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# **Reading in the Zone of Proximal Development: Mediating Literacy Development in Beginner Readers through Guided Reading**

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## Abstract

Because the term *direct instruction* has been and is used broadly, it has come to define all types of explicit teaching. Thus, a traditional basal approach – where children are grouped for instruction by their abilities (high, average, and low) and where the teaching is often predetermined or scripted – is unwittingly compared to *guided reading*. The major objective of this article is to demonstrate that the fundamental difference between the two approaches lies in pitching instruction to the child's literacy level and the need for dynamic grouping of children for instruction. This objective is achieved through an exploration of the theoretical foundations of *guided reading*. More specifically, the reader is given a Vygotskian perspective of the transactions that occur between the teacher and the student that lead to learning how to read.

No one will debate the maxim that the school's first mission is to guide students in their efforts to become literate. However, the discussion on literacy becomes emotionally charged which sharply divides educators as well as the public when the conversation turns to the best approach to teach beginning reading. Why has this topic become one of the most politicized issues in the field of education? Becoming a fluent reader by the end of the first grade "is the key to

education, and education is the key to success for both individuals and a democracy” (Adams, 1990, p. 13).

While there are many reasons for this ongoing debate, there have been sweeping changes in literacy instruction that have led to major reforms in reading instruction. Such changes have compelled more teachers to use children’s literature in their reading instruction rather than relying solely on the traditional basal readers in teaching children how to read. Further, more teachers are working to integrate reading and writing instruction within the curriculum areas of math, science, and social studies. Another major improvement led teachers to vary the grouping patterns for literacy instruction rather than placing children in fixed ability groups, where many young children are learning to read within the context of whole-class instruction.

While numerous literacy reforms are indeed excellent, one result is confusion centering on instructing young children to read. The one major problem that has emerged is the move from direct instruction with small groups of children to a whole-group approach. This shift away from intentional teaching in a small-group setting probably occurred when teachers began to eliminate the three ability-grouping format in the primary grades and started to use varied grouping patterns.

Traditionally, beginner readers, students who are learning to read in grades one through three, have been taught how to read in a high-, middle-, or low-ability group. Being assigned to a group in September, meant that students remained in that same group for the rest of the school year (Juel, 1988; Shannon, 1985). Further, children who were in the low-ability groups received the kind of instruction that focused on isolated skills, while spending very little time actually reading (Allington, 1983). The consequence was obvious; low-ability grouped children were low performers for the rest of the school year. In most instances, these students remained at the bottom of their class for the rest of their elementary school years. For this and many more reasons, the traditional model of direct instruction that uses the fixed ability-grouping pattern has not been successful, especially for the low-ability group. It is no wonder then that many teachers turned to whole-class reading instruction as an alternative to traditional small-group instruction.

However, for most young children, direct instruction in how print works when learning how to read is indeed critical (Juel, 1988; Stanovich, 1990). This is even more critical for first graders who

come to school with fewer literacy or book experiences from home (Adams, 1990). The kind of grouping and the nature of teaching offered by the traditional basal approach, wore a disguise of "teaching to the child's literacy level." However, the instruction was scripted and pre-determined, paced for each group, and rarely responsive to the individual literacy needs of the child. The traditional approach held literacy was out of their reach for most children.

An alternative to the traditional model of direct instruction is *guided reading*. This approach in teaching young children to read is *more* than direct instruction of how print works. In *guided reading*, the explicit goal is to enable children to develop and to use efficient literacy strategies, independently and creatively. Children not only learn how print works, but they develop the critical strategies needed to become fluent readers, strategies for detecting and correcting errors, for word-solving unknown words within the text, for making predictions, for making personal connections to the text, and more. At all times during instruction, meaning is central to reading which becomes internalized by the students. Thus, the children learn more than just how to read a story; they learn how to read on their own by applying the strategies learned in *guided reading*. This kind of direct instruction in reading is possible when children are grouped for literacy or skill needs of the children.

Thus the instructional activities and the literacy strategies taught by the teacher within the context of *guided reading* are directed and shaped by the children's literacy needs. There are fundamental differences between the grouping procedures used in *guided reading* and the ability-grouping patterns used in traditional approaches. The procedure for grouping students for instruction in *guided reading* is based on each child's literacy development, that is, their literacy needs at variable points in the school year. Because a child's development is constantly changing, never static, the grouping procedure in *guided reading* is dynamic. Children are grouped for their specific literacy skill needs and their needs change at different rates. Thus, on-going observation and informal assessment practices of children's literacy strategies by the teacher is a critical element embedded in guided-reading instruction, since it informs the teacher in grouping children for instruction.

Therefore, the major goal of this article is to provide a strong rationale for direct instruction at a child's level of literacy development, demonstrating why this approach is needed for most

children who are becoming independent readers. This objective is achieved by explicating the theoretical foundation of the practice of *guided reading*. My intention is to demonstrate the need for the teacher to consider carefully the children's literacy development while planning instruction as well as the equally mandated need to teach children to read within their zone of proximal development, achieved through the proper grouping of children based on their specific literacy needs. To those who view direct teaching in traditional approaches and in *guided reading* similar, they will discern that their fundamental differences are quite dissimilar

### Guided Reading: The heart of a literacy program

Guided reading is the indispensable component of a well-balanced literacy program within the primary classroom. Indeed, it has been described as the "heart of the literacy program" (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996). Within any well-balanced literacy program, each element is integrally related, supporting the goal of the literacy program in varied ways. *Guided reading* serves to assist students in becoming fluent and independent readers early in their school years so as to reap the benefits and rewards that reading brings throughout their lives. As students become strategic readers, their levels of participation in all other literacy events increase as well.

### The Procedures Used in Guided Reading

Following is an overview of the essential elements of guided reading supported by a discussion of how the fundamental components are related to Vygotskian theory. That is, the essential procedures for the teacher and the students during guided reading will be described and explained through Vygotsky's theory. For a thorough description and a complete guide to this approach, see Fountas and Pinnell (1996),

The following are brief descriptions of the essential components that are characteristic to teaching guided reading:

**Book introduction.** Before children are directed to read the book independently, the teacher "walks the students through the story." The book introduction is "a way that gives children access to [the story] while leaving some problem solving to do" (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, p. 135).

***Children's reading of the whole text by themselves.*** After the book introduction, the children are asked to read the story by themselves. While they are reading, the teacher listens in order to assist anyone who solicits or needs help. During this time, she observes and documents children's strategy use as well as their performance on other reading behaviors.

***Selection and use of appropriate leveled reads.*** Students learn to read with texts that are appropriate to their specific literacy needs. The teacher selects, from many small leveled books, a text that is supportive of the beginner reader and poses a few problems to solve to practice learned literacy strategies.

***Dynamic grouping procedures.*** Guided reading is founded on the major assumption that changes in children's development is a continuous process. However, their development may not have the same qualitative change, nor do changes take place at a specified rate or the same time for each child (Vygotsky, 1986). Therefore, within a first-grade classroom, literacy concepts are developing continuously but emerge at different times; a concept may take longer in one child to develop than in another; and a literacy concept's appearance may have qualitative differences as well. Thus children are "grouped by specific assessment for strengths in the reading process and appropriate level of text difficulty" and the grouping is "dynamic, flexible, and changeable on a regular basis" (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996, p. 101).

### A Vygotskian Perspective of Guided Reading Clinic

Three major themes from Vygotsky's work provide very specific support to the framework for ***guided reading*** instruction: (1) learning is social and occurs in social contexts (Vygotsky, 1986); (2) learning is mediated by language (Vygotsky, 1986); and (3) learning or the development of concepts and higher mental functioning takes place within a student's zone of proximal development (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Gallimore & Tharp, 1990). These basic ideas will be discussed as they relate to the essential elements and procedures of ***guided reading***.

### The Book Introduction

Before the children read the story independently, the teacher will provide considerable time and thought in preparing her students for that task. This occurs within the context of the book introduction.

The small group of children hold their own books as “they walk through the story” assisted by the teacher. The teacher’s support is in the form of a discussion of the story which is determined by the specific needs of the children related to the text to be read. The purpose of the book introduction is to mediate the text before the students read it independently. Being sensitive to their specific literacy needs, she poses questions about the story to be read, prepares them for the structure of the story, provides word work on specific words she knows will pose difficulties, and makes them familiar with the language of the text. She may help them with text patterns, or alert them to the pictures that will serve as cues for comprehension and decoding while they are reading. Student responses to the questions posed demand “on-the-spot” teacher actions as she hopes to further the student’s development of a concept. This teacher-lead dialogue, or curricular conversation, within the context of the book introduction is the direct or intentional assistance to the children’s literacy performance within their zones of proximal development.

The teacher is able to teach and prepare further teaching to their development through on-going observation and assessment of the children while reading independently. Here the teacher is acquiring knowledge of their performance with respect to literacy specific concepts and strategy use. Having garnered an understanding of the children’s literacy development, the teacher may prepare for the book introduction more effectively and know how to respond to each child during this strategic interaction. When instruction like this is pitched just slightly beyond the capacity of the children, the teacher is then assisting them in their *zone of proximal development (ZPD)*. What is the *ZPD*?

**Teaching in the Zone of Proximal Development:** The *zone of proximal development* is a way of thinking about learning and development. Vygotsky (1978) has defined the zone of proximal development as the “actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving” and the “potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p.81). For the teacher, this means knowing the children’s level of development and shaping their instruction slightly beyond their development. Besides providing the appropriate instructional activity to further the development of the specific concepts that are being learned, the teacher also mediates and scaffolds the performance of the students until they can function independently.

For Vygotsky, development and learning was not an “either-or” situation, you know or you don’t know. Rather, he viewed learning or the development of a concept on a continuum, as a series of growth points or degrees of maturing. When a child is learning within a *zone of proximal development*, he/she is learning a concept that is close to emergence. That is, once the child receives appropriate instruction, the child will be able to use the concept independently or without adult assistance.

Thus, Vygotsky’s (1978) description of learning in the *zone of proximal development* is further developed by Gallimore and Tharp (1988, 1990) who have studied and explained the *ZPD* extensively. They have defined good teaching in relation to development which “consists of assisting performance through the *zone of proximal development*. Teaching can be said to occur when assistance is offered at points in the *ZPD* at which performance requires assistance” (Tharp and Gallimore, 1988, p.45). The teacher then needs to be aware of the level of support and assistance that can foster learning. The model of the *ZPD* developed by Gallimore and Tharp provide a guideline to those who are shaping instruction at the child’s development. According to their model, there are four stages within the *zone of proximal development*, each stage requiring varied levels of support. At the first stage, the teacher assists the child in performing the task. At the beginning stages of the *ZPD*, and for young children, the teacher may model the task, provide explicit directions with much direct response and feedback to the child’s performance. The teacher is always responsive to the specific learning needs of the child.

During the book introduction, the teacher mediates the text for the child. Much of the assistance she gives to the child in the context of the book introduction is similar to that which occurs in the first and second stages of the zone of proximal development. For example, the teacher may be working on a specific literacy strategy such as using the title and the illustration on the cover to make a prediction about the story. The teacher may point to the title of the book to see if anyone can read it. If not, she will point to each word as she reads the title. She will then ask the children to look at the cover to see if they can tell what the story is about (modeling the strategy). Then a discussion about the title and the picture will ensue. What the teacher is doing is assisting the children in developing a prediction strategy that they will eventually be expected to independently.



Within this type of interaction, the teacher may employ such instructional techniques as modeling, questioning and thinking aloud. At first the children's responses are more imitative, and there is a heavy reliance on the teacher for assistance or scaffolding of the targeted literacy strategy. This will probably occur many more times before the children will be able to use, with little or no assistance, this literacy strategy, that is, the title and the picture to make predictions about the story. As the child proceeds through this beginning phase, Stage I of the *ZPD*, the teacher's teaching techniques will change. Depending upon the children's development of the strategy that is being taught, she may no longer model where the title is and her questions may become fewer to evoke a discussion around the picture.

Later, when the children have reached Stage II in the *ZPD* of this specific literacy strategy, the teacher may not ask the question about the title nor the picture. The teacher knows from observing the children that they are in the second stage of the *ZPD*, because they are using the title and the picture to make a prediction about the story. As the teacher distributes the books, she notes how the children begin to read the title themselves and search for picture cues to discuss the story that they will be reading.

The teacher assistance and support that is given in Stage II is quite different from the support given in Stage I. Because the children's concept of making predictions about a story is more fully emerging, the mediation given by the teacher is in the form of feedback and guidance to further develop this concept. Thus, when the children have reached Stage II, they are self-regulated; that is, they direct themselves to find the title and study the picture on the book's cover to participate in the discussion about the story. As a result, the book introduction is different. Because the children's literacy concepts are developing, the assistance that the teacher provides has changed, at least for this literacy concept. "However, this does not mean that the performance is fully developed...Regulation may have passed from the adult to the child(ren) speaker(s), but the control function remains with the overt verbalization in the form of self-directed speech" (Gallimore & Tharp, 1990, p. 185). The teacher may hear a child using self-directed speech in finding the picture or in analyzing the picture for clues. The function of his/her speech is self-guidance, a characteristic of Stage II in the *ZPD*.

In Stage III, the child's "performance is developed, automatized, and fossilized" (Gallimore & Tharp, 1990, p.186). This

is where the child has emerged from the *zone of proximal development*. When observing the children during the book introduction, the teacher notes that when they make their predictions about the story, the students are performing at a higher level. Now their performance is smooth and integrated; they do not need any assistance from the teacher, and they no longer use egocentric or overt speech to direct their strategy use to solve a problem.

In the Stage III, the need for help by the learner vanishes: Assistance from the teacher or from oneself is obtrusive in task execution. Vygotsky referred to a concept that was developed and to performance was automatized as “fossilized,” now the child has emerged from the *ZPD* for this literacy concept, making predictions about the story from the title and the picture.

Since learning is a life-long process, Stage IV of the *zone of proximal development* describes the child as he learns many new concepts and strategies. Stage IV describes the recursive nature of learning, where *ZPD* sequences are similar for the development of new capacities. For example, while a child has learned many strategies and concepts related to the reading process, there are many more that need to be developed.

**Language is a tool for learning and thinking:** Vygotsky postulated that an “indisputable fact of great importance (is that) thought development is determined by language” (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 94). Within the context of the book introduction, it is obvious that language plays a critical role in learning, that is, in mediating the literacy strategy.

At first, in Stage I of the *ZPD*, the teacher demonstrated the use of the title and the illustration to determine the nature of the story. Modeling how to use this literacy strategy through gestures, she supported each aspect of her demonstration by language. The children were not passive recipients, they were encouraged to take an active part in the discussion about the story: They were pointing to the title, and as they searched the illustration, they talked about it in relation to the story and to their own lives. Language is the tool that was used to assist the children in making predictions.

When children were more familiar with that literacy strategy, that is, when their development was in Stage II of their *ZPD*, they used their own speech to guide their actions, as their performance became self-regulated. Their speech has its origins in the shared discussion

between the teacher and the group. That is, they may have used their egocentric speech to assist themselves, but carefully listening to them reveals that it bears resemblance to the teacher's direction or the group discussion. It is clear that the language that the teacher uses in direct teaching, becomes the inner voice of children in self-regulatory behavior. Thus, as the children progressed through the *ZPD*, when the literacy strategy was fully developed, their speech turned inward, and the curriculum conversation that took place within the context of the book introduction became their tool for learning. The teacher who knows this chooses the strategy language very carefully, because eventually it becomes the tool that the children use on their own to regulate their own learning.

Within the context of the book introduction, language was discussed as a "tool for learning," and indeed it is. The book introduction is a shared activity that offers another learning opportunity for language growth and development.

Within this rich curriculum conversation, children appropriate the language they experience as they participate in the book discussion. Bakhtin (1973) assures us that language is not learned from dictionaries, rather "language is activity, an unceasing process of creation realized in individual speech acts" (p.48). According to Vygotsky, (1986) "word meanings evolve. When a new word has been learned by the child, its development is barely starting; the word at first is a generalization of the most primitive type; as the child's intellect develops, it is replaced by generalizations of a higher and higher type" (p.149).

This occurrence of semiotic mediation occurs as shared activity. While the teacher's and the children's word meanings may differ qualitatively, their interactions about the story lead the children to restructure their personal meanings of the words that they are using. Such sustained curriculum conversations will help children's language grow and develop, bringing their personal meanings of words closer to the conventional cultural meanings.

**Learning is social and occurs in social contexts:** Vygotsky claimed that higher forms of mental functioning is rooted in social life. An individual's development cannot be understood without accounting for the child's social milieu. Aside from the larger society, the children are participants within their immediate communities, families, and the community of learners within the classroom context, where each group supports each child's cognitive

development in different ways. In other words, our intellect is shaped by our participation in our social worlds. That a child's development is derived from his/her social context appears in Vygotsky's (1986) general claim about the sociality of learning: "Any function in the child's development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category" (p. 163).

The book introduction in *guided reading* is an example of the social nature of learning. At first, the teacher assists the children in their performance of the literacy strategy. The teacher provides support, feedback, and directs the interaction. The appropriation of the literacy concept and strategy used by the children appears first on the social plane, outside of the learners as an interpsychological category, which is made possible through language. It is obvious that learning first occurs outside the children, on a social plane, as the teacher mediates and assists their performance.

When concepts and strategy use are developing at a point where students begin to self-regulate their own performance, as in Stage II of the *ZPD*; or when students have fully developed the concepts and strategy so that performance becomes effortless, as in Stage III of the *ZPD*, learning appears within the learner as an intrapsychological category. The child in Stage III no longer needs the assistance from others because the strategy is fully developed within the child, no longer appearing in the social plane. In the book introduction, we see learning occurring first on a social plane, between at least two people, then on a psychological plane, within oneself. Thus, learning is social in nature, and has its origins in social contexts.

### Reading the Text on Their Own

Children read the book independently after the book introduction, which is an essential element of *guided reading*. The book introduction prepares students to read text on their own. Here they are using strategies that they have learned to solve problems in the text and to gain control over text as they work towards becoming fluent readers.

The teacher's role at this point is one of observer and coach. She listens to each child as he/she reads the story. During this time, she uses prompts to facilitate strategies that the children are developing. These prompts appear in the form of questions,

constructed on language that encourages strategy development and use. The role of strategy language, in the form of questions, is to assist the children to internalize the language as their support in strategy use and development.

This type of teaching for strategies is mediating children's reading performance within the *zone of proximal development*. Consider the child who is reading a story and makes a mistake by inserting an extra word in the sentence. Because s/he was tracking the words with a finger, when s/he came to the end of the sentence s/he found there were not enough words. Not knowing what strategy to use to detect this error, the child stops reading. Because the teacher was observing this child's reading behavior, she is able to use the following support prompt that is constructed on strategy language: "Did you have enough words? Did you run out of words?" So the student tries once more, again tracking the words as s/he reads, but this time noting the extra word that did not fit. This is a checking strategy that the teacher hopes the child will develop.

At this point, the child appears to be in Stage I in the *zone of proximal development*. The teacher is providing assistance that helps to regulate the behavior of the child. When the child eventually learns to use this question, "Did I have enough words?" to check errors, or to self-regulate reading behavior, s/he will be in Stage II. Now the children are developing strategies that they need to read fluently. They work at self-monitoring, searching for cues and checking varied sources of information in the text to solve problems that occur in the text as they read. *Guided reading* is unlike direct instruction in a traditional basal reader, where the teacher instructs all of the children in a set of sequential objectives, one at a time. In *guided reading*, assistance is provided to each child who is helped in the development of a system of strategies. Such is a "self-extending system...that works together so that by reading, readers learn more about the process," and in "strategic ways they problem solve their way through many books" (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, p. 157).

While reading, the children are developing strategies as they use and practice them under the guidance and with the assistance and support of their teacher. The strategies that were once difficult, become easier to the beginner readers who are now able to shift their attention to more complex operations. After reading the story, the teacher may conduct a mini-lesson with the students who have just read. This lesson is directed at the specific needs of the children who were reading the story. The teacher may decide to draw their

attention to a word or a group of words that was especially difficult for the group. The lesson will be strategy based, showing them how to figure out a word based upon the surrounding contextual cues. The teacher often includes a phonics lesson embedded within the context of the story-based lesson. Finally, the children will be asked to practice the strategy that they have just learned by reading the relevant text once again. The teacher's support, guidance, and feedback continues until the students emerge through the *zone of proximal development* as fluent readers.

### Dynamic Grouping

One method of preventing the damaging effects associated with ability grouping, yet maintain the practice of grouping children for effective reading instruction, is to use dynamic grouping for *guided reading* instruction. At the same time, the grouping patterns for other literacy events conducted throughout the day should vary. Dynamic grouping for reading instruction differs from the traditional groups in reading on a number of factors: Traditional groups employ general ability as a factor to determine membership in a group, whereas, in dynamic grouping, the determining factor is the ability of the children to use varied sources of information to read and understand text. Traditional groups are static in that once children gain membership in a group, they remain in that group until the end of the year. However, dynamic grouping assumes that development is continuous and that the quality and rate of change vary from child to child; therefore, membership in the group is flexible and changes on a regular basis, determined by the specific needs of the children.

In order to identify the specific needs of each child for appropriate instruction in *guided reading*, the teacher must know each child's capability for processing the text. Therefore, dynamic grouping is dependent upon a carefully designed program of assessment. Because change is continuous and occurs at different rates and degrees in each child, assessment should be on-going, and it should occur within the context of *guided reading* instruction. Using multiple data sources from daily observation as well as from other informal tests, such as, running records, the teacher will be able to group each child for specific needs. Remembering that a child's *ZPD* is the distance between what the child is capable of doing independently and what the child can do with assistance from the teacher and that *guided reading* instruction is based on mediating learning, dynamic grouping has become a prerequisite to this approach.

## Conclusion

**Guided reading** offers an alternative to the traditional teaching of reading where direct instruction using ability grouping is offered to beginner readers. Direct instruction denotes a transmission model of teaching: The teacher uses a “one-size-fits-all” approach, where lessons are taught not on need but on the basis of where the skill appears within the sequence of the objectives in the curriculum. Further, there is a focus on skills instruction which appears outside the context of reading and fortified by unlimited practice on worksheets, that may or may not be needed by each student.

**Guided reading** is referred to as mediated learning or assisted learning because of the nature of instruction. It can easily be described as an apprenticeship model of teaching (Rogoff, 1990.) Children receive instruction based upon their capacity for learning to read; that is, they receive instruction within their *zone of proximal development*. Rather than transmitting knowledge that the teacher possesses, students construct their own knowledge through transactions about the text where language is an important tool in learning. The teacher pitches her instruction at the specific development of each child; and practice on skills occurs within the context of reading whole texts, several times, that are carefully selected for the children’s capacity for processing text. **Guided reading** rests upon sound principles of learning that have provided a framework for Vygotsky’s theory of instruction. Indeed it is “good first teaching for all children” (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996).

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