reading lesson is taught, a comprehension discussion should take place, regardless of the reading level. At higher levels, students may not read the entire book during one guided reading lesson, but the teacher can still conduct a comprehension conversation about the portion of the text that

was read and make predictions about what may be read next. These comprehension conversations are crucial because the purpose of reading is to understand, thus making comprehension the most important piece of reading (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007).

Pre-planning the comprehension questions that will facilitate the discussion with students is beneficial. Degener and Berne (2017) pointed out that when planning for comprehension conversations, educators must include not only knowledge-level questions in their discussion with students but also questions that will encourage deeper understanding of texts. Once again, *The Literacy Continuum* can aid educators in preparing for both literal and higher-order comprehension questions that target the demands of specific levels of text and readers (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017b).

Conclusion

Literacy consultant Enid Martinez stated in one of her trainings that “it is not about teaching kids a level; it’s about teaching kids the process of reading. In guided reading, we are not trying to get them to the next level; rather, we are trying to build up a reading process” (personal communication, November 18, 2016). The method described in this chapter aligns with this belief and will help teachers plan effective guided reading instruction for all students, regardless of their reading level. Through analyzing running records, selecting goals for instruction, and developing quality teaching points supported by prompts, guided reading instruction becomes a highly effective and purposeful practice within the classroom. While this type of lesson planning requires time, it will ensure that all students are provided with opportunities to grow in their reading proficiency.

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