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Rachel Cwiek

Shannn Kroll-Limberg

Amy Pasternak

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# Guided Reading and Leveled Texts

BY RACHEL CWIEK, SHANNON KROLL-LIMBERG, & AMY PASTERNAK

**I**magine that you are standing in your school's leveled book room and are surrounded by shelves of books. What ideas do you have going through your mind? If you're like many teachers, you may be thinking, "Where do I begin?!" Leveled book rooms can be very overwhelming, even for experienced teachers. Developing professional understandings of how to use these books as tools is essential for the planning of guided reading in a balanced literacy program.

Often, educators have difficulties understanding the importance of the processes of leveling texts, selecting appropriate texts for students, creating successful guided reading groups and promoting a love for reading. Since reading is such a complex subject to teach, it is essential that educators have an understanding of instructional methods that are successful. This paper will explore the foundation of guided reading, leveling systems, text availability, and other concerns regarding text leveling.

## Understanding Guided Reading

Guided reading is an instructional method that provides an opportunity for teachers to support student learning through small group instruction. The purpose of guided reading is to scaffold instruction, where the learner is actively involved with the teacher. The term "guided" refers to the type of instruction that is less about modeling and more about coaching. During guided reading, the teacher's responsibility is not simply to show a child how to use a strategy, but to provide support as he or she works to develop it. Using a coaching model to support readers during reading can be a significant factor in highly effective instruction (Ford & Opitz, 2008). Guided reading involves ongoing observations and assessments that inform the teacher's interactions and appropriate text selection (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

If scaffolded instruction is the heart of guided reading, the ability to make fluid and flexible grouping decisions is vital (Ford & Opitz, 2008).

Students are placed into flexible groups based on the same developmental reading stages and are taught how to use particular reading strategies based on needs. Guided reading incorporates the use of texts at the instructional levels of students for optimal effectiveness of strategic instruction.

## *Role of Teacher*

According to Fountas & Pinnell (1996), the role of the teacher in guided reading is to support each reader's development while working with a small group of children who use similar reading processes and read similar levels of texts with support. In small group instruction, the teacher selects a text and introduces it, and then each student reads the text independently as the teacher listens in. As the students read, the teacher observes, notes reading behaviors, and coaches the reader as they read. After reading, students discuss the meaning of the story and highlight the particular reading strategies they used. Guided reading may also include word study, written analysis, or other kinds of discussions (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

The purpose of guided reading enables children to use and develop strategies while they are reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). The instruction focuses on constructing meaning, using problem-solving strategies to figure out unknown words, and understanding concepts about print. The main goal in guided reading is to help children use independent reading strategies successfully (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

*Rachel Cwiek holds a master of arts in teaching with a focus in literacy education. She lives in Plymouth, MI.*

*Shannon Kroll-Limberg is a resource room teacher with Livonia Public Schools and holds a master's degree in teaching literacy.*

*Amy Pasternak has a master's degree in literacy education and is an elementary school teacher at St. Anne School in Warren, MI.*

## The Foundation of Guided Reading

The foundation of guided reading is built upon eight principles originally created by Marie Clay, Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell, which are mapped out by Ford and Opitz (2008):

1. Guided reading starts with the belief that all children have the ability to become readers. Guided reading requires teachers to determine what the student already knows, what the child needs to learn, and design instruction.
2. All children need to be taught by a skilled teacher during guided reading in order to maximize reading potential.
3. Guided reading experiences help students to become independent readers, internalize strategies and self-monitor so that they can become successful readers.
4. In guided reading, children learn to read by reading. It is important that both independent and instructional level texts are used during instruction.
5. Reading for meaning is the primary goal of guided reading; the instruction is designed to help children construct meaning. During guided reading, teachers should engage in discussions, have students think about the texts, and allow them to make connections.
6. Guided reading should help children become metacognitive and understand the purpose of why they are reading. Giving students the opportunity to think about their thinking and reading behaviors enables them to make progress.
7. Children need to experience the joy and excitement of reading. This experience will teach children to become readers.
8. Guided reading relies on a three-part lesson plan including before/during/after-reading strategies. These strategies are the focal point of the overall lesson and specific strategies must be used throughout each phase.

## Gradual Release Model

According to Duke & Pearson (2002), the major goal of guided reading instruction is the gradual release of responsibility. The gradual release model emphasizes demonstrations that are explicit forms of instruction where the teacher has more responsibility than the learner. During guided instruction, the learner shares the responsibility with the teacher. In guided reading, instructional scaffolding provides structure for the teacher and supports them from assuming too much responsibility for the task at hand (Duke & Pearson, 2002). The gradual release model creates an environment where students can begin to apply what they are learning to promote independent application of skills.

## Instructional Scaffolding

“Does it sound right?” “Does it make sense?” “Does it look right?” These are familiar prompts that reading teachers use to help students make sense of the text (Frey & Fisher, 2010). The term “scaffold” originated from Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976), which is defined as a process by which the teacher supports the child in reaching a learning goal that he/she could not accomplish without support from a more experienced mentor (Ford & Opitz, 2008). Instructional scaffolding allows teachers to determine where learners are developmentally as well as where they need to be so instruction can be planned accordingly (Ford & Opitz, 2008).

According to Rogers (2004), the main role of the teacher in instructional scaffolding is to structure the task’s difficulty level, participate in the problem, focus the learner’s attention to a task, and motivate the learner. By guiding students, teachers are able to provide scaffolds of support, guide learners, continuously observe, and assess. Teachers are able to determine how to respond to each student. During observations, instructional decisions occur quickly and require the teacher to draw upon curricular and instructional knowledge that will guide the student. During guided reading, teachers question, check for understanding, prompt for metacognitive work, cue to focus the learner’s attention, and explain concepts. When misconceptions are not clarified, the teacher will directly model to strengthen understanding.

## Differentiated Instruction

The “one-size-fits all” traditional teaching model can be detrimental to student growth (Wood, 2005). Providing all students with the same reading instruction can be harmful to student achievement. In classrooms where students have varied reading levels, understanding how to accommodate all learners can be challenging. Teachers have struggled for years with how to accommodate the needs of all learners (Ankrum & Bean, 2008).

When teachers differentiate students into group arrangements, it is not the groups that make the difference, but rather what the teacher does with each group of students (Ankrum & Bean, 2008). According to the International Reading Association’s position statement, “*Making a Difference Means Making It Different*” (2002), differentiated instruction only occurs when the teacher has a deep knowledge of the reading process, understands the strengths and weaknesses of each student, and has the ability to teach responsively (Ankrum & Bean, 2008). Guided reading instruction should be based on the needs of each child. Through ongoing assessment, teaching decisions can be made from the information the data provides.

A variety of grouping formats should be included during literacy instruction, including whole group, small group, and individualized instruction. Materials in reading lessons should be based on the instructional reading levels of the students in the group. Books selected for guided reading should support the development of reading skills and strategies that students need to develop. Materials should be differentiated to meet the needs of all students. Ankrum & Bean (2008) state that it is the teacher who makes the primary difference in effective guided reading instruction, not the materials. A well-prepared teacher can effectively differentiate instruction and meet the needs of all students.

## Grouping Techniques & Assessment Tools

Guided reading uses a variation of grouping techniques to meet student needs. Grouping decisions depend on the teacher’s ongoing assessment of learners and the ability to make appropriate instructional decisions based on assessment. Informal assessments include daily observations, running records, and reading inventory assessments which help teachers to determine students’ reading levels and needs. Informal

assessments provide evidence about students’ strengths and weaknesses, and through analysis, teachers can determine how to maximize their reading potential. Since reading is complex, teachers must use a variety of assessments to determine students’ reading attitudes, word accuracy, speed, and comprehension.

The spirit of guided reading is based on teachers grouping students who are more alike than they are different based on levels and needs. Guided reading suggests that groups should be flexible and fluid, where students are constantly reevaluated and groups are reformed as needed. It is important that teachers see the difference between grouping students by level and grouping by need. Students who are reading at the same level may have entirely different needs (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). This idea will help teachers to develop effective groups in order for all students to succeed (Ford & Opitz, 2008).

## Leveled Texts

It is important to have many different types of texts when implementing a guided reading program. A balance between narrative and informational texts is critical. According to the National Center of Education in 2003 and further emphasized by Ford & Opitz (2008), there is a shortage of informational texts in primary classrooms that impacts student performance and achievement. Students who are exposed to different types of texts are able to learn about different text structures and build upon their comprehension of different texts.

Guided reading programs are designed by using a leveling system. This leveling system makes it easier for the teacher to match a student to a text at his or her reading level. Texts that are used during guided reading should be books with interesting text that support students. It is important to have direct, systematic instruction that focuses on strategy use as well as the use of instructional-level texts for all students. Guided reading is highly effective for struggling students who need more support with particular skills. It is critical to provide students with guided strategy instruction and instructional-level texts.

## Leveling Systems

The leveling of texts has been in discussion for many years and has driven much of the instructional practice that is being used today. Text leveling

allows readers to find success and grow in their reading development. When used properly, leveling can be a wonderful tool, but used incorrectly, it could produce major issues in motivation and reading development (Glasswell & Ford, 2011). One of the major problems with text leveling is the idea that if a student is at a certain level he or she cannot read above or below that level. This idea can lead to a student not wanting to read or completely losing interest. As educators, we have to remember that it is our goal to see that all students grow as readers, and sometimes that may mean allowing students to read something that is beyond their level.

Glasswell and Ford emphasize that it is very important for teachers to introduce students to texts at their instructional level during guided reading and at the same time provide successful grade level experiences. All students should be provided with equal opportunities to experience grade level concepts and using only leveled texts may limit the students' exposure to these experiences. In order to ensure that all students have these experiences, educators can expose them to various texts that may not be leveled. These allow students to develop their higher level thinking skills and help strengthen them as readers. Struggling readers will also experience grade level concepts that they may otherwise lose if they are limited to reading only leveled texts (Glasswell & Ford, 2011).

In the study by Glasswell and Ford, (2011) we learn that when a student is constrained to his/her "instructional level" and is only exposed to texts at that level, not only does development as a reader suffer, but he or she may also become disengaged. Students may become uninterested because the texts are not of interest to them, the texts lack authenticity, or the readers are unable to identify with the characters or plot. As teachers, we need to be able to provide these students with many different text experiences. Finding the balance of using texts that are appropriate for the students and at the same time using texts that may be challenging to them is both important and necessary in their development as readers. One of the most effective ways to motivate students is to provide them with both leveled texts to ensure development of skills and also books that may be a little more challenging and of high interest to keep them engaged and motivated. Teachers need to know their students well and provide books that they need and want

most. Perhaps teachers can provide surveys to their students and use that information to stock the classroom or grade level library appropriately and most effectively.

Another issue that arises with text leveling is how the level is determined. Teachers need to use their knowledge of students and their professional judgment in leveling texts instead of relying on rigid leveling systems. They need to make decisions that are best for their students. Numerous researchers have examined and compared the systems and scales widely used to determine their accuracy and reliability (Hoffman, Roser, Sales, Patterson & Pennington, 2000; Schwartz, 2005). Two such systems are the Scale for Text Accessibility and Support-Grade 1 (STAS-1) and the system created by Fountas and Pinnell. Hoffman, et. al. (2000) found both systems to be both reliable and accurate. They examined how these scales were used and implemented, as well as their effectiveness. The study found that both systems were reliable and useful tools for leveling texts.

### STAS (Scale for Text Accessibility and Support)

STAS-1 was developed in the 1990s in order to investigate the transition from the basals of the 1980s to literature-based anthologies. This system consists of two 5-point scales that look at the decodability and predictability of the text by examining various text characteristics. The decodability scale ranges from highly decodable to minimally decodable. Highly decodable texts contain one-syllable words, high-frequency words, and some inflectional endings. Minimally decodable texts contain more irregular words and require the reader to use many sophisticated and well-developed decoding skills. The predictability 5-point scale ranges from texts that are highly predictable to those that are minimally predictable. Highly predictable texts have strong picture support, rhyme and repetition, and enable the reader to give a strong reading after a few exposures. Minimally predictable texts have no significant support for word recognition as a function of predictability (Hoffman, et. al, 2000).

### Fountas & Pinnell

Another widely used leveling system was developed in 1996 by Fountas and Pinnell. This system contains 16 different levels of texts ranging from

kindergarten to third grade. Of these 16 levels, nine are dedicated to kindergarten and first grade. Texts specifically for kindergarten and first-grade readers include Levels A-I. These lower levels include texts that have simple storylines, clear print, and many high-frequency words. As the levels increase, the texts have more complex story lines, more advanced vocabulary, and require the reader to begin to make inferences. In the highest levels in this range, the print size becomes smaller, stories become longer and more complex, and the illustrations provide less support for the text. The study by Hoffman, et. al. (2000) compared this system to STAS-1 to see how accurate and reliable they both were. Much needed insight was offered into how texts are leveled and provided models that could be used to level books. They suggest that in order to effectively level texts, many aspects should be considered in the leveling process: word count, illustrations, print location, and amount of print per page. Knowledge of text levels offer teachers tools that they can use in their classrooms to assist struggling readers.

### Lexiles

Lexile scores are another way to determine text difficulty and can be used to easily match students to appropriate texts. Lexile scores are numbers corresponding to individual texts, as well as grade-level estimates. The higher the number, the more difficult the text and reading levels become. The Lexile system takes into account sentence length and word frequency. Lexile tests aim to produce targeted levels of texts, ones that students can comprehend with 75% accuracy or higher. For example, a typical Lexile range for a first grader would be up to 300L. The text *Matilda* by Roald Dahl (1998) is 890L.

According to research conducted by Walpole (2006), Lexiles are generally good predictors in matching students with instructional-level texts. This is useful because the goal is to have students practicing with instructional-level texts. On the other hand, Lexile scores are not as accurate in matching students with texts they are able to read at a higher rate. While rate is always important, teachers must understand that it is not the most important skill to have mastered.

Cunningham, et. al. (2005) explored Reading Recovery-specific texts in order to see how they instructionally supported beginning readers. The researchers state that texts at the instructional

level need to enable students to apply what they already know about reading and to gradually help them build on those skills as they are presented with more challenging texts. The results showed that the number of unique words in a book was the best predictor of curriculum demands as the Reading Recovery level increased. These texts were not found to adequately support readers in decoding, and high-frequency words accounted for only half of the words in print. It was also found that word level and sentence length in the texts did not increase as the levels increased.

Hoffman, et. al. (2000) studied how “little books,” the small easy-reader paperbacks, would be leveled according to Fountas and Pinnell and Reading Recovery standards. They used the STAS-1 system to calculate decodability and predictability. Patterns they discovered include the finding that as decodability and predictability decreased, text level increased consistently. In addition, sentence length continually grew with higher levels of texts. Other text features were not as consistent in their performance. These results show that the STAS-1 scale, Fountas and Pinnell and Reading Recovery systems are highly correlated with each other.

### *Other Concerns in Leveling*

When leveling books, there are many characteristics to consider, but text and book features are the most often examined when leveling. One has to consider whether books are consistent in these characteristics at a given level or if there is a range that students are exposed to while reading at a certain level. According to Dzaldov and Peterson (2005), teachers often restrict students to only a level or two of text that they can read instructionally, which will limit the students’ text experiences.

Dzaldov and Peterson (2005) examined various text and print features in selected texts to find consistency or a lack thereof. They discovered that a wide variety of text features and themes were found among texts at the same level. In addition, the researchers found a lack of diversity among characters and events from the texts in a given level. This examination shows that limiting students to one level may not be providing them with the best text selection. Dzaldov and Peterson conclude, “Not every text is suitable for guided reading instruction, and not every text used in classrooms needs to be given a level” (pg. 228).

Brabham and Villaume (2002) emphasize that texts may not always give students what they need to be able to grow and solve problems as they are reading. They state, "...[c]onstraining vocabulary to make texts decodable also produces language that is difficult to comprehend. These texts offer students limited opportunities to develop the powerful and robust word-solving and meaning-constructing strategies that characterize skillful readers" (pg. 440). They also explain how many teachers see students become reliant on repetitive language and are unable to transfer their thinking in order to understand words in more complex texts. Some students also become so reliant on sounding out words and attempt to apply this strategy to irregular words where it may not always work.

## Text Availability

When it comes to the availability of texts, many teachers either have access to a bookroom or are left to create their own collections with colleagues, independently, or simply use their basals. In a national survey conducted by Ford and Opitz (2008), based on nearly 1,600 responses, the average teacher had access to 467 texts. Of teachers surveyed, 36% did not share books with other classrooms; 39% shared among their grade levels; 23% shared among primary grade classrooms; 22% shared with their entire building. Fawson and Reutzel (2000) state that, "Many teachers who are just beginning to implement guided reading often express frustration with the need to provide large numbers of leveled books in classrooms where they do not have ready access to the quantities and varieties of leveled texts needed" (pg. 84). The authors describe a project in which graduate students participated, which led to the leveling of each K-2 selection in five largely popular basal reading series. Such projects can enable more teachers to create guided and shared reading activities because they now have levels with which they can work and build flexible groups.

## Additional Implications for Instruction and Student Progress

Teachers need to know and understand the different leveling systems that are used and the characteristics of texts that are found at various levels. Understanding leveling systems will enable teachers to use their knowledge and their own professional judgment when evaluating the needs

of their students. Teachers also need to be aware of various grade level concepts and evaluate whether or not their students are being exposed to these concepts with the texts that are presented to them. Teachers need to realize that regardless of reading levels, students need to be exposed to these concepts. Teachers may need to introduce students to texts that are not leveled in order to see that these experiences occur. This is also important to consider when trying to engage and motivate a student.

Teachers need to understand that leveling systems are tools that enable them to address student needs. When incorporating guided reading, teachers need to use their professional judgment when planning and implementing reading instruction. With the understanding of guided reading as a coaching model, teachers can support students to learn and use effective reading strategies at their instructional reading level.

## Conclusion

Although guided reading is grounded in theory and practice, it is important to understand how to use this model as an instructional tool. By understanding the synthesis of the parts of reading such as the text, teacher, students, and instruction, we are able to understand that guided reading creates an instructional tool that nurtures and supports reading and readers (Ford & Opitz, 2008). As educators, it is important that we have an understanding of how to effectively implement guided reading as an instructional model; otherwise, even the most extensive leveled book rooms will not meet the needs of all readers.

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