GUIDED READING

The Romance and the Reality

Irene C. Fountas ▪ Gay Su Pinnell

In thousands of classrooms around the world, you will see teachers working with small groups of children using leveled books in guided reading lessons. The teachers are enthusiastic about providing instruction to the students in ways that allow them to observe their individual strengths while working toward further learning goals. Books are selected with specific students in mind so that with strong teaching, readers can meet the demands of more challenging texts over time.

Readers are actively engaged in the lesson as they learn how to take words apart, flexibly and efficiently, while attending to the meaning of a text. They begin thinking about the text before reading, attend to the meaning while reading, and are invited to share their thinking after reading. They deepen their understanding of a variety of texts through thoughtful conversation. The teachers have embraced guided reading, "an instructional context for supporting each reader's development of effective strategies for processing novel texts at increasingly challenging levels of difficulty" (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, p. 25).

As we look back over the decades since we wrote our first publication about guided reading, we recognize that there has been a large shift in schools to include guided reading as an essential element of high-quality literacy education. With its roots in New Zealand classrooms (Clay, 1991; Holdaway, 1979), guided reading has shifted the lens in the teaching of reading to a focus on a deeper understanding of how readers build effective processing systems over time and an examination of the critical role of texts and expert teaching in the process (see Figure 1).

We realize that there is always more to be accomplished to ensure that every child is successfully literate, and that is our thesis in this article—the exciting romance with guided reading is well underway, *and* the reality is that continuous professional learning is needed to ensure that this instructional approach is powerful.

There is an important difference between implementing parts of a guided reading lesson and using guided reading to bring readers from where they are to as far as the teaching can take them in a given school year. If you are a teacher using guided reading with your students, we hope that, as you read this article, your effective practice will be confirmed while you also find resonance with some of the points of challenge that will expand your professional expertise. If you are a system leader, we hope you will find new ways to support

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Figure 1 Structure of a Guided Reading Lesson

STRUCTURE OF A GUIDED READING LESSON

SELECTION OF A TEXT:
The teacher selects a text that will be just right to support new learning for the group—at the instructional level.

INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXT:
The teacher introduces the text to scaffold the reading but leaves some problem-solving for readers to do.

READING THE TEXT:
Students read the entire text softly or silently. If students are reading orally, the teacher may interact briefly to teach for, prompt, or reinforce strategic actions.

DISCUSSION OF THE TEXT:
The teacher invites students to discuss the text, guiding the discussion and lifting the students' comprehension.

TEACHING POINTS:
The teacher makes explicit teaching points, grounded in the text, and directed toward expanding the students' systems of strategic actions.

WORD WORK:
The teacher provides explicit teaching to help students become flexible and efficient in solving words.

EXTENDING UNDERSTANDING: (OPTIONAL)
If further work with the meaning is needed, students extend their understanding of the text through writing and/or drawing (may be independent).

the educators on your team as they continue to refine and expand the power of their professional practice.

The Romance

As an instructional practice, guided reading is flourishing. As teachers move to a guided reading approach, the most frequent question they ask is: What are the rest of the students doing? The first agenda for the teacher is to build a community of readers and writers in the classroom so the students are engaged and independent in meaningful and productive language and literacy opportunities while the teacher meets with small groups (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, 2001). The teaching decisions within guided reading lessons become the next horizon. Next we discuss some of the changes that have taken place with the infusion of guided reading.

Providing Differentiated Instruction

Classrooms are full of a wonderful diversity of children; differentiated instruction is needed to reach all of them. Many teachers have embraced small-group teaching as a way of effectively teaching the broad range of learners in their classrooms. Because readers engage with texts within their control (with supportive teaching), teachers have the opportunity to see students reading books with proficient processing every day. In addition, it is vital to support students in taking on more challenging texts so that they can grow as readers, using the text gradient as a "ladder of progress" (Clay, 1991, p. 215). Inherent in the concept of guided reading is the idea that students learn best when they are provided strong instructional support to extend themselves by reading texts that are on the edge of their learning—not too easy but not too hard (Vygotsky, 1978).

Using Leveled Books

One of the most important changes related to guided reading is in the type of books used and the way they are used. Teachers have learned to collect short texts at the levels they need and to use the levels as a guide for putting the right book in the hands of students (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). The term *level* has become a household word; teachers use the

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gradient of texts to organize collections of books for instruction. They collaborate to create beautiful book rooms that bring teachers across the grade levels to select books from Fountas and Pinnell (1996, 2001, 2011) levels A through Z.

In many schools, neatly organized boxes, shelves, or baskets make it possible for teachers to "shop" in the common book room. They can access a wide variety of genres and topics and make careful text selections. Book rooms often have special sections for books that are *not* leveled—enlarged texts ("big books") and tubs of books organized by topic, author, or genre for interactive read-aloud or book club discussions.

Publishers have responded to teachers' "love affair" with leveled books by issuing thousands of new fiction and nonfiction titles each year. Most of these texts are short enough to be read in one sitting so readers can learn something new about the reading process—strategic actions that they can apply to the longer texts that they read independently. The individual titles enable teachers to choose different books for different groups so that they can design a student's literacy program and students can take "different paths to common outcomes" (Clay, 1998).

Conducting Benchmark Assessment Conferences

Because they need to learn students' instructional and independent reading levels, teachers engage in authentic, text-based assessment conferences that involve students in reading real books as a measure of how they read, a process that 20 years ago was new to many. Administered during the first weeks of school, an assessment conference with a set of carefully leveled texts yields reliable data to guide teaching (e.g., Fountas and Pinnell, 2012). The information gained from systematic assessment of the way a reader works through text provides teachers with new understandings of the reading process. Teachers are learning that accurate word reading is not the only goal; efficient, independent self-monitoring behavior and the ability to search for and use a variety of sources of information in the text are key to proficiency.

Using Running Records to Determine Reading Levels

A large number of teachers have learned to use the standardized procedure of running records (Clay, 1993) to make assessment more robust. They can code the students' reading behaviors and score the records, noting accuracy levels. From that information, they make decisions about the level that is appropriate for students to read independently (independent level) and the level at which it would be productive to begin instruction (instructional level). Sound assessment changes teachers' thinking about the reading process and is integral to teaching.

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Using a Gradient of Text to Select Books

The A to Z text level gradient (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) has become a teacher's tool for selecting different texts for different groups of children. Teachers have learned to avoid the daily struggle with very difficult material that will not permit smooth, proficient processing—no matter how expert the teaching. Instead, they strive for text selection that will help students read proficiently and learn more as readers every day, always with the goal of reading at grade level or above. Teachers look to the gradient as a series of goals represented as sets of reading competencies to reach across the school years.

Attending to Elements of Proficient Reading: Decoding, Comprehension, and Fluency

Assessment of students' reading levels and the teaching that grows out of it go beyond accurate word reading. In addition to the goal of effective word solving, teachers are concerned about comprehension of texts. Many students

learn to decode very well and can read words with high accuracy. Their thinking, though, remains superficial, sometimes limited to retelling or remembering details or facts.

Comprehension is assessed in different ways, usually after reading. Attention is increasingly focused on comprehension as the central factor in determining a student's ability to read at a level. Fluency, too, has gained importance in teaching, especially because it figures so strongly in effective reading. Teachers are concerned about students' ability to process texts smoothly and efficiently, and specific instruction is dedicated to the development of reading fluency.

Using the Elements of a Guided Reading Lesson

Teachers have learned the parts of the guided reading lesson—internalized the elements, in fact, so that they consistently provide an introduction to a text, interact with students briefly as appropriate while reading, guide the discussion, make teaching points after reading, and engage students in targeted word work to help them learn more about how words work. They have learned ways of extending comprehension through writing, drawing, or further discussion. Even students know the parts of the lesson in a way that promotes efficient work.

Building Classroom Libraries for Choice Reading

Teachers have realized the importance of a wide inventory of choice reading in building students' processing systems. They have created beautifully organized classroom libraries filled with a range of fiction and nonfiction texts that encourage students' independent reading. You can notice books with their covers faced front, arranged by author, topic, or genre, as well as books organized by series or by special award recognition. Students choose books according to their interests and spend large amounts of time engaged with texts of their choice that do not require teacher support for independent reading.

The End of the Beginning

All these developments have been accomplished with tremendous effort and vision on the part of teachers, administrators, and others in the schools or district. It takes great effort, leadership, teamwork, and resources to turn a school or district in the direction of rich, rigorous, differentiated instruction. Creating a schedule, learning about effective management, collecting and organizing leveled books, providing an authentic assessment system and preparing teachers to use it, and providing the basic professional development to get guided reading underway—all are challenging tasks. Having an efficiently running guided reading program is an accomplishment, and educators are justifiably proud of it. However, as Winston Churchill said, "Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."

Many have experienced the romance in the journey, and the reality is that there will be more for everyone to learn as we move forward. We have summarized our general observations of the accomplishments of decades of guided reading and the challenges ahead in Figure 2.

Of course, our descriptions will not fit any one teacher or group of teachers, but along with relevant challenges, we hope they provoke thinking by raising some issues related to growth and change. The compelling benefits of guided reading for students may elude us unless we attend to the teaching decisions that assure that every student in our care climbs the ladder of success. Let's think about some of the areas of refinement that lie ahead in our journey of developing expertise.

The Reality

The deep change we strive for begins with the why, not the how, so our practices can grow from our coherent theory. Our theory can also grow from our practice as we use the analysis of reading behaviors to build our shared understandings and vision. To change our practices in an enduring way, we need to change our understandings. If we bring our old thinking to a new practice, the rationales may not fit (Wollman, 2007). Teaching practice may often be enacted in a way that is inconsistent with or even contrary to the underlying theory that led to its development (Brown & Campione, 1996; Sperling & Freedman, 2001).

The practice of guided reading may appear simple, yet it is not simply

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Figure 2 Decades of Guided Reading

DECADES OF GUIDED READING

The Romance	The Reality
1. Teachers provide differentiated instruction in the form of small group instruction.	Behavioral evidence is needed to inform grouping and regrouping so that the danger of static groups can be avoided. Reading instruction takes place across a variety of instructional contexts; guided reading is not the whole literacy program.
2. Teachers embrace the use of short, leveled texts as powerful resources. In many schools, teachers have worked together to create a common bookroom that houses leveled books.	The analysis of texts helps teachers go beyond the "level" to knowledge of the specific demands of the text on readers. A book room is more than a storage facility; as teachers analyze texts across a broad range of levels, they develop a common vision of the development of the reading process over time. Students always expand their reading powers by engaging with more challenging texts across time.
3. Publishers respond to the demand by producing a large quantity of fiction and nonfiction leveled books from which teachers can choose.	The most important characteristic of a book is not its level, but its quality and appeal to readers. Teachers and publishers can work together to improve quality so that students are assured the opportunity to process books that are interesting, age appropriate, well written, and accurately leveled.
4. Teachers use benchmark assessment conferences to determine students' reading levels; teachers know what level their students can read and use that information to select texts.	The level from a benchmark assessment provides an excellent starting point for grouping. Teachers need to go beyond the level to analyze the reading behaviors that will provide the specific teaching goals of the level.
5. Teachers code and score running records as a way to make systematic observation rigorous and informative.	Beyond coding and scoring, teacher expertise is needed in the analysis and use of the information: • knowing what proficient processing looks like (strategic actions) and sounds like (fluency); • analyzing reading behaviors and noting how students' behaviors change over time, as evidence of learning; • analyzing talk as evidence of comprehension.
6. Teachers use a gradient of text to select books and to monitor student progress in reading.	Beyond the levels, a conceptual picture of proficiency that includes the full range of strategic actions required to process a text at each level is needed. Selecting books to create a superb sequence requires matching evidence from student reading behaviors with analyses of the demands of the text on readers; selection goes beyond knowing the level of the text to noting the quality and learning opportunities.
7. Schools expect students to comprehend the texts rather than expecting accuracy alone.	Colleagues can work together to use a shared vision of proficiency that involves the complex network of strategic actions that are built across time.
8. Fluency is valued and expected.	Fluency has many dimensions; teachers need more specific ways of teaching for more than rate, for example, pausing, phrasing, word stress, and intonation.
9. The structure of the guided reading lesson framework is valued and teachers have internalized its use.	Beyond the lesson framework, teachers make decisions within each lesson component and that is how powerful learning takes place. Attention to teacher's language interactions that help readers become self-initiating and self-regulating is essential.
10. Classrooms are filled with a variety of books so that students can have choice from among books they can read independently.	Leveled books are only one component of a high-quality literacy effort; with the knowledge of genre, teachers can scaffold the reading of leveled books in guided reading and also work with students in other contexts such as interactive read aloud, book clubs and reading conferences to develop deeper comprehension.

another word for the small-group instruction of the past. We address three big areas that offer new learning in the refinement of teaching in guided reading lessons, bringing together the romance in guided reading with the reality of its depth. These areas can be summarized as readers and the reading process, texts, and teaching. As we discuss each area, notice the aspects that reflect your growing edge as a reading teacher.

A Shared Understanding of the Process of Reading

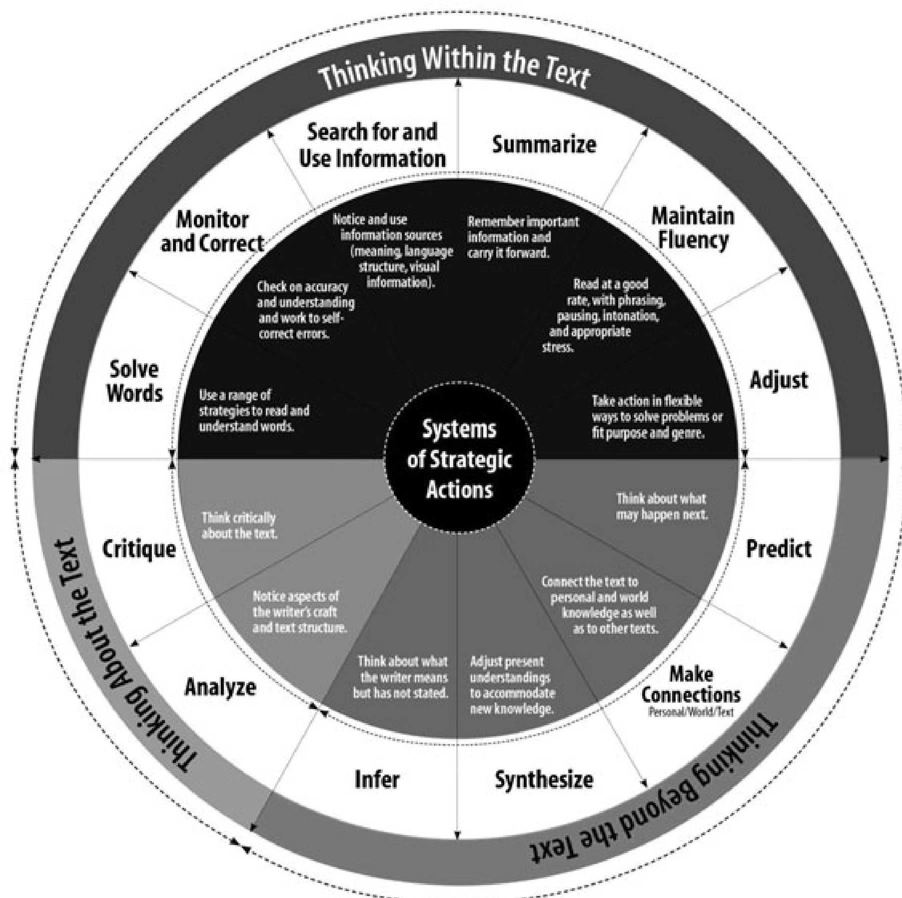
Some teachers have learned to be satisfied with their students simply reading accurately. This practice has led to pushing students up levels without evidence of their control of the competencies that enable them to think within, beyond, and about texts at each level. The goal of the guided reading lesson for students is not just to read "this book" or even to understand a single text. The goal of guided reading is to help students build their reading power—to build a network of strategic actions for processing texts. We have described 12 systems of strategic activities, all operating simultaneously in the reader's head (see Figure 3).

Thinking Within the Text. The first six systems we categorize as "thinking within the text." These activities are *solving words, monitoring and correcting, searching for and using information, summarizing information in a way that the reader can remember it, adjusting reading for different purposes and genres,* and *sustaining fluency*. All these actions work together as the reader moves through the text. It is essential to solve words; after all, reading must be accurate. It is just as important to engage the other systems. Readers constantly search for information in the print, in the pictures; they know when they are making errors, and if necessary, they correct them. They reconstruct the important information and use it to interpret the next part of the text. Kaye's (2006) study of the word solving of proficient second-grade readers showed the following:

> When students are efficiently processing text, they flexibly draw from a vast response repertoire. They use their expertise in language and their knowledge of print, stories, and the world to problem solve as they read. Supported by mostly correct responding, readers are able to momentarily direct their attention to the detail of letters and sounds as needed. When they need to problem solve words in greater detail, second graders can draw upon their orthographic and phonological knowledge with incredible flexibility and efficiency, usually using the larger subword units. Then they are free to get back to the message of the text. (p. 71)

Figure 3 A Network of Processing Systems for Reading

A NETWORK OF PROCESSING SYSTEMS FOR READING



Thinking Beyond the Text. The next four systems call for "thinking beyond the text." They are *inferring*, *synthesizing*, *making connections*, and *predicting*. Reading is a *transaction* between the text and the reader (Rosenblatt, 1994); that is, the reader constructs unique meanings through integrating background knowledge, emotions, attitudes, and expectations with the meaning the writer expresses.

When several of us read the same text, we do try to understand the writer's message and share much with each other. At the same time, each reader's interpretation is unique. Readers infer what the writer means but does not say; they make connections with their personal experiences and other texts. They bring content knowledge to the text and synthesize new ideas. They make predictions before, during, and after reading.

Thinking About the Text. The last two systems represent how the proficient reader *analyzes* and *critiques* the text. Readers hold up the text as an object that they can look back at and analyze. They notice aspects of the writer's craft—appreciate language, literary devices such as use of symbolism, how characters and their development are revealed, beginnings and endings. They critique texts: Are they accurate? Objective? Interesting? Well written?

A Complex Theory. Reading is far more than looking at individual words and saying them. Readers are in the fortunate position of encountering language that is created mostly by unknown individuals who may be distant in space and time. The systems of strategic actions take place simultaneously in the brain during the complex process of reading. The proficient reader develops a network like a computer, only thousands of times faster and more complex. The brain *learns*, making new connections constantly and expanding the system. Clay (1991) described the process:

> This reading work clocks up more experience for the network with each of the features of print attended to. *It allows the partially familiar to become familiar and the new to become familiar in an ever-changing sequence.* Meaning is checked against letter sequence or vice versa, phonological recoding is checked against speech vocabulary, new meanings are checked against the grammatical and semantic contexts of the sentence and

"The reader constructs unique meanings through integrating background knowledge, emotions, attitudes, and expectations with the meaning the writer expresses."

> *"When students engage in smooth, efficient processing of text with deep understanding, they can steadily increase their abilities."*

> the story, and so on. Because one route to a response confirms an approach from another direction this may allow the network to become a more effective network. However the generative process only operates when the reading is 'good,' that is, successful enough to free attention to pick up new information at the point of problem-solving. An interlocking network of appropriate strategies which include monitoring and evaluation of consonance or dissonance among messages that ought to agree is central to this model of a system which extends itself. (pp. 328–329)

The amazing thing is that all of this complex cognitive activity is accomplished simultaneously and at lightning speed; proficient readers are largely unconscious of it (Clay, 1991). We are writing here about the efficient, effective, fluent processing that allows readers to keep the greater part of attention on the meaning of the text. Teachers cannot see into the brains of effective readers, and the process breaks down the moment you make readers try to describe their processing (much like watching your fingers while playing the piano).

However, skillful teachers have a sharp observing eye, with the ability to notice and understand the *evidence* of processing shown in the behaviors of students—how they read and what they reveal through conversation about what they read. Understanding the reading behaviors that are evident in a student who is processing well helps the teacher detect inefficient or ineffective reading and take steps to offer support. You can also notice the way proficient readers change over time; sometimes progress is detectable every day!

When students engage in smooth, efficient processing of text with deep understanding, they can steadily increase their abilities. That means much more than just moving up levels; the goal is to build effective processing systems. It isn't easy, but guided reading offers that opportunity.

Fluent Processing: An Essential Element of Effective Reading. Deep comprehension is not synonymous with speed, nor, surprisingly, is reading fluency. Some in the educational community seem to have become obsessed with speed. However, measuring fluency only as words per minute is a simplistic view and a procedure that may do harm. In our work, we emphasize pausing, phrasing, word stress, and intonation far more than rate.

Rasinski and Hamman (2010) reviewed the research and found that the norms for reading speed have gone up, but these increases have not been matched by improvement in comprehension. They believe that the way reading fluency has been measured has influenced practice and in some places had a devastating effect on reading itself. We now see students who read rapidly and robotically, often skipping without problem solving every word not instantly recognized. The result is a loss of comprehension and confusion for the student about what it means to read.

We recognize that proficient readers do move along at a satisfying rate, but fluency can't be measured by rate alone—certainly not by measuring the rate of reading word lists. Reading fluency means the efficient and effective processing of meaningful, connected, communicative language. According to Newkirk (2011), "the fluent reader is demonstrating comprehension, taking cues from the text, and taking pleasure in finding the right tempo for the text" (p. 1). He hastens to explain that he does not mean the laborious, word-to-word struggle to read something that is clearly too hard for the reader. And he says there is no *ideal* speed. The speed has to do with the relationship we have with what we read. He describes his own entry to a book:

> I enter a book carefully, trying to get a feel for this writer/narrator/teller that I will spend time with. I hear the language, feel the movement of sentences, pay attention to punctuation, sense pauses, feel the writer's energy (or lack of it), construct the voice and temperament of the writer. (p. 1)

Oral Language: An Essential Element of Effective Reading. Reading is language and language is thinking. One of the purposes of guided reading is to bring the control of oral language to the processing of a text. Of course, oral and written language have important and subtle differences, but oral language is the most powerful system the young child brings to initial experiences with the reading process. As readers grow more proficient, language still plays a strong role. The most obvious is the role of the oral vocabulary, which is extremely important. However, teachers also consider the reader's grasp of sentence complexity and the speaker's understanding of metaphor, simile,

"Teachers need to become expert in forming and reforming groups to allow for the differences in learning that are evident in students."

expression, idioms, and other nuances of speech.

Students' language development is important, and there is no better way to expand it than to engage them in lively conversation (not just questions and answers) about any exciting subject as well as about books. When students talk about their reading, they tend to use the language of texts, which is usually more complex than their own. Guided reading includes such discussion every day, and teachers are working toward richer conversations that will extend students' language far beyond a dry recounting of the story.

Using Systematic Assessment

The assessment system needs to provide the behavioral evidence that is consistent with a shared understanding of the reading process. It should link directly to our teaching. Good assessment is the foundation for effective teaching. Assessment in its simplest form means gaining information about the learners you will teach. The "noticing" teacher tunes in to the individual reader and observes how the reader works through a text and thinks about how the reading sounds. For some teachers, assessment stops at finding levels because they have not had the opportunity to develop further understandings of the value of specific behaviors to inform teaching. The assessment may be used to report levels, and then the data are filed without the benefit of their richness.

Using Assessment to Group and Regroup Readers. In a comprehensive approach to literacy education, small-group teaching is needed for the careful observation and specific teaching of individuals that it allows, as well as for efficiency in teaching and the social learning that benefits each student. For some teachers, guided reading groups may have become the fixed-ability groups of the past. Teachers need to become expert in forming and reforming groups to allow for the differences in learning that are evident in students. Some students may not develop the same reading behaviors in the same order and at the same pace as others. The key to effective teaching is your ability to make different decisions for different students at different points in time, honoring the complexity of development.

A key concept related to guided reading is that grouping is *dynamic*—temporary, not static. Teachers group and regroup students as they gain behavioral evidence of their progress. In our experience, the reason groups don't change enough is that no systematic ongoing assessment system is in place for teachers to use to check their informal observations with what students demonstrate when asked to read a text without teacher support. When teachers use ongoing running records in a systematic way (more frequently with lower achieving students and less frequently with higher achieving students), the data are used to make ongoing adjustments to groups. Often the only assessment in place is beginning, middle, and end of year assessment, and nothing systematic happens in between.

Often teachers have a history of using prescriptive programs in which students are expected to pass through the same books or materials so groups may remain the same for a long period of time. In guided reading, text selection does not follow a fixed sequence that students must progress through; there are no workbooks or worksheets that must be completed before moving forward. Teachers are expected to select different books for the groups and to move students more quickly or slowly forward as informed by their expert analysis.

Using Assessment to Guide Teaching All Year. A system for *interval* assessment such as a benchmark assessment conference using running records even two or three times a year is not enough. The benchmark information is old news in a few weeks. To make effective decisions for readers, you also need an efficient system for *ongoing* assessment using running records. A running record using yesterday's instructional book takes the place of benchmark assessment with "unseen text." The running record becomes a useful tool for assessing the effects of yesterday's teaching on the reader.

"Good assessment is the foundation for effective teaching."

> *"Successful processing of the more challenging text is made possible by an expert teacher's careful text selection and strong teaching."*

Your professional development may have stopped with coding and scoring reading behaviors; you may not have had the opportunity to become expert at their analysis and use in informing your teaching. When you go beyond coding and scoring, you make a big shift in the way you think about your teaching decisions in the lesson. Rather than teaching the level or the book, you notice and are able to use the behavioral evidence to guide your next teaching moves. We see this kind of teaching as the "precision teaching" that makes guided reading lessons powerful. Reading teachers are like scientists gathering precise data and using it to form hypotheses. For example, you can use running records or benchmark assessments to:

- Assess the accuracy level
- Assess fluency
- Observe and code oral reading behaviors systematically to note what students do at difficulty or at error and learn how students are solving problems with text
- Engage the student in conversation to assess comprehension at several levels

From Assessment to Teaching: Using a Continuum of Literacy Learning. When you understand the complexity of the reading process, you are able to teach toward the competencies of proficient readers. A precise description of the behaviors of proficient readers from levels A to Z constitutes the curriculum for teaching reading. A level is not a score; it stands for a set of behaviors and understandings that you can observe for evidence of, teach for, and reinforce at every level.

Think about all the behaviors that are observable in readers who process a text well. Of course the behaviors of effective processing at level A will look very different from those at level C or M or S. To support your ability to teach for changes in reading behaviors over time, we developed *The Continuum of Literacy Learning Grades PreK-8: A Guide to Teaching* (Pinnell & Fountas, 2011). The Continuum provides a detailed description of the behaviors of proficient readers that are evident in oral reading, in talk, and in writing about reading so that you can teach for change in reading behaviors over time.

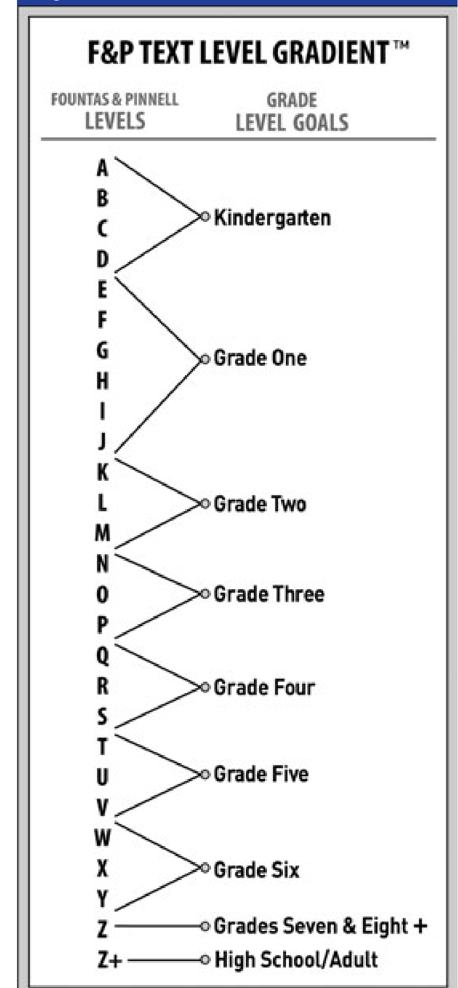
Understanding Leveled Texts and Their Demands on Readers

The Fountas & Pinnell A–Z text gradient and high-quality leveled books are powerful tools in the teaching of reading (see Figure 4). The appropriate text allows the reader to expand her reading powers. To become proficient readers, students must experience successful processing daily. Not only should they be able to read books independently, building interest, stamina, and fluency; they also need to tackle harder books that provide the opportunity to grow more skillful as a reader.

Successful processing of the more challenging text is made possible by an expert teacher's careful text selection and strong teaching. If the book is too difficult, then the processing will not be proficient, no matter how much teaching you do.

Consider the situation when every student in the room (and sometimes in the grade level) is reading the same book. *Most of the readers will not be encountering text*

Figure 4 F&P Text Level Gradient



that, with teacher support, causes them to expand their reading powers. For some, the books are too easy; for many, much too hard. There are many reasons for whole-group instruction, and we recommend that it take place every day in interactive read-aloud or reading minilessons. However, ensuring that all students develop an effective reading process requires *differentiated* instruction. One-size-fits-all or single-text teaching does not meet the varied needs of diverse students.

Many teachers use levels to select the books for students, but that raises several more questions. First, not all leveled books are equal. Just because a book has a level does not mean it is a high-quality selection. Some leveled books are formulaic or not accurately leveled. Teachers need to look carefully at books in the purchasing process to assure they are well written and illustrated. They also need to check to be sure that the Fountas and Pinnell level has been accurately determined. It will be frustrating to select a book and begin to use it with a group, only to find it is too easy or too difficult to support learning. Second, when teachers understand the 10 text characteristics that are used to determine the level, they understand its demands on the reader and can use it in a more powerful way in teaching.

Understanding a text is far more than noticing hard words and coming up with information or a "main idea." Skilled teachers of guided reading understand how a text requires a reader to think—the demands that every text makes on the reader. We consider an understanding of text characteristics an extremely important area of teacher expertise.

Teachers do more than apply mechanical formulas by looking at sentence and word length (although those are important); we recommend an analysis that takes into account text complexity. We have described 10 characteristics of text difficulty (see Figure 5).

Teachers consider the characteristics of genres and special forms; some genres and forms are more difficult than others, with simpler and more complex texts of every type. Teachers notice and understand the text structure—the way it is organized—as well as underlying structures such as compare and contrast. They assess the level of content (what background knowledge will be required) and the themes and ideas. Highly abstract themes and ideas make a text more challenging. Many texts have complex language and literary features such as elaborate plots, hard-to-read dialogue, or figurative language that make the

Figure 5 Ten Characteristics Related to Text Difficulty

TEN CHARACTERISTICS RELATED TO TEXT DIFFICULTY

Characteristics	Definition
1 Genres/Forms	The type or kind of fiction or nonfiction text (e.g., biography, informational, historical fiction, folk tale, realistic fiction, fantasy). Also, the particular form (mystery, oral stories, picture book, graphic text, short story).
2 Text Structure	The way the text is organized.
3 Content	The subject matter of the text—what it is about, the topic or ideas.
4 Themes and Ideas	The big ideas in the text, the overall purpose, the messages.
5 Language and Literary Features	The literary features (such as plot, characters, figurative language, literary devices such as flashbacks).
6 Sentence Complexity	The structure of sentences includes the number of phrases and clauses.
7 Vocabulary	The meaning of the words in the text.
8 Words	The length and complexity of the words (syllables, tense, etc.)
9 Illustrations	The photographs or art in fiction texts; the graphic features of informational texts.
10 Book and Print Features	The number of pages, print font, length, punctuation, and variety of readers' tools (e.g., table of contents, glossary).

texts more interesting and at the same time more challenging.

Sentence complexity, too, is a factor, one that is usually measured by mechanical readability formulas. Works with many embedded clauses and long sentences are harder. Teachers also consider the number of long, multisyllabic, or hard to decode words in a text and the complexity of the vocabulary. Illustrations in fiction can add meaning or mood to the text, and graphics in nonfiction offer additional complex information. Book and print features play a role as well. The size of print, layout, punctuation, and other text features such as charts, diagrams or sidebars—all go into the analysis of text difficulty.

Using these characteristics, we created the A to Z text gradient to give teachers a useful tool for guided reading instruction and a picture of student progress over time (see Figure 6). Notice how Ronald has progressed from kindergarten through grade 8 in a high-quality instructional program.

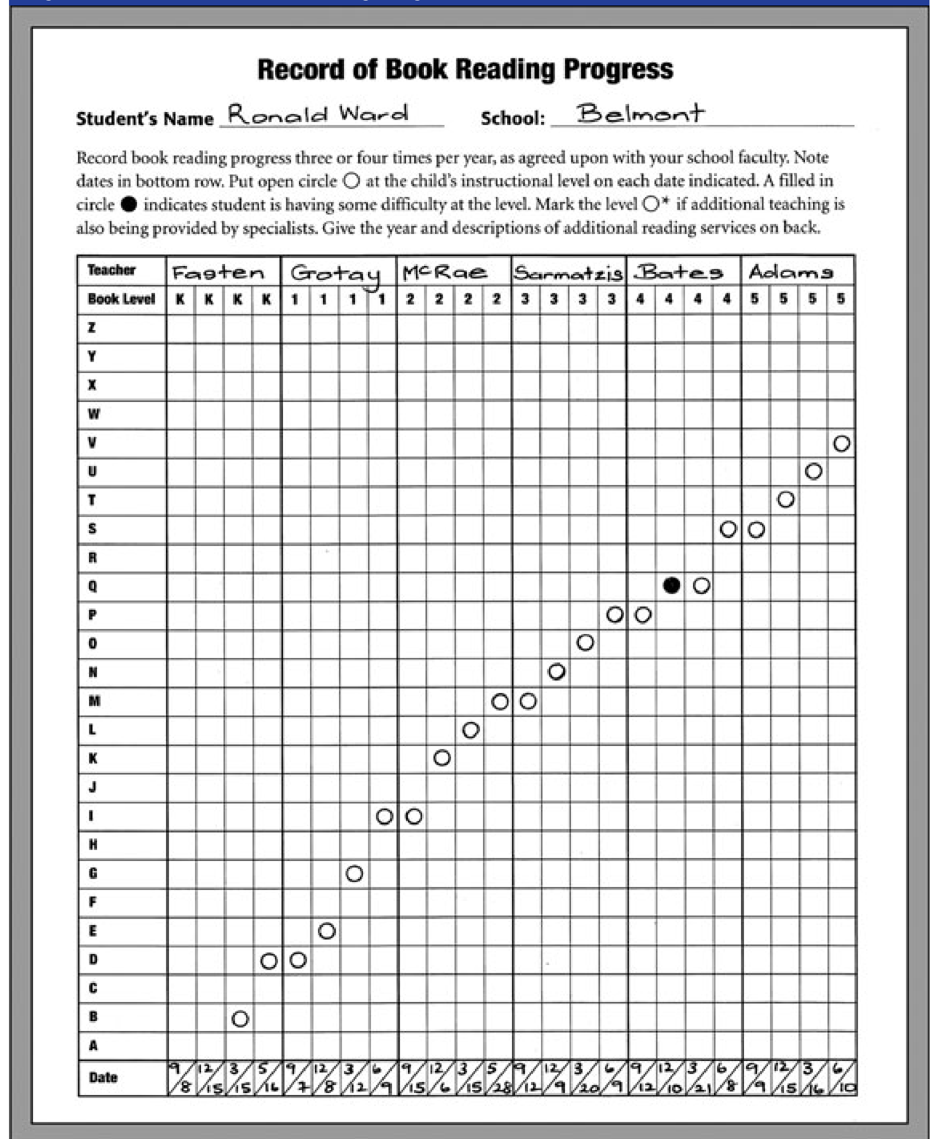
The gradient offers guidance in selecting texts, but it's important to remember that levels are not written in stone. Background experience and unique characteristics of readers figure into their processing of texts so that most students read along a fairly narrow range of levels, depending on interest and whether they are working independently or with strong support. We would not situate a reader at a single level and insist that all reading be there.

The ability to analyze texts represents important teacher knowledge that takes time to develop. Many teachers of guided reading have spent a great deal of time analyzing and comparing texts using the 10 characteristics and have become "quick" analyzers of texts. They match up their understandings with their knowledge of the students in the group. When they teach a guided reading lesson, they can plan quickly what they need to say in the introduction and anticipate key understandings to talk about in the discussion. When you understand the inner workings of a text, you can introduce it well and guide a powerful discussion.

Teaching for a Processing System: The Role of Facilitative Talk in Expanding Reading Power

At first, guided reading may be perceived only as a process of convening small groups, using

Figure 6 Record of Book-Reading Progress



Record of Book Reading Progress

Student's Name Ronald Ward **School:** Belmont

Record book reading progress three or four times per year, as agreed upon with your school faculty. Note dates in bottom row. Put open circle ○ at the child's instructional level on each date indicated. A filled in circle ● indicates student is having some difficulty at the level. Mark the level ○* if additional teaching is also being provided by specialists. Give the year and descriptions of additional reading services on back.

Teacher	Fasten				Grotay				McRae				Sarmatzis				Bates				Adams			
Book Level	K	K	K	K	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	5	5	5	5
Z																								
Y																								
X																								
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Date	9/8	12/15	3/15	5/16	9/7	12/8	3/12	6/9	9/15	12/6	3/15	5/28	9/12	12/9	3/20	6/9	9/12	12/10	3/21	6/8	9/9	12/15	3/16	6/10

"The ability to analyze texts represents important teacher knowledge that takes time to develop."

leveled books, and following a lesson framework. Often, teachers use the small-group format, the steps of the lesson, and a set of leveled books but bring their old theory to this new practice. Professional development support does not go far enough to enable them to do powerful teaching beyond these initial steps. Guided reading is much more. It is an instructional context within which the precise teaching moves and language choices are related to the behaviors observed, moment by moment, and which guide the reader to engage in problem solving that expands his or her reading power.

The skilled teacher of guided reading makes decisions throughout the lesson that are responsive to the learners. Each element supports readers in a different way, with the goal of helping them think and act for themselves. You expertly shape the introduction to support readers' ability to successfully process the text. The introduction sets the stage for effective reading of the text. During reading, you can use language to demonstrate, prompt, and support the reader in efficient processing.

Your language is also a critical area of your expertise. Through precise language, you facilitate readers' problem-solving power and their ability to initiate effective actions as they become self-regulating readers (Clay, 2001). Use language in specific ways to demonstrate, show or teach, prompt for, and reinforce strategic actions. With brief yet powerful facilitative language, you can scaffold students during the time you sample oral reading. Short, focused interactions with individuals allow readers to learn how to problem solve for themselves (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009). Some examples of precise language that helps students build a processing system are presented in Figure 7.

As your students discuss the text, you can use facilitative language that promotes dialogue. Get readers thinking and using what they know. Through the discussion, they expand comprehension. Your teaching points address the precise needs of the learners you teach. They involve *responsive teaching* based on your observation of the readers and the opportunities offered by the text. Notice the examples of specific language to support analytic thinking in the discussion of a text (see Figure 8).

Figure 7 Facilitative Talk

FACILITATIVE TALK

	Teach	Prompt	Reinforce
SEARCHING FOR AND USING MEANING INFORMATION	You can try that again and think what would make sense.	Try that again and think what would make sense.	You tried that again and now it makes sense.
SEARCH FOR AND USING VISUAL INFORMATION	It has to make sense and look right, too. Let me show you how to check.	Does that make sense and look right?	That makes sense and looks right.
FLUENCY	You need to put your words together so it sounds like talking. Listen to how I read this.	Put your words together so it sounds like talking.	You put your words together and it sounds like talking.
SELF-MONITORING	You can look for a part you know. (Use finger to cover last part.)	Look for a part you know.	You looked for a part you knew and it helped you.

Through word work, you help readers develop flexibility with words and word parts, noticing syllables, working with letters and sounds, and understanding the morphemic structure of words. The option to extend the understanding of a text involves more than just an assignment. Many teachers of guided reading have students use their readers' notebooks to write about their reading in a way that supports and expands their comprehension.

Using Self-Reflection to Grow in Teaching Guided Reading

High-quality, highly effective implementation of guided reading involves a process of self-reflection. You are very fortunate if you have a colleague with whom you can talk analytically about lessons. Each time you work with a small group of students, you can learn a little more and hone your teaching skills. (We believe that students who have teachers who also are learning are equally fortunate. That makes the whole experience a lot more exciting!) In Figures 9 and 10, we offer some guidance for you to pause and ponder. Ask yourself some critical questions about the guided reading lesson. You'll find that you become more aware of the skillful teaching moves you have made, as well as

Figure 8 Examples of Language to Support Analytic Thinking About Text

EXAMPLES OF LANGUAGE TO SUPPORT ANALYTIC THINKING ABOUT TEXTS

ANALYZING: Use language that helps the reader notice aspects of the writer's craft and text structure.

* What did you notice about how the writer told the story?
* How did the writer organize the information (by time or logic)?
* What did you notice about the way the writer used language (words)?
* What did the writer do to interest you in the story (topic)?
* What was the writer's purpose in writing the book?
* How would the story (realistic fiction) be different if it were historical fiction?
* Who are the important characters (least important)?
* What is the problem and how is it solved?
* What do you notice the writer doing? Why? Have you noticed another writer doing the same thing?
* What did the writer do to make (character, topic, plot, setting) interesting?
* How did the writer make the information interesting?
* What parts of the story are probably fact and what parts are imagined?
* What do you know about the type of book (genre) that helps you know what to expect?
* How is the genre helping you think about what to expect in the book?
* What do you notice about the genre?
* Why do you think the writer chose this genre?
* What were three of the most important ideas in this informational text?
* What does the author want you to know about [topic]?
* Why do you think the author chose this organization for the ideas he tells about in this informational text?

Note. From Fountas & Pinnell (2012).

Figure 9 Pause and Ponder: Teaching the Reader

PAUSE & PONDER

In guided reading lessons the goal is to teach the reader, not the text. Think about how your language interactions with readers support the ability of each reader to initiate problem-solving actions.

Ask yourself:

* *What does the reader do at a difficulty or after an error?*
* *How does your language support pass control to the reader?*

Figure 10 Pause and Ponder: Results of the Lesson

PAUSE & PONDER

Think about your guided reading lesson and ask yourself:

* *What have I taught the readers how to do today that they will be able to do with other texts?*

the thought that "I might have…" or "tomorrow I will…". Reflective teaching is rewarding because you are *learning from teaching.*

Providing Variety and Choice in the Reading Program

Educators have sometimes made the mistake of thinking that guided reading *is the reading program* or that all of the books students read should be leveled. We have argued against the overuse of levels. We have never recommended that the school library or classroom libraries be leveled or that levels be reported to parents.

We want students to learn to select books the way experienced readers do—according to their own interests, by trying a bit of the book, by noticing the topic or the author. Teachers can help students learn how to choose books that are right for them to read independently. This is a life skill. The text gradient and leveled books are a teacher's tool, not a child's label, and should be deemphasized in the classroom. Levels are for books, not children.

Guided reading provides the small-group instruction that allows for a closer tailoring to individual strengths and needs; however, students also need age-appropriate, grade-appropriate texts. Therefore, guided reading must be *only one* component of a comprehensive, high-quality literacy effort that includes interactive read-aloud, literature discussion in small groups, readers' workshop with whole-group minilessons, independent reading and individual conferences, and the use of mentor texts for writing workshop. Students learn in whole group, small group, and individual settings.

Guided reading instruction takes place within a larger framework that brings coherence to the students' school experience. It does not stand alone. The expert teacher is able to draw students' attention to important concepts *across* instructional contexts. For example, a teacher may help students attend to how readers need to think about not only what the writer says (states), but also what he or she means (implies) in contexts such as these:

- Guided reading (small group, leveled books)
- Literature discussion (small-group book clubs or whole class, *not* leveled books)
- Interactive read-aloud (whole class, *not* leveled books)
- Independent reading with conferences (individual, *not* leveled books, self-selected)
- Reading minilessons (whole class, *not* leveled books)

In guided reading and interactive read-aloud, the teacher selects the book; in other contexts, students have choice. They are taught ways to assess a text to determine whether it will be interesting and readable. Whole-class minilessons often involve using a whole range of books as mentor texts. The entire literacy/language program represents a smooth, coherent whole in which students engage a variety of strategic actions to process a wide variety of texts.

Growth Over Time

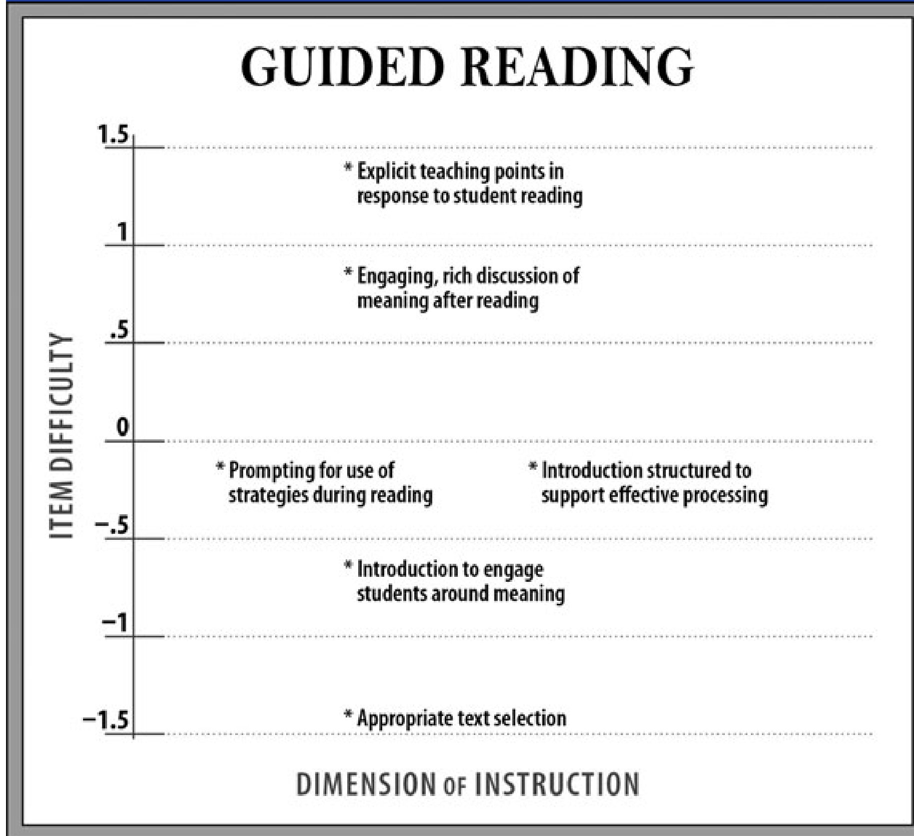
The lesson of guided reading development over the years is that it cannot be described as a series of mechanical steps or "parts" of a lesson. The lesson structure is only the beginning of providing effective small-group instruction for students of all ages. Powerful teaching within the lesson requires much more.

It is interesting to reflect on what aspects of guided reading tend to be easiest or hardest for teachers to take on. Bryk et al. (2007) found empirical evidence for teacher development of some of the complexities of guided reading. He and his colleagues constructed an instrument called the Developing Language and Literacy Teaching rubrics and tested it for reliability. A series of controlled, systematic observations indicated that the instrument distinguished between "novices" and "experts" in several contexts for literacy teaching.

A very helpful result of the study was that the analysis of items revealed a "scale" that provided evidence of the dimensions of instruction from less to more frequently observed (item difficulty), and this item map was consistent across teachers. The researchers were able to demonstrate increasing levels of sophistication. In Figure 11, you see the chart for

"The lesson structure is only the beginning of providing effective small-group instruction... Powerful teaching within the lesson requires much more."

Figure 11 Development of Expertise in Guided Reading



Note. From Bryk et al (2007).

development of levels of expertise in guided reading.

On the horizontal axis, you see dimensions of instruction, and on the vertical axis, you see the level of item difficulty, meaning that it seemed to take longer for teachers to develop this area of expertise in guided reading, and these items tended to separate novices from more expert teachers. It seems that early on, teachers take on tasks such as book selection (aided by the levels and the bookroom) and parts of the lesson such as text introduction. We would argue that even these components require complex thinking and can be improved once acquired. Effective prompting for use of strategies also raises the sophistication, and, finally, acting "in the moment" to engage students in a rich discussion and make teaching points based on observation are the most challenging on this scale. In addition, when we consider that this study was completed before a great deal of new research on comprehension was accomplished, the need for ongoing professional development is compelling indeed.

We realize that achieving a high level of expertise in guided reading is not easy. It takes time and usually the support of a coach or staff developer. Research indicates that it is fairly easy to take on the basic structure of guided reading, for example, the steps of the lesson. However, that is only the beginning of teacher expertise. Teaching for strategic actions and "on your feet" interaction with students is much more challenging.

You bring an enormous and complex body of understandings to the teaching of guided reading. Yet, with appropriate high-quality professional development and ongoing support, it is possible for every teacher to implement guided reading more powerfully in every classroom. Skilled teachers of guided reading have the pleasure of seeing shifts in their students' reading ability every week—sometimes every day. Through guided reading, students can learn to deeply comprehend texts. And perhaps most importantly, they experience the pleasure of reading well every day.

To make the guided reading journey successful, we call for resources in the form of excellently written, attractive, and engaging leveled books and for access to high-quality professional development for teachers. Our own experience

"Teaching for strategic actions and 'on your feet' interaction with students is much more challenging."

"Achieving substantial schoolwide growth is possible if a community of educators are willing to undertake the journey."

indicates that one-to-one literacy coaching with a highly trained and knowledgeable professional developer is very effective. An important federally funded study supports the use of coaches (Biancarosa, Hough, Dexter & Bryk, 2008; see www.literacycollaborative.org for a summary). Teachers had professional development and coaching over four years to implement all elements of a literacy framework. The research team gathered data on 8,500 children who had passed through grades K–3 in 17 schools; they collected fall and spring Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) and Terra Nova data from these students as well as observational data on 240 teachers. The primary findings showed that:

- The average rate of student learning increased by 16% in the first implementation year, 28% in the second year, and 32% in the third year—very substantial increases.
- Teacher expertise increased substantially, and the rate of improvement coincided with the extent of coaching teachers received.
- Professional communication among teachers in the schools increased over the three-year implementation, and the literacy coordinator (coach) became more central in the schools' communication networks.

Guided reading was only one component of the literacy framework implemented in the schools researched in the preceding study, but it was an important one. The importance of the literacy coach, who conducts professional development sessions, models good teaching, and most importantly observes teachers in the classroom and dialogues with them to collegially mentor their growth in understanding and implementation of effective teaching, appeared to be paramount in the process. And even these schools were only at the beginning of the journey. However, the study shows that achieving substantial schoolwide growth is possible if a community of educators are willing to undertake the journey.

The Beginning

In this article, we have described some wonderful changes that have brought teaching closer to students. If we take a romantic view, we could say that once we have the book room, small-group lessons, and leveled books and things are running smoothly, we have arrived in the implementation of guided reading. However, the heart of this article is what we have *learned* from many years of engaging teachers and students in guided reading—what its true potential is, and what it takes to realize it. That's the reality.

In the case of guided reading, facing reality reaps endlessly positive rewards. Facing reality means that there is more exciting learning to do. Teaching and managing educational systems is energizing when we are working collaboratively toward new goals. The accomplishments we have already made simply give way to new insights.

You may have made a very good beginning in using guided reading to develop your students' reading power, and that is a satisfying accomplishment. It is also a development that enables you to have important insights that you can build upon. As you look at your educational program, you may be noticing some of the issues we have described here. That can put you on the path to work toward even higher goals on behalf of your students. We hope you are excited to know that more challenges lie ahead in your growing professional expertise and that there are tools to help you meet those challenges.

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