

Preparing for & Teaching Guided Reading

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Introduction

In countless classrooms across the country, students are engaging in small, focused guided reading groups. The purpose of these groups is to help students learn effective strategies for processing text with understanding (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). The majority of primary teachers know the value in guided reading, but to make these groups successful, there is a specific structure with which to use, that has seen great success with students of varying reading levels. In order to make these groups as successful as possible, teachers need to understand many things about guided reading and how students learn to read, decode and understand words and stories. For the purpose of this literature review, the main focus will be on how teachers can prepare for and instruct effective and meaningful guided reading groups. Guided reading gurus, Fountas and Pinnell (2009), outline that there are three keys to having successful guided reading groups: expert teaching; good books; and good instructional design. In understanding and implementing these things, teachers will also be able to monitor and assess student growth and achievement, and see the benefits of having well-planned and executed guided reading groups.

Expert Teaching

In order to have successful and meaningful small guided reading groups, an “expert teacher” is needed to prepare for and teach these groups. An expert teacher must know the main purpose and definition of guided reading groups, the difference between whole and small group reading, and prepare and organize the most beneficial materials for the groups. Ferguson & Wilson (2009) defined guided reading groups as having the ability to increase students’ oral reading fluency, phonetic understanding, and their overall reading level. With this power, it is crucial that the teachers of guided reading groups know how to prepare for and plan lessons. Guided reading groups also work on each student’s individual strengths, which allows for

differentiated instruction in a small-group setting to work on furthering student learning goals (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). As teachers understand the potential outcomes that guided reading groups can have, they must also understand that the groups must have a focused purpose, which does not come easily without preparation.

Defining Whole and Small Group Reading Lessons

To be prepared to teach a guided reading group, teachers need to first understand the difference between the teaching styles that should be used during a whole versus small group reading lesson. Diller (2007) defines the purpose of a whole group reading lesson as a time for expert teachers to “model reading and writing strategies – how to read and write, using explicit language so they know exactly what to do” (p. 3). This is a time for teachers to show the class how to read with fluency and expression. The focus is more on the teacher modeling how exactly students should read, versus expecting the students to apply the strategies independently. Diller (2007) also defines a small group reading lesson as a time to “meet the needs of all students to accelerate their learning” (p. 4). Small group guided reading focuses on the teacher supporting and scaffolding the reader for them to read as independently as possible. An expert teacher understands that small guided reading groups should be taking the skills and strategies from the whole group lesson and helping students to apply those strategies effectively, with support.

Using Specific Language and Instructional Strategies

There is a certain language that expert guided reading teachers use; it controls the group in a positive way, and promotes the best behaviors for each reader. The language that teachers use during small groups supports students, but does not do the work for them. For example, at the beginning of a lesson, the teacher might introduce the strategy or skill that he or she wants each child to use while reading that day. If the skill is fluency, the teacher’s language might

sound like this: “I’m going to be listening for reading that sounds like talking, and I’ll jump in to help you if you need me” (Lipp & Helfrich, 2016, p. 640). Specific language allows students to know exactly what to focus on, and provides opportunities for the teacher to help and praise students who show that skill being used. It also helps while individually reading with students, to demonstrate any skill or strategy that he or she is struggling with, in a one-on-one environment. This concept will be elaborated on more in the “During Reading” section, but one example would be to prompt students while reading if they come to a difficult word. This might sound like: “Do this. What did you notice? Why did you stop? Think about what you know that might help” (Lipp & Helfrich, p. 643). Through the expert teaching strategy of using specific language to promote reading skills and strategies while reading, students are able to connect lessons to lessons, and use what they learn during independent reading.

Using Good Books & Materials

In most current guided reading instructional books for educators, there will no doubt be some mention of, if not entire sections about, using leveled texts with students. Fountas and Pinnell (2009) define finding and using appropriate leveled texts with any reader:

The key is matching readers’ ability to a text that is not too easy and offers enough challenge and support that they feel they are successful and learning with reasonable effort. When the text conditions are ‘just right,’ readers can develop pride and confidence. (p. 491)

The process of choosing and finding appropriate books that will hold the interest of students is not an easy task; there is a lot more to it than just grabbing whatever is on the shelf. Elementary literacy coach, Lynne Kush, described how looking at the target skill for each lesson, thinking about the students within the group and their interests, and having a conscious thought

process while choosing will better prepare teachers to find appropriate books versus choosing randomly (personal communication, January 18, 2017). After leveled texts have been read during a reading group, they can then become “familiar reads” for students to continue practicing fluency and expression independently. Familiar reads are often stored in students’ personal book bags or boxes, and should be started with every lesson to get students warmed up and practicing reading with texts that each are successful with (Lipp & Helfrich, 2016).

Other important materials to include and have prepared before reading groups begin include any anchor charts that have been introduced to the whole group, which may include vowel patterns, blends, digraphs, or word families. These charts allow students the chance to reference them while reading, and promote more problem-solving when a student gets stuck on a word. In an interview, literacy coach, Lynne Kush, also suggests having simple things that every teacher will use with students during a group, including: sticky notes, pencils, white boards, guided writing notebooks, white “cover up tape,” magnetic letters for word work, and highlighting tape (personal communication, January 18, 2017). All of these materials will help build a solid foundation that a successful reading group is built on, with necessary books and items to aid in teaching and practicing good reading skills.

Planning Lessons with Good Instructional Design

Every guided reading group lesson has a precise schedule of events, which must be planned out with good instructional design and followed through on. Having a set schedule each group provides the students an expectation of what is to come each day, and the teacher builds a strong group that is led with fidelity. Most guided reading plans consist of a “Day One” and a “Day Two” of any new book. However, since the “Day One” of a lesson is always a new book

introduction and a “Day Two” is commonly rereading and writing about the text, the following information will be focused solely on the reading of a new text portion, or the “Day One.”

Familiar Read

The first thing that each student should do when they arrive at the table for reading group is pull out a “familiar read,” which was briefly mentioned in the previous section. This familiar read is of their choosing, and is a book in which the student is fluent in reading and does not have to stop frequently for decoding and understanding. It is a brief time for all students to get acquainted with reading again, and allows the teacher to do a running record test for one student daily, on a text that has already been introduced. Ferguson and Wilson (2009) suggest that after listening to one chosen student read, it is helpful to tell the reader one compliment that was heard or seen while he or she was reading, and one tip to try as a reader in today’s group. Lipp and Helfrich (2016) conclude that the entire process of a familiar read, including the reading itself and any modeling of appropriate strategies with the student, should take only about three minutes. This allows time for one student to be the “star” of the group, and gives great insight to the teacher about an individual student’s reading behaviors and accuracy.

Book Introduction

After the brief familiar reading time, a new book is introduced to the group, with the very important, yet brief, introduction. For each new book, the title is introduced, and some sort of connection should be made about the story. This connection helps students to use what he or she already knows to connect to the topic that the new story will be about. Then, a brief summary is given about the story to help students understand exactly what they will be reading. The brief summary would also include any text features, such as the genre, headings, captions, or diagrams that may be present, to provide a time for readers to prepare to read those as well.

After the summary, the teacher sets a purpose for the students' reading that day. The purpose could include focusing in on the specific genre, a character study, any new facts to look for, etc. It also sets the expectation for the day while physically reading, including pointing, or not pointing, to words, fluency, expression, or intonation. It could even include what students are expected to do when finished with the book, such as reread, write down any new vocabulary words or connections made. As a whole, teachers should remember that "less is more" for a book introduction, and that there should still be some problem-solving left for readers to do (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). The teacher is the gateway to a new book for students, so it should be introduced with enthusiasm with connections being made to the interests of the students. Lipp and Helfrich (2016) have said that a "solid, supportive book introduction engages conversation, developing oral language and meaning around the text, setting the reader up for a successful read" (p. 642).

During Reading

The structure of the reading group during the reading of a new text is crucial to the success of the read. Students should be softly or silently reading independently, and the teacher should be setting the expectations for behaviors while reading and following through with any redirections or prompts needed. Schwartz (2005) found that while interacting with student readers during a guided reading group, teachers must make many quick decisions about how to respond to and prompt students. These complex decisions often arise while a student or group of students is reading a story aloud, and the teacher must decide how to support and guide each reader. The factors that should be analyzed while listening to a reader include: cues (used, noticed, and neglected), strategies (monitoring, searching, and fluency), and prompt support. By listening or watching carefully as a student reads and looking at the prior reading history,

Schwartz says teachers can see if there is any recurring patterns in errors. He says, “To respond quickly and effectively to teaching opportunities during oral reading, we need a tentative but elaborate theory of a particular student's literacy development” (Schwartz, 2005, p. 438). A teacher must look at a student’s reading history and current reading to decide a course of action.

Cues and strategies are both actions that the student develops with reading practice. Students may use, notice, or neglect to notice patterns and phonics errors while reading, which are types of cues. A reader may also use searching strategies to “generate an initial attempt to read a word,” and monitoring strategies to “evaluate the attempt and initiate further searching if needed” (Schwartz, 2005, p. 439). With any of these attempts that a student makes, the teacher must observe whether a student can identify when an error is made, and prompt accordingly. For example, if the student substitutes the word “flat” for “fat” and does not notice the error, the teacher could prompt them with a monitoring question such as, “Does that make sense?” If the student does recognize the error but doesn’t know how to proceed, a searching prompt could be, “Try that again and think what would make sense.” By understanding the reader’s needs, the teacher can use many forms of questions and prompts that allow the reader to be in control of learning and practicing good reading strategies. It also allows the reader to gain more insight into errors that he or she makes and how to fix them, without the teacher doing all the work.

After Reading

When the group is done with the reading of a new text, the first question a teacher asks the group should relate back to what the original prompt or question was when the focus was stated. For instance, if the focus was on the characters in the story, the first thing discussed with students should be related to the characters. Phillips (2013) concludes that questioning should be more of a conversation with readers, not the teacher repeatedly asking interrogating questions,

looking for specific answers from students. This allows more room to discuss the text like “real” readers do, with prompting to help stimulate inferential comprehension. It also promotes equal contributions from everyone in the group. Teachers can accomplish conversational comprehension discussions by asking open, inferential questions. An open, inferential prompt might come from having students connect the meaning of different parts of a fictional story. It can be difficult to let the students discuss stories in this way, but it will lead to overall higher comprehension levels and engagement. Overall, the less talking the teacher does during comprehension discussions, the more time students have to comprehend what they read. Phillips summarizes the method by promoting teachers to use more inferential questions at a slower pace, versus frequent literal questions. A few examples of discussion questions include:

Fiction:

- What do you think about the way ____ acted? Who did this character remind you of?
- If the story had a different ending, how would that change what happened?
- Name the problem. How would you have solved it if you’d been in the story?

Nonfiction:

- How does _____ compare with ____?
- What are the parts or features of____?
- Why do you think____?

After reading and questioning, it is always a good idea to point out what students did as good readers (rereading, thinking about the blends, figuring out new words), and remind students to keep doing this the next, and every, reading time.

Conclusion

Through development of expert teaching, gathering and using appropriate materials, and planning lessons intentionally and with good instructional design, any teacher will be able to develop meaningful and effective guided reading groups. These groups will allow teachers to monitor and measure the growth of individual students, and provide differentiated instruction to students of varying ability levels with the peace of mind that his or her instruction is effective. However, even with all of these instructional improvements, there are always ways in which a teacher can continue developing his or her guided reading lessons, with more strategies and techniques that fit the needs of specific groups of students. There are aspects of guided reading groups that have not been included in this research, including: guided writing within reading groups, word work techniques, literature circle groups, and even what the rest of the class is engaged in during group time. These are all variations of added instruction that many teachers include and could develop more in regards to his or her class. Although these are beneficial aspects of many guided reading groups, the researched techniques which include expert teaching, using appropriate materials, and planning structured lessons are going to build a strong foundation for teachers to build reading groups on, and through which students become stronger, more confident readers.

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