Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

1-1-2011

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Looking Back to Move Forward with Guided Reading

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──────────── **Abstract** ────────────

Guided reading is used in classrooms across the country and, while it is fairly new, it is anything but revolutionary. In this article, and in honor of the 50th volume of Reading Horizons, the authors take a look back at the 50-year history of this practice, provide a definition of guided reading, analyze what caused the practice to change, and discuss their own perspectives and predict the future of guided reading.

Introduction

Guided reading is perhaps one of the most common elements of today's reading programs as most descriptions of comprehensive literacy programs now include guided reading as one of the essential components (Cunningham, Hall, & Cunningham, 2000; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Although there is a tendency to view it as a fairly new practice, it is anything but revolutionary. This is not to say that guided reading has remained exactly the same over the years, that it was used for the same reasons, or that it was used with the same intensity. All three have fluctuated throughout time. In this article, we take a 50-year look at guided reading through representative influential writers of the time whose textbooks were used to teach teachers how to teach reading. Several of these authors were also authors of the commercial materials (i.e., basal readers) that were mass-produced and used in classrooms so the ideas they set forth in their textbooks found their way into the materials that teachers used to teach children.

There is no question that guided reading was more prevalent in some decades (e.g., 1940-1970, late 1990s-present) over others (e.g., 1980, early 1990s). However, we couch this prevalence in terms of how much it was emphasized in the professional

literature and in courses of study such as university courses and professional development courses designed to educate teachers on the latest teaching techniques. That being said, the popularity of guided reading (or any reading topic for that matter) in the professional literature may or may not play out in individual teachers' classrooms. Our own teaching experiences as well as working with numerous teachers have helped us to see that teachers use what they see working with their students regardless of how "hot" or not the technique might be. To accomplish our purpose, this article is divided into four parts: *What is Guided Reading?, What Caused It to Change?, What is Our Perspective?,* and *Where Do We See It Headed*?

What is Guided Reading?

Harris and Hodges (1995) offer the following definition of guided reading in *The Literacy Dictionary*: "reading instruction in which the teacher provides the structure and purpose for reading and for responding to the material read. *Note*: Most basal reading programs have guided reading lessons. See also **directed reading activity**."

Their definition takes us back 50 years to the 1940s when Emmett Betts, a prominent reading educator of the time, put forth the *directed reading activity*. In his now classic text, *Foundations of Reading Instruction* (1946), Betts elaborated on the importance of providing students with direction in order to best help them learn how to read. Guided reading was the second of four basic principles of the *directed reading activity*.

Table 1. *Betts' Directed Reading Activity (1946, pp. 430-431)*

Step	Purpose
1. Prepare students for reading the selection.	• To ascertain students' background for the given text.
	• To help students build background for the text if none or little exists.
	• To help students relate their backgrounds to the story at hand thereby creating interest and reading for meaning.
	• To help children make connections with previous stories.
	• To help children with any unique words they might encounter.
	• To establish a purpose for reading.
2. Silent reading of the selection precedes oral reading.	• To get the "wholeness" of the story.
	• To help students learn to apply what they know to decode unknown words and to apply comprehension skills asking for help when necessary.

3. Rereading, either silent or oral, for new purposes.	• To promote fluency, foster rhythmical reading, and to relate details to the big idea.
4. Follow-up activities to meet the needs and interests of students	• To develop organization skills and promote efficient study habits.

In their book *Teaching Children to Read, 2nd Ed.* (1957), Lillian Gray and Dora Reese echoed Betts' view and went so far as to use the term *guided reading* in their explanation of how to conduct a reading lesson. As with Betts, their explanation is grounded in the basal readers being used at the time. In their words,

> Teachers should follow the four lesson steps in the manuals to help their children extract all the values possible from a given story. These steps include preparation for the story, *guided reading* (emphasis added) of the story skills and drills for word analyses and vocabulary, and follow-up activities for applying new ideas. (p. 155)

More specifically, they delineate exactly what should happen during guided reading, the second step.

Table 2. *Step 2. Guided Reading. Based on Gray & Reese, (1957, p. 156)*

Teaching Procedure	Purpose
A. Ask the major motivating question.	• Helps children see a reason or purpose for reading.
B. Ask other questions to guide the children through the story.	• Helps children have a purpose for reading a given part of the story. • Depending on question, helps children to read silently, to visualize character, scene and action. • Helps build self-reliance because the children rely on themselves to find answers to questions. • When asked to read answers to questions, helps children to satisfy their need to achieve and to share.
C. Answer the major motivating question.	• Meets children's need to resolve tension by finding the answer to a question.

Nearly 10 years later, Bond and Wagner (1966) also called attention to guided reading in their nine-step daily reading lesson plan. Here's what they have to say about their fourth step, Guiding the Silent Reading:

> Now the children should read independently the selection for the purposes that have been established. If adequate preparation for read-

ing the selection has been made, the children will be able to read with comfort and in a way to fulfill the established purposes... Any child who gets into difficulty should be allowed to ask the teacher for help so that he may proceed. (p. 124)

George and Evelyn Spache were two reading authorities in the 1980s who carried on the ideas previously set forth about guided reading. In their book, *Reading in the Elementary School, 5th Ed.* (1986), they outlined five steps as part of a typical basal primary reading lesson: introduction of vocabulary, silent reading, oral reading, skill building, and supplementary activities. The second step focuses on guided reading.

Table 3. *Step 2: Silent Reading (Guided Reading, Guiding Interpretation, Developing Pupil Purposes) of a Basal Reading Lesson (Spache & Spache, 1986, p. 58-61)*

Teaching Procedure	Suggested Activities
1. Create prereading practice.	• Help children locate information such as where the story begins. • Help children to draw inferences about the story by looking at the introductory picture. • Set the purpose for reading by raising questions.
2. Have students read the story.	• Either in segments or by the whole, have students read the story to themselves. • While they read, provide assistance as needed encouraging students to apply what they know about decoding, using picture clues, or using context clues.

Guided reading caught our attention once again in the early 1990s when Margaret Mooney addressed it in her book *Reading To, With, and By Students* (1990). Mooney argued that guided reading was a way to read *with* students meeting instructional needs that could not be accomplished when teachers read aloud to students or when students were reading by themselves. With the 1996 publication of Fountas and Pinnell's book *Guided Reading: Good First Teaching for All Students*, guided reading began to shift from being an instructional technique to use with small groups to a way of defining small group instruction. Fountas and Pinnell (1996) identified the following essential elements of guided reading:

• Teacher works with children in small groups who are similar in their development and are able to read about the same level of text.

- Teacher introduces the stories and assists children's reading in ways that help to develop reading strategies so children can reach the goal of being able to read independently and silently.

- Each child reads whole texts with an emphasis on reading increasingly challenging books over time.

- Children are grouped and regrouped in a dynamic process that involves ongoing observation and assessment.

Since then, many others have defined essential elements of guided reading (Booth, 1998; Calkins, 2000; Cunningham & Hall, 2000; Opitz & Ford, 2001; Routman, 2000). Regardless of decade or author, all agree that guided reading is planned, intentional, focused instruction where the teacher helps students, usually in small group settings, learn more about the reading process.

What Caused Guided Reading to Change?

The history of guided reading has been significantly impacted by the role and nature of small group instruction in elementary reading programs. Small group reading instruction organized with homogenous ability groups was the predominant feature of elementary reading programs during most of the past 50 years (Caldwell & Ford, 2002). The infamous three reading groups — high, middle, and low — with not so subtle names — bluebirds, robins, and crows — were pervasive in reading classrooms. Research, however, revealed that grouping children by ability was fraught with problems (Barr, 1995; Opitz, 1998). Research-based concerns documenting arbitrary selection standards, inequitable access to quality meaning-based instruction, and long-lasting negative social stigma, however, did little to derail this questionable practice.

Again the problems with this practice had less to do with the actual grouping format and more to with the nature of instruction during the small groups. The type of guided instruction we documented advocated by Betts (1946) and others rarely captured the typical instruction in ability groups. This was true even when teachers were using the basal materials these experts were involved in designing. In her classic study, Durkin (1979) observed that small group instruction was basal-driven and that teacher-directed round-robin oral reading followed by literal-level questions was more often than not the type of instruction found. There was very little guided reading taking place in these groups.

While Durkin's (1979) study started to raise concerns, it was the publication of *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (BANOR) (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985) that finally became the catalyst for change. Summarizing the overwhelming negative research on ability grouping, BANOR reported that some scholars suggested that the reading group in which a child was initially placed had more to do with his or her reading achievement than his or her actual ability. Concluding that educators needed to explore other options than ability grouping, many basal publishers and educators moved toward more flexible grouping formats. Unfortunately, whole group instruction seemed to dominate these formats. While this did address concerns about ability grouping, it simply substituted one set of major concerns for another as the exclusive use of whole group instruction with little differentiation meant that many students were spending very little time with appropriate instructional materials. Some educators tried to help teachers by developing models for differentiating within whole class models (Paratore, 1990). These models tried to integrate guided reading within whole class instruction (Caldwell & Ford, 2002), but most classroom instruction failed to achieve this end goal. Within a few years, most educators were back looking for alternatives to yet another flawed grouping practice.

The pendulum swung back. After struggling with how to accommodate individual differences in whole group instruction, teachers rediscovered the value of using small groups to differentiate instruction in their reading programs. Now the challenge was how to return to small group reading instruction without returning to all the problems that caused people to move away from the practice in the first place. Conceiving of small group reading instruction as guided reading seemed to provide that needed new direction. Clearly influenced by the work that was being accomplished in individual and small group intervention programs, Fountas and Pinnell (1996) suggested guided reading as a classroom-based practice that would provide good first teaching for all children. They proposed that this might reduce the number of children who would need intervention programs away from the classrooms.

So how is guided reading different from the homogenous small group reading instruction of the past? Some changes, such as the change in materials, are fairly obvious. In the past basal readers were the primary reading sources for teaching children to read and most often authors wrote stories for the basal using a given number of words per story. But, while basal readers continued to be the mainstay of the reading material used to teach reading, the content became quite

different as some included children's literature, either the entire book or a chapter from the book. As guided reading gained popularity, basal reading programs included separately packaged sets of leveled readers specifically designed for this aspect of reading programs.

Some changes are more subtle and less obvious. A veteran teacher recently asked, "Weren't the reading groups we used in the past leveled? How is this any different from what we used to do?" Clearly the difference is not in the size or make-up of the groups. What the teacher was questioning surfaces a concern that we share. If teachers have subscribed to a view of guided reading that emphasizes the use of text levels as the primary way to group children, what we frequently see is a return to ability grouping. Even when teachers go beyond text levels, guided reading groups can become static because when we rely on ability grouping in guided reading, we are apt to create problems. One problem that could resurface is the debilitating effect of labeling. Continual reference to these levels could work to label the group in much the same way the traditional labels (bluebirds, robins, and crows) of years past did.

So how do we prevent the return of these problems? The difference needs to be in the nature of the instruction provided in the small homogenous groups (Hornsby, 2000; Schulman & Payne, 2000). Theoretically we see a significant shift from transmission models of learning to transactional models of learning. Instruction moves from being based on skill-based behaviorism to strategy-based constructivism as the key focus is no longer on covering materials, it is on teaching learners. Assessment is an ongoing process that informs decisions about who to teach, what to teach, what materials to use, and how to teach what is needed. Assessment-informed instruction should mean that small groups in guided reading will be organized in a much more fluid, flexible manner avoiding the static, fixed memberships of the ability groups of the past (The Wright Group, 1996).

The very term *guided* suggests a type of instruction that would be less about teachers transmitting information and more about teachers coaching students. This difference is especially critical when research reveals that the frequent use of "coaching during reading" may be one of the most significant distinctions between highly effective schools and moderately or less effective schools (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 1999). In instructional models that advocate a gradual release of responsibility (Au & Raphael, 1998; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983; Wilhelm, 2001), demonstrations are described as an explicit form of instruction in which the teacher has more

responsibility than the learner. Guided instruction suggests a form of instruction in which the learner shares the responsibility with the teacher.

In guided reading, scaffolding becomes the metaphor for teaching and learning. Scaffolding enables teachers not only to determine where learners are developmentally — but also where they need to be — so that teachers can plan sensitive, responsive instruction that provides a bridge between these two points. Boyle and Peregoy (1998) list five criteria defining the literacy scaffold model; these criteria:

- are applied to reading and writing activities aimed at functional, meaningful communication found in entire texts;

- make use of language and discourse patterns that repeat themselves and are therefore predictable;

- provide a model, offered by the teacher or by peers, for comprehending and providing particular written language patterns;

- support students in comprehending and producing written language at a level slightly beyond their competence in the absence of the scaffold; and

- are temporary and may be dispensed with when the student is ready to work without them. (p. 152)

Clearly the return to the use of small homogenous groups means that teachers and students in guided reading groups should sound, look, and act differently from the way they did in ability groups of the past.

Now that guided reading has been used for over 10 years, several individuals have addressed how guided reading can be adapted to other existing instructional models and formats (Cunningham, Hall, & Cunningham, 2000), how it can be adapted to other grade levels (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Fawson & Reutzel, 2001), what problems are emerging with the practice (Routman, 2000), and how second generation models might address these concerns (Opitz & Ford, 2001). Some have already suggested that we have reached a time in which we should move beyond guided reading (Mere, 2005).

What Is Our Perspective on Guided Reading?

Our 50-year look has helped us identify the following 11 common understandings about guided reading that have stood the test of time.

1. *All children have the ability to become literate.* Every child is ready to learn something and our job as teachers is to determine what the child already knows, what the child needs to learn, and to design instruction accordingly.

2. *All children need to be taught by a skilled teacher in order to maximize their full potential in reading.* Good teaching matters every step of the way. This is especially true for those children who need our help the most. Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) comment,

   Children who are having difficulty learning to read do not, as a rule, require qualitatively different instruction from children who are "getting it." Instead, they more often need application of the same principles by someone who can apply them expertly to individual children who are having difficulty for one reason or another. (p. 12)

3. *The goal of guided reading is to help children become independent readers.* The whole purpose of providing children with guided reading experiences is to help them become independent readers as quickly as possible.

4. *Guided reading is but one component of an effective reading program.* The purpose of guided reading is to show children how to read and to provide a scaffold (i.e., support) for them as they read. An effective literacy program also includes reading aloud by the teacher, shared reading, and independent reading by students. Elements of the reading program are enhanced by comparable elements in the writing program and the use of content instruction as additional opportunities for reading-writing strategies.

5. *Reading for meaning is the primary goal of guided reading. The instruction is designed to help children construct meaning.* Betts (1946) noted years ago,

   During the first reading the child is encouraged to ask for any kind of help he needs. To stimulate interest, to enlist effort, and to cause the child to come to grips with the meaning,

this silent reading is guided by suggestions, comments, and questions. (p. 508)

6. *Children learn to read by reading.* They need to do more reading at their independent and instructional levels to become competent readers. There is general agreement that when children read with 95-100% word accuracy and 75-100% comprehension, they are reading at their *independent level*. When children read with 91-94% word accuracy and 60-75% comprehension, they are reading at their *instructional level*. At the same time, we must acknowledge the complexity of variables that intersect when an individual comprehends. A child might very well be reading a book well beyond his or her "level" one day and the next day struggle with an "on level" book. Many factors contribute to the successful reading of a text and some of those factors relate to the text, others to the reader, and still others to the context in which the reading occurs. The interaction of these three variables accounts for the relative success of each particular reading experience (Alexander & Jetton, 2000; Leslie & Jett, 1997).

7. *Children need to become metacognitive: knowing what they know; the why and how of reading.* Children need to know what they know. They need to become aware of how reading works and they need to be able to use this knowledge to make the reading process work for them. This is called metacognition (McNeil, 1987). Research shows that when children are aware of their reading behaviors, they make good progress (Brown & Palinscar, 1982; Paris, 1983; Raphael, 1982; Wong & Jones, 1982). Pressley (2005) found that exemplary teachers who had the greatest impact on primary students' performance and achievement promoted this self-regulation.

8. *Children need to develop a self-extending system in order to be independent readers.* One of the ways to nurture students as independent readers is to question and model specific reading strategies. Guidance leads children to internalize specific strategies they can use independently to successfully read a text. Once internalized, they use the strategy(ies) they feel best fit to

help them solve the problem at hand. Most often, one strategy will not work in all situations; they are able to monitor themselves and choose from a range of strategies because they have developed a "self-extending system" (Clay, 1991, p. 325).

9. *All children need to be exposed to higher level thinking activities.* Learning how to retell story events either orally or in writing; discussing important events in a specific reading selection; listening and responding to others' views of a given reading selection; rereading text to find evidence to support a point of view — all of these tasks call on students to think about what they have read and to make connections with themselves, their world, and other texts.

10. *Children need to experience joy and delight as a result of the reading experience.* One of our main goals in providing children with different guided reading experiences is to show them that reading can be enjoyable and something they would want to do on their own. We are not only teaching children to read, we are also teaching children to be readers. Obtaining this positive disposition toward reading and writing may be even more critical in sustaining children's efforts and achievement than the acquisition of the skills of reading (Dahl & Freppon, 1995). As children experience success with specific texts, they most often want to repeat the experience, which provides meaningful, purposeful practice that leads to a favorable view of reading (Cullinan, 1992; Gambrell, 1996; Opitz, 1995; Watson, 1997).

11. *Specific elements characterize the successful guided reading lesson.* It relies on a three-part lesson plan (Before/During/After Reading) with one focal point for the overall lesson and the use of specific teaching strategies at each phase of the lesson. Lessons should help children achieve independence with the teacher assisting and assessing individual children as needed. Recognizing that comprehension is the essence of reading and the importance of making sure that students gain this understanding, teachers should also engage children in a discussion about the texts they read.

Where Do We See Guided Reading Headed?

In addition to what we have learned from doing this brief historical sketch of guided reading, our view of the future of guided reading is shaped from extensive involvement in working with educators as they learned about, implemented, and evaluated their use of guided reading. We have also learned much from analyzing results of a recent national survey asking teachers to discuss issues and ideas related to their practice of guided reading (Ford & Opitz, 2005). While our perspective on guided reading encompasses many of the commonly accepted understandings, we recommend a wider array of guided reading experiences that open up new learning possibilities for teachers and students alike (Opitz & Ford, 2001). Here are some of the most critical problems we propose for further examination related to the future of guided reading:

1. How do we help educators develop a clearer understanding of the purposes of guided reading to avoid returning to the flawed grouping practices of the past?

2. How do we show educators how to foster connections between guided reading and the other components of the literacy program so that it isn't seen by educators and/or learners as a separate component minimizing its potential impact and transfer of outcomes to other literacy experiences and contexts?

3. How can we explain and demonstrate different ways to integrate responding to texts during guided reading so that instruction moves beyond the micro-level of the text to foster attention on meaning-making at the global level of texts?

4. How do we help educators expand their text selections for use in guided reading to insure that students are working at their instructional levels and being exposed to a better mix of fiction, nonfiction, and alternative texts?

5. How do we develop independent learning opportunities away from the teacher that can rival the power of the guided reading instruction with the teacher (Ford & Opitz, 2004-2005)?

6. How do we help teachers integrate the variety of assessments that are available to them into a manageable system that they

will actually use to inform their thinking and impact during and beyond their guided reading instruction?

We encourage those interested in designing an in-depth staff development program to support teachers with implementing and improving guided reading practices to use some or all of these critical problems as focal points. Addressing these critical problems and documenting how they are addressed promises to contribute to the history of guided reading guaranteeing that the practice will continue to evolve.

Conclusion

While guided reading can be grounded in past theories and practices, it is also clear that current practice has been impacted by what we have learned from our concerns about traditional small-group reading instruction primarily seen in ability groups. We need to stand guard so that the popular return to small group reading instruction conceived as guided reading is not a return to the problematic practices of the past. This means expanding the view of what can happen during guided reading instruction. We must view the many discrete parts of guided reading — the texts, teacher, children, instruction — as a mosaic and understand the ways in which the parts contribute to an overall vision of the guided reading experience. We believe an expanded understanding of guided reading creates an instructional tool that more effectively nurtures and supports both reading and readers. As we look toward the future, we are discovering that there may be more than one way to implement effective guided reading instruction.

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