

# Guided Reading in a Comprehensive Literacy Program

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## Introduction

In 2014 I was invited to present for a professional development conference that attracted more than 6,000 educators. While I was asked to present on what I thought were three contemporary hot topics (complex texts, integrating nonfiction, and using accessible assessments), a session I conducted entitled “Guided Reading: What’s New?” drew the largest number of educators—almost four times more than the others. Should I have been surprised that so many educators were still interested in learning more about guided reading? I thought the role of guided reading in a comprehensive literacy program was well established. Guided reading hadn’t received much recent scholarly attention, but the practice still dominated literacy programs. In fact, forms of guided reading were now carrying responsibility to meet the increasing demands from Response to Intervention (RtI) frameworks and College and Career Readiness Standards. For many teachers, guided reading plays a critical role in their classrooms especially in working with readers who need help the most. Perhaps that is one reason why teachers are still interested in improving the role of guided reading.

Models of guided reading have existed for many decades (Ford and Opitz 2011, 225–226). Current models gained traction with the popular embrace of Fountas and Pinnell’s (1996) text *Guided Reading: Good First Teaching for All Children*. Their book was followed by a number of how-to resource books that emerged to support teachers. One was a text I co-authored called *Reaching Readers*. This book was written to expand the vision of guided reading models and encourage teachers to break out of a “one right way” orthodoxy that had quickly developed around the practice (Opitz and Ford 2001, 1–2). Since that early flood of resources, fewer books have been written about guided reading until the Capstone text *Guided Reading: What’s New, and What’s Next?* was published in 2016. Before that, one of the last resources to focus attention on this topic was *Preventing Misguided Reading*. It offered a more critical view and warned:

Education is littered with the remains of educational trends lost in translation. Often, the reality is that we compromised the fidelity of their implementation. So, critics assemble and declare that the approach doesn’t work, as researchers and publishers line up to set a new program in place. We see this trend surfacing with guided reading, and we lament the energy and resources that districts may expend in totally revamping literacy instruction that may simply need adjusting (Burkins and Croft 2010, xv).

This chapter will help us refocus needed attention on key basics to ensure teachers are getting the most out of their time with guided reading.

## Basic #1 Remember the History of Guided Reading

Like many of the practices examined in this book, guided reading has a significant history in classroom literacy programs. When something has been around a long time, it is important to look at its history. Examining its original intent and subsequent evolution is a reminder of what is “basic” about the practice. The history of guided reading has always been entangled with the history of grouping practices. For many years, small group reading instruction dominated most classroom programs. Reading instruction was often exclusively carried out in homogenous small groups. Typically there were three groups: one at, below, and above grade level. They were often labeled in subtle or not too subtle ways to reflect the perceived level of the group. The structure was so pervasive that it was often seen in most elementary classroom reading programs (Caldwell and Ford 2002, 1). It should be pointed out that it was not the use of small groups that was problematic. It was the exclusive use of small groups without the balance of other grouping formats and the static nature of those small groups. Once students were assigned to those small groups, the group assignment rarely changed throughout a student’s school experience.

Then *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (BANOR) was published in 1985. BANOR revealed what many already knew: There was no positive research base for the exclusive use of homogenous small groups in reading programs (Anderson et. al. 1985, 71). The widespread embrace of BANOR led to many shifts in reading practices, including rethinking the exclusive use of homogenous small groups.

After BANOR was published, small group instruction disappeared from many classrooms. Whole class instruction began to be the main component of many literacy programs. Most teachers

marched all students through the same instruction with the same text at the same time (Caldwell and Ford 2002, 13–14). The inherent flaws of whole group instruction became magnified when it was used exclusively in reading programs. Teachers quickly became frustrated because they were unable to meet the needs of diverse students. Concerns related to the exclusive use of static homogenous small groups were just replaced with new concerns related to the exclusive use of heterogeneous whole class instruction (Ford and Opitz 2011, 230).

Within a few years, educators were looking for yet another alternative to less than satisfying grouping practices. They needed a model of instruction that targeted learners more effectively. Suddenly small groups reemerged in literacy programs.

Guided reading evolved as an alternative to the past exclusive use of static homogeneous small groups or heterogeneous whole class instruction. The goals of guided reading reflected a vision and direction that was different from these previous grouping models. Guided reading was proposed as an important part but not the only component of a flexible grouping model. Guided reading groups would be more dynamic than those of the past with ongoing assessment informing decisions about students’ group assignments. Transforming small group reading instruction as guided reading was informed significantly by individual and small group intervention programs, including what had been seen in New Zealand classrooms (Fountas and Pinnell 2012, 263). Classrooms Down Under had been promoting the use of guided reading years before its widespread use in the states (Holdaway 1979, 142; Mooney 1990, 46–47). Guided reading should provide *good first teaching for all children* to reduce the number of children who would need individual interventions or at least provide instruction that could support and build on the work done in intervention programs.

## Basic #2 Stay Focused on the Purpose of Guided Reading

Another critical basic for effective guided reading is the importance of honoring its intended purpose. A clear definition of guided reading helps define its purpose. Guided reading is defined as “an instructional context for supporting each reader’s development of effective strategies for processing novel texts at increasingly challenging levels of difficulty” (Fountas and Pinnell 1996, 25). It includes these essential elements:

- Teacher works with small groups of students who are similar in their development and ability to read about the same level of text,
- Teacher introduces the texts and assists students in developing strategies that reach the goal of being able to read independently and silently,

- Each student reads whole texts with an emphasis on reading increasingly challenging texts over time, and
- Students are grouped and regrouped in a dynamic process that involves ongoing observation and assessment.

“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” (Fountas and Pinnell 1996, 4). Most researchers who have defined essential elements tend to agree that guided reading is planned, intentional, focused instruction where the teacher helps students, usually in small groups, learn more about the reading process (Ford and Opitz 2011, 229). In defining guided reading, it is also important to remember what guided reading is and what it is not. See Figure 1 below.

FIGURE 1 THE ACRONYM GR IS USED TO REPRESENT “GUIDED READING” IN THIS CHART.

What Guided Reading IS NOT	What Guided Reading IS
GR IS NOT an end in and of itself. Its intent is NOT to make good guided readers.	GR IS a means to an end. The end is always to develop independent readers.
GR IS NOT the entire reading program; GR IS NOT the only time during the day that the teacher is teaching reading.	GR IS part of a comprehensive literacy program that focuses on teaching reading and writing throughout the school day. It works best when it is connected to other aspects of the classroom literacy program, including read-alouds, shared reading, content instruction, and independent reading.
GR IS NOT something you do by following a script or a program outline.	GR IS an opportunity for targeted, responsive teaching in which we teach to the needs of the students. It includes different models to meet these needs.
GR IS NOT exclusively taught with leveled texts.	GR IS a time to use a wide variety of appealing and high-quality texts in lessons for readers.
GR IS NOT instruction focused exclusively on word-level strategies and accurate oral reading.	GR IS focused on both word-level and text-level strategies (i.e., accuracy with meaning making).
GR IS NOT an intervention.	GR IS an essential element of universal instruction made available to all learners within high-quality, regular classroom instruction. Varying the frequency, duration, intensity, or focus of GR can reposition it as an intervention.

Modified from Ford 2016, 34

The purpose of guided reading is informed by transactional rather than transmission-oriented models of learning. Transactional models of reading suggest an interaction between the reader and text. Meaning is constructed based on both reader and text factors. Transmission models of reading suggest more of a one-right meaning inherent in the text that has to be discovered by the reader. In the past transmission models defined a teacher's purpose often as covering materials—teaching texts. The basic purpose of guided reading changes that. Transaction models remind teachers to consider *learner* factors, not just *text* demands when teaching reading. A critical and basic point to remember is the intentional use of the term “guided” to describe instruction in these groups. Distinguishing guided reading from past small group instruction is the role of the teacher. Teachers “coach” the students during their guided reading. Results from one study indicated that coaching during reading was so critical, it was the frequency of that one practice that separated the most effective schools from others (Taylor et al. 1999, 156–157). Coaching requires scaffolded instruction. Teachers need to learn where their students are at, where they need to be, and then build scaffolds to support the students as they move from one point to the other. Scaffolding requires targeted, responsive instruction to provide that bridge. This is what shifts teachers from just covering materials to teaching learners. In other words, teachers should use *guided reading sessions* not just *guided reading lessons* (Burkins and Croft 2010, 22). Bottom line—guided reading sessions need to be more focused on helping learners make growth and be less concerned with just completing lessons.

Fountas and Pinnell remind us that guided reading “gives children the opportunity to develop as individual readers while participating in a socially supportive activity (1996, 1).” When used effectively, guided reading:

- ✓ targets both similar needs across learners and specific needs for individuals,

- ✓ scaffolds learning to accelerate the growth of similar learners while attending to the growth of individual learners,
- ✓ provides opportunities for teachers to observe learners' similarities and variations to provide responsive instruction, and
- ✓ should be positioned for greater intensity and impact by adjusting frequency, duration, focus, membership, and monitoring of the small group.

Students arrive with different needs, and our responsibility is to meet those specific needs. All teachers need tools, structures, and resources to help them meet those needs. The purpose of guided reading is to bring differentiated, responsive instruction into those classrooms. That is why guided reading matters.

### **Basic #3 Guided Reading Grows in Power When It Is Integrated with Other Elements**

This book clearly presents the importance of looking at many different dimensions of a comprehensive literacy program. The stronger each dimension is, the stronger the overall program will be. No matter how powerful guided reading is, it is just one element of a comprehensive literacy program and no one component of a comprehensive literacy program can carry the burden of accelerating the growth of all readers (Routman 2000, 151–152). Teaching and learning happen all day in a classroom, not just during guided reading (Mere 2005, 13–15). While this seems so basic, a common misunderstanding about guided reading is that it is often seen as the only time reading is taught (Burkins and Croft 2010, 11). It is important to remember that what a teacher does during guided reading shouldn't be any more important than what a teacher does during read-alouds, shared readings, independent reading, and other components of a comprehensive literacy program.

I often tell the teachers with whom I work that a comprehensive literacy program can be summed

up in three words: *to*, *with*, and *by* (Mooney 1990, 9–12). You need to read *to* your students, *with* your students, and get your students to read *by* themselves. A comprehensive program recognizes that all are critical because they have different purposes, levels of support, and literacy goals. When we look at what happens in a typical day in an elementary literacy program, learners still spend significant time in the large group setting (Kelly and Turner 2009, 1673). This shouldn't be surprising since the most efficient use of time and resources is using a whole group setting—working with all children at the same time using the same materials. It makes the most sense for modeling and demonstrating skills and strategies during components like read-alouds and shared readings. If teachers do not intentionally consider how to support all learners during whole group instruction, this part of the literacy program may be less successful in reaching those students who may need the instruction the most.

With guided reading, there is more intentionality about how to support all learners. The teacher schedules time to meet with guided reading groups. The teacher carefully selects texts and targets instruction to meet the needs of learners in the group. This part of the literacy block is important for reaching students who may need the most support, but it can't carry the entire burden. In fact, the small group work is only part of guided reading. The teacher must also be very intentional in supporting learners who are working on their own as he or she works with other groups. If guided reading is to reach all students, the teacher must carefully consider how to structure this independent work time.

With the content areas, the teacher often returns to whole class instruction with the same text for all students. Students in need of the most support spend even more time with texts that are often not within their levels. By the end of the day, those students in need of the most support often receive the least amount of instruction within their levels. Clearly while guided reading is critical for accelerating the growth of all readers, it is only as strong as the other elements that surround it. Guided

reading acknowledges the basic understanding that accelerating the growth of all readers must be a focus throughout the literacy program. (Note: Other chapters in this book will address other elements more completely.)

## **Basic #4 Selecting Appropriate Texts for Guided Reading Is Critical**

Much attention is given to the leveled texts used in guided reading; however, it is important to remember that attention needs to be given to the student reading the texts during guided reading. Remember, a basic understanding of guided reading is we are not just teaching texts, we are teaching learners. Text selection is still critical, however, because specific texts may better allow the teacher to zero in on what an individual needs to develop as a strategic reader.

Most models of guided reading suggest that texts selected should be at the instructional level of the reader. If the model for guided reading is scaffolding, then those texts become the bridge between what readers are capable of doing on their own (independent level) and what readers are unable to do even with support (frustrational level). So how are instructional level texts determined? The formula to determine instructional level texts is rooted in work done 70 years ago by Betts and has been relatively unchanged since then (Halladay 2012, 53–54). For Betts (1946), a 95 percent accuracy rate with comprehension is what distinguishes an instructional level text from frustrational. [For Clay (1993, 23), a 90 percent accuracy rate was the mark of the same distinction.] In his review of the research, Allington (2012, 72–73) advocates for higher levels of accuracy, suggesting that instruction with texts of high success rates (low error rates) often lead to greater gains. Allington suggests Betts' criteria are best for guided reading sessions. He points out however, that no matter what criteria are used, levels need to be used with flexibility.

Why flexibility? Leveling systems both simplify the complex interaction between the reader and

text, as well as often add a cumbersome layer of complexity by developing multiple discrete levels (Glasswell and Ford 2011, 208–211). First, leveling systems simplify the interactions of readers and texts. For a reader to be successful with a text, a number of factors must be in play. And a change in any one of those factors can make the text easier or harder for the reader. Most factors used to determine levels relate to the texts themselves since they are the most stable components and easy to count (e.g., sentence length, word frequency). Variations of readers and contexts are virtually impossible to capture in these formulas and rubrics. In the end, leveling systems over-promise a magical match between a text and a reader, suggesting the best way to secure a successful interaction is to match the learner to a text at his or her level. Teachers need to be aware of these limitations and be allowed to use their judgment in effectively choosing leveled materials. Lists and numbers should not replace teacher judgment (Worthy and Sailors 2001, 228–229).

A second problem with leveling systems is their use of criteria per level that can be perceived as lacking in objectivity. One leveling system, with 26 levels of texts and readers, suggested that J level texts were determined by reviewing 66 specific criteria. In contrast the next level up—K—used 71 specific criteria. Twenty-one of the criteria were the same for both levels and others were only distinguishable by qualitative degrees (i.e., *some* vs. *many*). In the end, books assigned to the J and K baskets are labeled as such but often indistinguishable. Practically speaking, the differences do not seem meaningful enough to use a book with one group while withholding it from another group.

Outsourcing decisions to leveling systems can be too rigid and should not replace professional judgment. When the level is the exclusive focus in selecting texts, unintended consequences can occur. It can compromise opportunities for those who need the most practice. In a second grade class, a teacher was working with a group using a 16-page level G text that contained about 80 words (5 of which were multisyllabic). Then the teacher moved to her

N level group, who were reading 10 pages from a short chapter book. The selection had 87 words (11 multisyllabic) on the first page alone. By the time the N group had read their chapter, they had received 10 times more practice than the G group who had the greater needs. With the focus on teaching a text at a specific level, guided reading carried out in this manner does little to close the gap between readers.

One way to close the gap when selecting texts for readers with the greatest needs is to be more intentional about the number of words students are asked to read. That leads to the basic concept of reading mileage, which starts with increasing awareness about the word counts of texts. Establish a baseline on the number of words practiced by guided reading groups. Since same-level texts often vary in word count, pick texts that provide the most practice. During your planning, also consider how rereading can increase the practice of a low word count text. Purposeful repeated reading can also flow from the guided reading table into independent routines. To practice even more words, include at the table additional related texts at the same level. Reading a variety of texts at the same level offers practice with a greater variety of words.

Systems with multiple discrete levels often cause teachers to focus on students making progress through the levels rather than on students achieving proficiency. I was involved in a project to map out the trajectory of three different groups of learners using a popular guided reading program. Progress was plotted following the pacing recommendations suggested by the materials. Each group of readers was put on a path that would lead to making progress. But the paths laid out in the pacing guide for above, at, and below grade level readers raised a confounding issue. If teachers followed the guide, they would leave below grade level readers far short of proficiency. What's more, if teachers in a school used the materials for multiple years, the gap between readers would actually widen. If teachers get comfortable seeing progress, they can lose sight of the fact that proficiency is the end goal. An important goal of guided reading is that

end points or accepted benchmarks need to be very clear. Therefore, instruction can be paced in such a way that as a child progresses, he or she gets closer to the goal of proficiency. Proficiency levels have gained significant attention recently because of the conversations around College and Career Readiness Standards. These Standards propose that students should “read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers 2010). The Standards clearly have teachers looking at the complexity of the texts they are using and questioning whether the exclusive use of leveled texts will lead to proficiency.

The way teachers use leveling systems can certainly change as guided reading moves forward. The bottom line is levels help teachers find texts that might be a better fit for readers; however, it is important to be mindful of other factors in finding the right text for a reader. Teachers should not let levels be the only thing that guides them in selecting texts and planning instruction. Rather, teachers should consider how they can supplement leveled texts with the use of trade books, poems, magazine articles, digital texts, or stories students have written. The levels of some of these texts may also be publicly available. If not, a quick check through the use of a student oral reading of the text will allow teachers to determine if it is within the instructional level of the students in the guided reading group. Looking for something that can be read with 90–95 percent accuracy is the goal. With more flexible use of all texts, we can lead more readers to not just make progress but actually become proficient.

## **Basic #5 Guided Reading Needs to Be Structured Differently for Different Learners**

Guided reading acknowledges and addresses the common developmental patterns of learners and their individual pathways. If plans do not recognize the different needs of learners, then guided reading

becomes a less-effective, one-size-fits-all model. It needs to be conceptualized with different plans for different learners. For example, models of guided reading for learners in the primary grades should look different from those in the intermediate grades.

Purpose should always drive the instructional decision-making of teachers and is mainly determined by the common patterns shared by learners. These are starting points for making decisions. Teachers can begin by thinking about four common phases for readers’ development: emergent, early, transitional, and fluent. Once the general phase has been determined, teachers should adapt guided reading for that phase. For example, in the emergent phase, readers are trying to determine how print works. The student has to come to understand concepts of print, phonological including phonemic awareness, and alphabetic knowledge. The emergent reader is expanding the vocabulary and world knowledge needed to bring meaning to the page. By contrast, older readers are often in the transitional phase and have the tools they need to deal with the texts they encounter. For them, the challenge is using the tools. They shift their focus to the texts as they try to become more sophisticated meaning makers. Goals are focused on understanding what is read and creating comprehensible texts when writing. Comprehension outcomes continue to expand. Students use text elements to summarize what was read. They use their ability to identify main ideas and themes to support personal response, including genuine connections. They attend to author’s craft and link it to their writing. Clearly one important basic element of guided reading is that decisions about texts, teaching points, and other grouping issues need to be adapted for the common patterns of the learners in those different phases (Ford 2016, 92–96).

Each reading development phase gives a sense of the outcomes for which instruction needs to be planned. It identifies the direction in which the readers are headed. The heart of guided reading is using instruction to build the bridge between two points: where the readers are at (baselines) and where

the readers need to be (outcomes). Teachers need to plan instruction intentionally and thoughtfully to help students in the small groups learn more about the reading process. While intentionality is critical, it should not preclude the teacher from being flexible. If guided reading is about common patterns, it is also about following individuals' paths. The latter requires a degree of flexibility. Teachers should be careful about operating with orthodoxy and ignoring the responsiveness that expert teaching requires. For each phase, there are critical decisions that need to be made about texts, teaching points, discussion opportunities, and fostering positive affective outcomes. Part of the decision-making requires prioritizing which teaching moments are most needed. Most guided reading sessions will last around 20 minutes, so instruction needs to be tightly focused and quickly paced.

Group membership should be considered for each session. Planning involves addressing both common patterns and individual pathways. These needs may determine initial membership in a group. As needs differ, group membership should be reconsidered. Baseline assessments provide the starting points, but ongoing formative assessments are critical to monitor progress and target instruction. Guided reading groups are flexible. When students have clearly demonstrated the need for different instruction, they should be moved to a new group. Students should be making growth if instruction is effective. If students are not making growth, then it might be important to look at the instruction they are receiving.

The good news is the instructional activities, techniques, and resources to support instruction can come from a variety of sources. Teachers need to consider whether their materials and methods send readers the kind of messages that are at the heart of effective guided reading. While isolated skill and strategy work may be needed, it is best done in the context of authentic reading and writing. While a focus on word level activities is certainly critical, students should also engage in text-level meaning making and reading that encourage positive affective outcomes. One thing that is basic to guided reading

is the teacher must be intentional but not inflexible in planning for different learners.

## **Basic #6 Intentionally Plan for What the Rest of the Class Is Doing During Guided Reading**

When classroom literacy programs returned to the use of small groups for guided reading, the focus was often on what to do with the students in the small group. Only limited attention was given to what to do with the rest of the class who are working away from the teacher. This issue quickly surfaced as the most frequently asked question about guided reading from educators. A decade later teachers were still asking the question (Guastello and Lenz 2005, 144). Coming up with plans for the rest of the class is basic for effective guided reading instruction.

Guided reading needs to be conceived as having two critical parts. First, guided reading is defined by what is done by the teacher with the students in the small group; but secondly and just as important, guided reading needs to clearly consider what the other students are doing while they are away from the teacher. If the latter is not thoughtfully considered and addressed, the ability to focus targeted instruction with small groups is virtually impossible. Bottom line: The instructional model of guided reading is inherently flawed and probably doomed to fail if work away from the teacher is not considered and addressed.

On average teachers have four guided reading groups they meet with for about 20 minutes three to four times a week. So students are actually away from the teacher more than they are with the teacher. On some days, a group of students may actually spend all of the time away from the teacher. The time away from the teacher must engage students in powerful work. So what do we do with the rest of the kids? Historically, the work away from the teacher often involved completing every worksheet and workbook page recommended in the basal lesson (Durkin 1978, 52–53). Then learning stations or centers became

the next phase of many teachers' evolution. Guided reading programs became linked with centers and stations. (Look at the chapter starting on page 155 for suggestions on how to effectively use centers in a comprehensive literacy program.)

Beyond centers, teachers continued to look for ways to operate more effectively and efficiently. Teachers discovered the value of workshop approaches. They began to see the benefits of process-oriented classroom structures. With these workshops in place, individual students engage in productive work, and the teacher is freed up for small group work or conferences. Workshop approaches include times when students read and write either individually or with partners or small groups. Teachers started to see that they could meet with guided reading groups while everyone else was engaged in independent and peer-based reading and writing activities.

While many teachers achieved some success integrating guided reading with workshop approaches, some felt that the big blocks of time in which learners were expected to stay engaged were too long for young readers and writers. These approaches did little to prepare young students for long periods of time away from the teacher. That led to another major way of conceptualizing work away from the teacher. With their Daily 5 structure, Boushey and Moser suggested the use of routines as a way to manage learners away from the teacher. They recommended teaching young children how to stay engaged in five different routines: read to self, read to someone, work on writing, work on words, and listen to reading (2006, 11–12). As students were taught the routines and the expectations and behavioral guidelines, an intentional effort was made to help them gradually increase their stamina so they could self-regulate behaviors while involved in these routines. As stamina and engagement levels increased, teachers found the time needed to meet with small groups for guided reading.

## **Basic #7 High-quality Guided Reading Needs to Be a Part of Universal Instruction Before It's Considered for Intervention**

A new role for guided reading has emerged—its use as an intervention. Contributing to this change was the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004. Within this reauthorization of federal law and subsequent state policies that followed was the opportunity for states to redefine how they determined students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD). Historically, IDEA supported an IQ-achievement discrepancy model, theorizing that a student's academic performance below his or her academic potential is evidence of a learning disability. State policies defined formulas for determining how much of a discrepancy would indicate a learning disability. Many experts, however, found fault with the discrepancy model because it often meant that a student had to wait to fail before receiving needed help. This model placed all the focus on student factors and rarely looked at the instruction the student was receiving. It documented a discrepancy but revealed little about why the gap existed.

While IDEA did not do away with the IQ-achievement discrepancy model, it provided states with another option. Policies permitted the use of a process that focuses on a child's response to scientifically based interventions. For the first time, schools could consider the student's response to instruction as a factor in determining if he or she had an SLD. In a relatively short time, response to instruction options became codified in Response to Intervention (RtI) frameworks. Districts quickly operationalized identification tools, rules, and processes for schools and classrooms. RtI was envisioned as a broad framework for thinking about helping all children with needs. One of the most significant shifts was the implementation of general education interventions prior to special education identification. RtI brought a promise of being both a way to reduce the number of students with learning

problems while also more accurately identifying students with an SLD (Wixson and Lipson 2012, 387).

What role does guided reading play in interventions? If RtI is a regular education initiative, then it must focus initially on providing ALL students with quality, equitable opportunities to learn. All students need access to high-quality instruction within a comprehensive literacy program, including read-alouds, shared reading, independent reading, and *guided reading*. Sometimes “regular” guided reading is positioned as a small group intervention, but that needs to be rethought. Before guided reading is adapted and modified as an intervention, it should be included first as an effective instructional opportunity provided to all students. As previously discussed, a comprehensive literacy program would mean that within regular classroom instruction all students would have already received effective large group, small group (i.e., guided reading), and individualized instruction. Dorn and Soffos (2011, 7) strongly recommend that interventions should always be supported by high-quality regular classroom instruction. RtI requires that the quality of classroom instruction is always examined when discussing the needs of a child. Before looking at how a student responded to instruction, we must look at whether the student had an opportunity to learn.

So what is the role for guided reading beyond universal instruction? Can it be used as an intervention for subsequent levels? Allington (2008, 25) identified the research-based characteristics of interventions that accelerate reading growth:

- very small groups or tutoring
- majority of time spent reading
- match between reader and text level
- use of texts that are interesting to students
- coordination with core classrooms
- expert teacher delivers intervention
- expand daily reading activity
- meaning and meta-cognitive focus

Obviously, the models of guided reading presented in this chapter align with those characteristics. Fountas and Pinnell (2008, 498–501) also remind us that interventions are typically intensive, short term, supplementary, low in teacher to student ratio, and taught by an expert teacher who is in communication with the classroom teacher. Again many of those characteristics are at the heart of guided reading sessions, though the last characteristic seems to suggest that an expert teacher outside of the classroom handles the intervention. So what would have to change to position guided reading as an intervention?

Guided reading may have greater impact if the frequency of meetings is increased. Similarly, the duration of the guided reading sessions could be adjusted so students with greater needs are given more time (and instruction) with the teacher. Guided reading may also have greater impact by changing who is at the table. By decreasing the number of students taught, students are provided with more targeted instruction, greater potential for engagement, and less distraction than in regular guided reading groups. Another adjustment could be to refocus the content taught and time allocation for specific content within the lesson. This would allow for instruction that might differ from the lessons typically taught during guided reading. Guided reading sessions could also include more and/or different formative assessments to closely monitor the progress (or lack of it) with the learners than is typically seen in other guided reading sessions. Finally, one more way to adjust guided reading is to look closely at the instruction being offered. The delivery of instruction could be monitored more closely either through self-reflection, including taping the sessions, or with the help of outside supervision. Teachers should always look at their instruction to see if it is all that it needs to be to reach the students.

The reauthorization of IDEA has changed today’s classrooms. It presents all of us with a huge challenge. To achieve the intent of RtI, which is to improve education for all students, we need to start by tightening up effective guided reading instruction

within a comprehensive literacy program. We must be willing to take a look at guided reading when it is not working as well as it could for some learners and reflect on whether adjustments could improve the practice. Only after that occurs are we ready to add a more intensive type of guided reading instruction to reach learners with the greatest needs. In the end our willingness to move in these directions could help us resist and reduce the temptation to label and sort students.

## Conclusion

When we think about guided reading basics, we need to remember that it has a strong historical grounding and a clearly defined purpose. It has an

important role to play in a comprehensive literacy program. In this chapter, we have examined insights and ideas on how to make effective decisions related to planning and implementing guided reading instruction within a comprehensive literacy program. There are intentional decisions that need to be made about the integration of guided reading with other dimensions of the literacy program, selection and use of appropriate texts, planning around common patterns with the potential for responsive teaching, structures of work away from the teacher, and intensification of guided reading as an intervention. When these decisions are made effectively, the power of guided reading will only grow stronger in a comprehensive literacy program.

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