

When Guided Reading Isn't Working: Strategies for Effective Instruction

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ABSTRACT: Guided reading is widespread as a small group reading instructional approach, and yet in some cases the original intent of guided reading as a method for encouraging readers' independent strategic thinking has been lost. This article describes one group of teachers' discoveries as they searched for a way to improve their instruction by engaging in coaching labs and thereby turned what had been "private" teaching into "public practice." By entering this vulnerable space they came to some key realizations about the need to focus on student behaviors over skills, and the power of language to influence instruction.

Key words: Guided Reading, Gradual Release of Responsibility, Strategic Reading, Coaching



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“Jose has been stuck in the same text level for weeks now,” Janet laments as she picks at her salad in the staff lunchroom. “I really don’t know what else to try – he’s in guided reading every day with the other three who’ve also plateaued, but we’re running out of books at that level and they still don’t seem to apply any strategies on their own. That low group is just so quiet –I feel like I’m dragging them through the books sentence by sentence. I’m just so frustrated!” Janet’s fellow teachers nod sympathetically. They each have a group of students in a similar situation, and are equally as frustrated. It is past the midyear point and, just like last year, there is a group of students who simply are not making enough progress despite consistent, continual instruction in guided reading.

The above conversation could have taken place at the elementary school where I was an instructional coach for years. Ours was a high-poverty, majority English Language Learner setting where few students attended preschool before enrolling, and teachers were urgently aware that their efforts in the classroom comprised most, if not all, of the yearly academic support their students would receive. Teachers were working just as hard as those in other, more financially secure schools, and yet test scores and reading levels often did not reflect the effort.

Inconsistent progress in reading is not a problem unique to our school. Many teachers in the United States spend large segments of their literacy blocks conducting guided reading sessions with their students only to find that some students, particularly English Language Learners, minority, or underprivileged students, make minimal progress over the course of the year (Allington, 2001). Students may continually repeat the same reading errors, stall in their progress through textual reading levels, and often develop passivity in the face of difficult texts that contributes to their ongoing lack of progress. Oftentimes these students are then shuttled into intervention programs to practice skills in isolation while experiencing very little reading of actual books (Allington, 1983; Allington & Walmsley, 2007).

In my role as a literacy coach I worked alongside

many teachers disappointed by their students’ lack of progress in reading, and I witnessed numerous frustrated students struggle through guided reading sessions. Several years ago the primary grade teachers at our school came to me having reached a breaking point – despite having almost daily guided reading sessions with students and various support teachers aiding their instruction, many students had stagnated at the mid-year point. The teachers were exhausted and wanted answers. Why were students not making more progress when teachers were working so hard? The teachers and I decided to find out.

Optimal Guided Reading

In its optimal form, guided reading is small group reading instruction designed to teach students to apply strategic reading behaviors independently (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Johnson & Keier, 2010; Schulman & Payne, 2000). A small group of four to six students meets with the teacher to read a carefully chosen, appropriately leveled text. The focus of the lesson is on guiding students to apply reading strategies that have been previously taught and modeled by the teacher. The groups are formed flexibly according to similar reading levels and demonstrated needs, and students are never sentenced to a specific group for an indefinite, lengthy period. In a typical lesson the teacher chooses a small group of students with similar reading strengths and needs who are reading approximately the same level text. S/he chooses a book for the group to read that supports the intended teaching point of the lesson. The goal is to provide a delicate balance of instruction at the beginning of the guided reading session – just enough to clarify any potential misconceptions, while leaving enough words and concepts for the students to solve on their own.

During an ideal guided reading lesson, students independently read the selected texts silently and apply word-solving decoding strategies. The teacher looks on and listens in, providing support through prompting of specific strategies, while the majority of the problem-solving is carried out by the students. As s/he watches and listens to the students read, the

teacher is noting behaviors, misconceptions, and successful or unsuccessful strategies used by the students. After they have had a chance to read the story, possibly several times, the teacher then reconvenes the students to focus on one or two teaching points based on her/his observations.

While the above description outlines an optimal guided reading lesson, the reality is that day-to-day instruction may vary widely. For instance, guided reading sessions can become dominated by excess instruction on isolated skills, leaving little or no time for students to read connected text. In other cases, teachers might “automate” sessions by teaching identical skills to successive groups of students rather than differentiating instruction based on observations (Burkins & Croft, 2010). With these potential pitfalls in mind, the teachers in my school and I decided to examine our own guided reading instruction more closely.

When Guided Reading Isn't Working

The teachers with whom I worked had received plenty of professional learning on the structures and purposes of guided reading during previous years, and thus were determined to figure out why our guided reading sessions were not supporting our struggling readers. We decided to begin coaching labs similar to those conducted by Boston public schools (Cohen, Guiney, Lineweaver, & Martin, 2002), in which teachers meet during school hours to discuss common problems of practice, and then co-plan lessons to teach as colleagues observe. In the Boston public schools' coaching labs, participants, over a series of weeks, revise lessons, reteach, notice the immediate effects on students, turning what is usually “private” teaching into “public practice.” For our coaching labs on guided reading we chose to meet during school hours while students were available, and to enter a vulnerable space with each other by conducting guided reading sessions together in a laboratory setting during planning

periods. Over a series of weeks we co-planned and co-taught sessions, debriefed after school, closely examined running records, and analyzed videotapes of guided reading from our classrooms. We created a community of public practice, causing teachers to comment on the power in being able to see each other teach for the first time, and having the freedom

to sit back and intently watch the results of instruction on students.

Over time we came to some key realizations about our work during guided reading and the occasionally misplaced energy we had been putting forth. Two big discoveries resulted:

1. Guided reading instruction needed to focus more on changing student behaviors

and less on their mastery of skills.

2. Subtle changes in the language we used with students had an immense influence on student success.

We found that we were able to help our students make more progress in reading by keeping these questions at the forefront of our instruction: What are students doing with what they know? Are they actively problem-solving text? Who is doing the majority of the reading work? The following sections describe our findings for each.

What Do Students Do With What They Know?

Too often the core behaviors that underlie successful reading become obscured by the list of phonics and fluency standards teachers are tasked with teaching. The temptation is to cover isolated skills within small group reading by teaching sight words, vowel sounds, the silent e rule, or specific vocabulary. On occasion I have seen 15 minutes of a 20-minute guided reading session taken up by instruction on apostrophe use or sight word games. While phonics and grammar rules are important, a student can understand one or all of these skills without being a proficient reader. The reality is that the act of reading is a strategic endeavor requiring readers to

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think actively and problem-solve their way through texts (Clay, 1991). Decisions must be made constantly, misunderstandings must be clarified, and new knowledge must be contrasted with existing understanding. Readers must have a tool-belt of strategies available and a firm grasp on how to use them when challenges arise.

Take, for instance, the student who reads, “Milk cans from cows” when the text says *comes* instead of *cans*. Teachers would expect a proficient reader to listen to herself as she reads, to instantly recognize that what she read did not make sense, and to go back to use both textual clues and the meaning of the sentence, and most likely the picture, to self-correct quickly. If the reader does not go back to self-correct that does not necessarily mean the student needs more isolated sight word drills on the word *come*, though many students would be sentenced to that fate after such an error. Instead, the use of *cans* rather than *comes* should be a signal that this reader is not aware that reading should make sense. She is not actively thinking and comprehending as she reads, or what is commonly known as self-monitoring (Burkins & Croft, 2010; Clay, 1991; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

Guided reading sessions should be focused on teaching readers the strategies they need in order to think their way through texts (Burkins & Croft, 2010; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Constructivist theory forms the basis of guided reading instruction and states that learners understand deeply and more effectively those ideas which they construct on their own or with the support of others (Vygotsky, 1978). Students truly own knowledge they construct for themselves. As an example, in classroom A, students memorize sight words, write spelling patterns, and learn to sound out words in isolation. Conversely, in classroom B, students listen to and read many books a day and understand books to be the source of powerful messages and fascinating information. Students in classroom A are being delivered requisite skills while students in classroom B are constructing a deeper understanding of reading with purpose. While students in classroom B may also study sight words and spelling patterns, they have constructed their own understandings of reading and can more flexibly apply skills and strategies because of this understanding. Guided reading provides students the

opportunity to apply their constructed knowledge of strategic reading practices in the context of authentic reading experiences.

Proficient readers often fall back on several proven decoding strategies when they encounter difficult words: checking the picture for confirmation or clues to unknown words, rereading when text does not make sense, breaking longer words into recognizable chunks, keeping the overall meaning of the story at the forefront of their minds, and constantly checking to be sure their reading is making sense (Clay, 2001). Oftentimes, when faced with a struggling reader, teachers see the need for more instruction in skills such as sight words, the silent e rule, or blends and digraphs. While it is true that these students may benefit from additional instruction in these skills, it should not replace the opportunity to learn the decoding strategies and self-monitoring behaviors used by proficient readers (Allington, 1983; Burkins & Croft, 2010).

This misplaced focus on skills was evident in our work with struggling students during coaching labs as the teachers and I noticed that we had focused too much on covering what we felt were the missing skills our students needed rather than the behaviors they failed to exhibit. To help us focus on these behaviors, we found it easier to discuss what our *successful* students *were* doing rather than what the struggling ones were not. When faced with that question we could see that proficient readers seemed to read with an understanding that a story should make sense, and they usually self-corrected when it did not.

As we observed each other coaching students during our guided reading labs, we also began to notice a pattern in the prompts we used with students. More often than not, we guided students to use more graphophonic cues than meaning cues (Burkins & Croft, 2010) by saying such things as, “What sound does the first letter make?” or “Look for a chunk that you know.” While these prompts may be helpful, they should not be used to the exclusion of asking students to think about what makes sense or to use the picture, both of which turn the student’s attention to the meaning of the story. We realized

that our prompts were pulling students further away from the text and turning what should have been an engaging reading experience into an exercise of meaningless skills that made little sense to our young readers. We began a focused effort to balance our responses to student errors to include both phonic and meaning prompts by first listing the meaning prompts for ourselves and then creating visual reminders for our own use during guided reading.

Over time we began to find that the success of guided reading had less to do with student knowledge of skills and more to do with our own behaviors as teachers. We had been striving to provide students with standards and skills in order to have them “do” reading well, but we found instead that the answer had more to do with what we, as teachers, chose to do or not do during the lesson. We also came to realize that, rather than needing to work harder at teaching reading, perhaps we had been doing too much.

Who Is Doing the Work?

Guided reading is based upon a framework of reading informed by Pearson and Gallagher's Gradual Release of Responsibility model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). The model (see Figure 1) states that instruction should occur along a continuum beginning with the teacher modeling the desired behavior, followed by the teacher and students engaging in shared activities as the teacher gradually allows the students to gain increasing responsibility, and finally the students independently reading without support. This approach is commonly referred to as “I do, we do, you do” (Routman, 2008). In many models of balanced literacy, reading instruction follows the gradual release framework and progresses from modeled reading to shared reading, then guided reading, and finally independent reading (Burkins & Croft, 2010). Key here is the placement of guided reading just before the independent reading stage, with students holding a majority of the responsibility for reading during guided reading sessions.

In reality, however, many guided reading sessions seem to take place much higher on the continuum, with the teacher constantly prompting reading

behaviors, correcting students, and redirecting miscues. In these cases, teachers have taken over much, if not all, of the responsibility of reading from the students. Students, in turn, become passive and develop learned helplessness, allowing the teacher to continue doing much of the work (Allington, 1983).

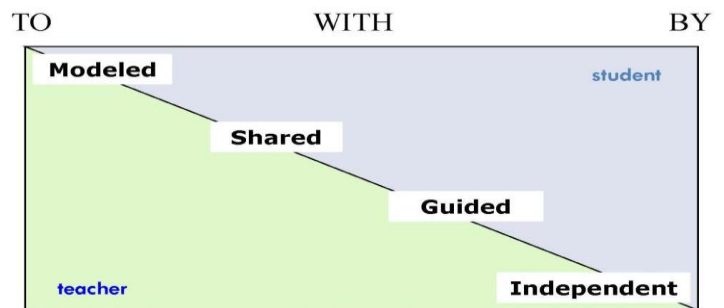
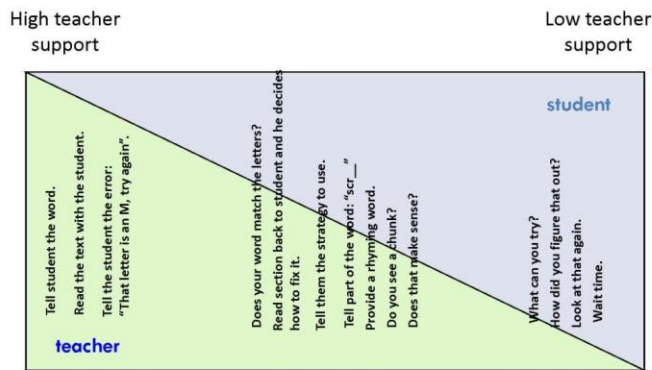


Figure 1. Gradual release of responsibility. Adapted from “The Instruction of Reading Comprehension,” by P. D. Pearson and M. C. Gallagher, 1983, *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 8, and “Reading to, with, and by Children,” by M. E. Mooney, 1990.

In our coaching labs we found that we could do much to improve guided reading sessions by becoming very intentional about the language prompts we used with students as we released responsibility. We found that the prompts fell neatly along the gradual release continuum, with some prompts providing a high level of teacher support while others handed over a majority of responsibility to the student. Over time, we collected the prompts we typically used and categorized them according to the level of student responsibility they required (see Figure 2). Prompting by telling the student their error or chorally reading with students provides a great deal of support and does not allow them to problem-solve. The student and teacher can equally share the decoding work, however, if the teacher provides the strategy and allows the student to apply it by prompting, “Look at the picture – did that make sense?” the student is required to problem-solve the word after receiving minimal support from the teacher. This response is particularly effective with students who tend to have one “favorite” strategy and need reminding to combine multiple strategies. The teacher can remind them of an alternate strategy, but it is up to the students to put it to use and solve the word.



It's all about who's doing the work.

Figure 2. Prompting students towards independence.

On the other hand, prompts that require the most responsibility from the student tend to be very vague and open-ended. The teacher might simply ask the student, "What can you try?" when a difficult word is encountered. This response requires that the student choose a strategy, apply it, and evaluate its effectiveness entirely on his/her own. The teacher could even wait and say nothing at all, putting the student fully in control of the decisions around decoding. Teachers I worked with commented that this feels uncomfortable and awkward – "After all," they explained, "our job is to teach, and saying nothing or giving vague prompts feels as if we're not doing our job." Burkins and Croft (2010) respond, "This does not mean that a teacher does not support students; it means that we support them in learning to support themselves, and we do this systematically across instructional contexts" (p. 12). What this support looks like has everything to do with how successful students will be at breaking the reading code. It is helpful to keep in mind the low-support position guided reading fills on the gradual release continuum. Guided reading sessions are the optimal time for students to demonstrate the strategies they have internalized from previous instruction. The silence of teachers allows, and even

requires, students to independently put into practice all that has been taught. Sometimes students' strategies will not be successful, but if we, as teachers, are smart, we will let them struggle, allow them to evaluate the effectiveness of their attempts, and apply different strategies if necessary.

In our work with students we found it best to begin at the low support (right-hand) end of the prompt continuum (see Figure 2). We know that during ideal guided reading sessions, if we are working with the appropriate level texts and readers have been taught problem-solving strategies, students should be able to do a majority of the reading work. Our work with students in the coaching labs allowed us to practice this release of responsibility with the support of our

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peers while also allowing us the luxury of observing the direct results as students began to feel empowered as readers. On occasion we noticed a reader's behavior quickly change during the course of reading one book – as the teacher simply prompted, "What can you try?" the student soon stopped appealing for help and began rereading and self-correcting on her own.

Donna (pseudonym), a first grade teacher who was applying our work in her own guided reading sessions, reported to the group of teachers that one of her students asked, "How come you're not helping me with the words more?" We chuckled at her story and the sensible response she gave the student, but realized that many of our students might be feeling for the first time the healthy pressure of being solely responsible for their own reading. In our previous efforts to protect and support our students, we had created dependency, passivity, and much more work for ourselves.

Overall, our coaching labs provided us with the chance to focus more closely on our instruction than

we ever had before. We found that by concentrating more on student behaviors rather than on simple skills we were able to help struggling students reproduce the methods used by more proficient readers. Just as importantly, we found that becoming more intentional in our own language usage when prompting students had an immediate, noticeable influence. Flexible movement up and down the gradual release of responsibility scale was vital for responsive teachers. By beginning with a low level of teacher support and providing more support only if needed, we developed more independent student behaviors and our readers became more confident in their abilities.

Guided Reading Success

Current pressures on teachers to improve student achievement continue to rise, and teachers everywhere are searching for ways to support students as they learn to become proficient readers. For teachers who feel frustrated and exhausted after unsuccessful guided reading sessions, honest self-evaluation may be in order. Teachers I work with have found that video-recording guided reading sessions with students allows them to capture their instructional decisions for later review and can slow down the lesson to let them evaluate the effectiveness of their prompts. It can also be a very positive exercise when done with an honest colleague, one who will give feedback and suggestions on ways to improve what might feel like unproductive guided reading sessions.

It can be hard to make the change from skill-focused prompts to a problem-solving mindset. Reminding students to use specific decoding strategies requires that the teacher be intentional and keep the strategies at the forefront of his/her mind. One method that many teachers find helpful is to preplan the prompts they will use with students. By writing, "Did that make sense?" and "Look at the picture" on sticky notes kept in plain sight nearby, teachers are much more likely to remember to prompt students to apply strategies rather than ask that they use

phonics rules in isolation. Teachers can also use this method to remember to work at the "low support" end of the prompting continuum (Figure 2). Teachers might write, "What else can you try?" on a sticky note as a reminder to resist the temptation to follow up too quickly with more support. Once students realize we expect and believe they can solve unfamiliar words, passivity can begin to turn into growing confidence. Many teachers printed the continuum and kept it on a clipboard at the guided reading table to remind them to start with low support and only provide more support if needed.

Another way for teachers to be more intentional about their support for students during guided reading is to spend time beforehand examining running records for each student in their flexible reading groups. Running records serve as a transcript of the act of reading and allow teachers to see into students' heads as they read, illuminating the strategies they use and the decisions they make. Examining the running record can help teachers plan specific prompts for particular readers, such as, "Does that sound right?" for the student reading nonsense words without self-correcting or "Do you see a chunk?" for the student having difficulty with multi-syllable words. Targeting prompts directly to student behaviors is highly effective practice, and by examining running records and pre-planning these prompts teachers can ensure that instruction meets readers' needs.

If guided reading isn't working, we as teachers need to examine our instruction and determine where the problem lies. Too often, ironically, fixing the problem requires that the teacher do less work, rather than more. But while we may do less of the actual reading work with students, we still must work hard to teach students a problem-solving mindset and restrain ourselves from prompting too early or with too much support. Teaching reading means teaching students to think, and guided reading can be one highly effective method for creating thinking, confident readers.

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