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TEACHING AND LEARNING RESEARCH EXCHANGE

Guided Reading to Improve Reading Instruction in a Grade One Classroom

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Executive Summary

The purpose of the research project was twofold. The first and primary purpose was to improve reading instruction in a grade one classroom through the use of guided reading. Secondly, this was a joint project with the school administration to support and encourage teacher research at our school.

The project began with a basic review of guided reading and the strategies necessary to use it to improve instruction. This review involved gaining an understanding of the guided reading process and directions for implementing it. It also included visitations and discussions with teachers using guided reading in order to draw upon the collective and practical knowledge of classroom teachers.

Next, the project included research to identify the resources necessary to use this strategy successfully to improve reading instruction. Books in the grade one classroom were leveled, and other books were found to complete the collection of resources for the purpose of establishing a literacy center in our school. Commercially produced programs were examined. Advantage was taken of a workshop opportunity in order to gain an understanding of the guided reading programs produced by publishers. Finally, resources were made available in order to implement the program.

Students' individual reading levels were assessed before implementing the Guided Reading Program, during the process and at the end of the year. The information from the assessments was used to report to parents on the progress of individual students, and the information was also used in aggregate to evaluate the overall success of implementing guided reading to improve instruction.

Finally, it was important for the researchers to share their work with others. A PowerPoint presentation was developed to provide inservice for other teachers in the school and in the school division.

Introduction

Educators who teach children to read have a treasure chest or tool kit of strategies, programs and techniques that help students to transform printed text into meaningful language. Teachers carefully choose from this treasure chest a variety of methods in order to teach every child in their care to read. This treasure chest is always changing. Teachers use some strategies, improve on others, change strategies slightly to suit their individual styles, or dismiss them completely. Instructional strategies are continually researched and added to improve instruction.

Researching new strategies often follows an established model. A question is developed. Will this strategy improve reading instruction? The strategy is researched and developed for classroom use. Next the strategy is tested in the classroom with students. Through observation, testing and reflection, the strategy is evaluated. Changes are made to improve instruction and then the strategy is re-tested. The strategy is developed, re-validated and refined in order to provide effective instruction for students. Through this process, it becomes part of the teachers' treasure chest and instruction improves. Teachers have one more tool with which to teach reading.

Guided reading peaked the interest of Sheila Dosch, a grade one teacher at St. Mary's School in Estevan, Saskatchewan. After visiting a classroom that used guided reading and researching the strategy, she was ready to experiment with it in her classroom. Three things would be necessary. Money needed to be made available to purchase books and a program for the classroom, which meant support was required from the administration of both the school and school division. Secondly, time needed to be available so that the teacher could level books, implement the strategy and evaluate students. Thirdly, this new knowledge needed to be shared with others who had also expressed an interest in guided reading.

Sheila's desire to experiment marked the beginning of our journey with this research project. It has been one of successes and failures, ups and downs, experimenting, evaluating, strategizing and re-evaluating. This report is a journal of the journey, the development of the guided reading program used to improve reading instruction in a grade one classroom. The journal includes both the data that were gathered to evaluate its effectiveness as a strategy for improving reading instruction and a presentation that was used to share the information with other teachers.

Can Guided Reading Improve Reading Instruction in the Grade One Classroom?



PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of the research project was twofold. The first and primary purpose was to improve reading instruction in a grade one classroom through the use of guided reading. Secondly, this was a joint project with the school administration to support and encourage teacher research at our school.

In undertaking the research project, we had five objectives:

1. To examine our own beliefs about learning to read and to understand the research and guiding principles of guided reading in order to implement it successfully in the grade one classroom.
2. To level books in the grade one classroom, provide resources for a literacy center and provide a variety of texts for each reading level.
3. To implement a guided reading program to provide students with the opportunity to read and practice at their own level.
4. To assess students on an ongoing basis and make use of the assessment information to develop each child's individual reading levels.
5. To provide opportunities through guided reading for students to work with groups of children in order to develop their language and reading skills.



STEP ONE: UNDERSTANDING GUIDED READING

The first step involved examining what we believe about learning to read in order to understand guided reading. We recognized that we needed to be able to articulate our reasons for adding this strategy to our teaching reading treasure chest. Our understanding of Guided Reading developed through professional reading, through discussions with each other and through discussions with other teachers in the school division who were using Guided Reading in their classrooms. What we learned is summarized below.

If language has meaning and reading is the extension of language into written print, then that print also has meaning. If this statement is true, we can conclude that every child who understands language can learn to read. Our task is to use a variety of different strategies, experiences and techniques in order to provide students with every opportunity available so that children can learn to transform print into meaning.

We believe that reading is an extension of language. We know that language is acquired through interaction, experimentation and refinement. The development of language must take place in a language rich environment. Children use what they already know about language as a basis for learning to read.

Guided Reading takes on many different faces. For the purpose of our research, we have used much of the work of Fountas and Pinnell (1996) to guide our work. Using this model, guided reading involves groups of students who are thinking and talking and reading at their own level with the support of a teacher or professional. The goal is to develop each student's skills and abilities to the independent reader stage.

In Guided Reading children are guided through a process of development in which they are given opportunities to develop the skills and strategies at each level in the process. Learning to read is the progression through the levels. However, it cannot be done independently. Teachers evaluate, guide and assist students in progressing through each stage in order to assist them in becoming independent readers.

We believe that in order to improve reading instruction, students need to read and practice at their individual levels in order to develop their reading skills. Children begin grade one with a variety of different experiences, skill levels and language opportunities. All students need to begin with the knowledge they already have and develop skills at each level before attempting more challenging texts. These skills need to be taught. Guided Reading allows students to read at their individual levels to begin to read more challenging texts. Teachers evaluate students informally on a weekly basis and formally using benchmarks in order to determine the skills each individual student needs to practice. Guided Reading allows the teachers to meet the unique needs of each individual student.

We believe that teachers need the opportunity to read to students, read with students and listen to students read. They need to use the needs of individual students, small groups and the entire class as a basis for instruction. Guided Reading allows each student to progress through the levels under the supervision of the teacher. Guided Reading provides opportunity for individual, small group and large class instruction to meet the needs of the students. Guided Reading is never

the same in every context; it changes to meet the needs of the individual students, or the class as a whole.

We believe that good teaching includes using research and a variety of approaches and strategies from the teacher's treasure chest in order to ensure success for all students. As part of a balanced literacy approach to teaching reading, Guided Reading ensures that students have the opportunity to read a book for a specific purpose and that they are challenged to think about what they are reading and to identify the strategies they are using.



STEP TWO: IMPLEMENTING THE PROGRAM IN GRADE ONE – METHODOLOGY

The grade one class is composed of twenty students, ten boys and ten girls. The class has a wide range of abilities and experiences with reading and language. English is a second language for one of our students and one student received individualized programming. There were no significant factors to take into account with respect to the socio-economic background and ethnic diversity of the students.

At the beginning of the school year the grade one teacher began the Guided Reading journey by experimenting with a variety of learning centers. By trying out different centers and ideas, the teacher hoped to find ones that worked with her teaching styles and met the needs of the students. General rules and procedures for using the centers were reviewed with the students before introducing them. Clearly establishing general rules and procedures as well as those that applied to particular centers was an important component of the success of the centers. These routines were set each time the centers were used to get the students prepared for when Guided Reading started. The instructions for each new center were clearly outlined when the center was introduced. New centers were added at times when the teacher could observe the students working. The procedures and rules were reinforced in the group and with individuals.

Some of the centers were:

1. Listening

A traditional listening center was used. Upon reflection, the students needed more guidance at the beginning of the year on how to work the tape recorder. CD players were purchased for the listening center, which seemed

to work better because they were of interest to the children. A Walkman may be easier to use at this center and might be more user friendly.

2. Computer

Using the computer for center time was difficult for the children in terms of working independently. There were not enough games on which the children could work independently. The location of the computer in the room did not work well for the centers as it was very close to my reading table. This centre would be a great tool with some new programs and a different classroom location.

3. Whiteboards

This centre worked well throughout the year. Students were given instructions at the beginning of each session. The tasks became more difficult as the students' skills progressed. For example, at the beginning of the year the students were to practice formation of their alphabet letters. Towards the end of the year they could use this center to write messages, practice spelling words and write sentences.



4. Spelling

Throughout the year different activities at this center were used that increased in difficulty so that the students could practice higher level skills. For example, students used alphabet stamps, letter cubes and chalkboards.

5. Reading

Students were given the opportunity to read books at their own level or books from the classroom library.

6. Puzzles

Different kinds of commercial puzzles were used in the classroom.

7. Morning Message

Morning messages were written on chart paper and laminated. Students could write directly on the charts.

8. Word Searches

Computer-generated word searches were made from sight words and weekly spelling lists.

9. Videos

Short videos related to the units we had been working on in science, such as animals or space, were used. This center required a lot of teacher time to keep it running effectively.

10. Writing

A container was provided with a variety of gel pens as well as different types of notes pads, sometimes reflecting the different themes. The students especially enjoyed using black paper. This center was used all year long and adapted as the students gained more skills. Before each Guided Reading session, the teacher would review the expectations for the writing center. Different activities were used. For example, students could practice writing upper and lower case letters, sight words, spelling words or sentences.

11. Bookmaking

Commercially reproducible sight word books were provided for the students to make their own books. In this center, the students cut, sequenced, stapled, read and colored their books. Books were chosen by themes or by words that had been previously taught.

12. Art

At this center seasonal pictures were used for coloring, painting, and crafts.

13. Poems

During their time at this center, the students were allowed to use a pointer and read over the poems on the chart stand that we had been reading in the classroom. They could also write words on the chalkboard.

14. Games

The games that were used were already in the classroom, such as letter sequencing and recognition, bingo (alphabet and sight word), and vowel games.

Children were becoming confident in working independently at centers, so the next step was to level the books used for Guided Reading. Some books in the classroom had been leveled by another school. Another school division was kind enough to send us a copy of the criteria it had used when leveling books, along with its guidelines on how to determine a level for a book, which I was able to use to level my own books. A variety of sources were tapped to gather as many books as possible at each level. The material used for the Guided Reading sessions came from commercially available books that were already leveled. As the year progressed, it became more difficult to find books at the lower level. Therefore books already in the classroom were leveled. This practice worked well because only few students were still at the lower level and multiple copies were not needed. Stories from the classroom reading series that were at the appropriate level were also used.

In November, each student's reading level was determined using a purchased benchmarking kit. The kit included leveled books, running records for each of the books and comprehension questions to go with each book. Once the levels for each student were determined, the Guided Reading journey was about to begin. Because Guided Reading was at the experimental stage, the plan was to implement Guided Reading as part of the regular reading program.

Students were grouped according to the level they had achieved during the benchmarking process. Guided Reading was scheduled twice a week. This schedule insured that the teacher was able to work with each group of students each week.

The Guided Reading sessions were approached in different ways. For the most part, the sessions were used to teach groups of students who were reading at the same level. Multiple copies of books at each level were needed. Each session lasted

around twenty minutes, during which time three different groups met with the teacher. Each session with the teacher followed the same format. Students were instructed to look at the book, discuss what they thought the book was about, read the book and discuss the strategies they were using. Some of the books had teaching suggestions included in the package, but these sessions usually focused on assisting the students with the skills that they were unsure of and had been taught in the large group. Individual students were also given instruction during Guided Reading sessions to re-evaluate their reading level or to give extra instruction in certain areas.

Different approaches to centers and different centers were used. The centers that were experimented with were rotating centers, so that every group was able to go to every center at some point during the week, and choice centers, which allowed the students to pick the centers they were at. The center type used the most was the rotating center, which seemed to cause less commotion in the classroom. As group size was experimented with and reflected upon, it was determined that it was most successful to have no more than five students in a group, and the smaller the group, the better the result.

From November until January each student's reading level was monitored and the groups were adjusted accordingly. Formal benchmarking was completed in March and in May.

The teacher was given the opportunity to attend a Guided Reading session in May. It involved attending a book preview for a company that publishes Guided Reading books. Books for the upcoming school year were purchased so Guided Reading could continue to be used in the grade one classroom.

Benchmarks and the leveled books for Guided Reading were also used to improve the home reading program. Leveled books were used for the home reading program. The students chose from the bucket of books that corresponded with their reading level. This practice improved the home reading program by giving students the opportunity to practice at home at their reading level, thus reinforcing the skills and strategies they needed to practice in order to progress through the reading process.



STEP THREE: DATA COLLECTION

Students' reading levels were determined in November using a commercially purchased benchmarking kit. It was determined that of the twenty students in grade one, two students were below level 1, seven were at level 1 and eleven were at level 2 (see Figure 1).

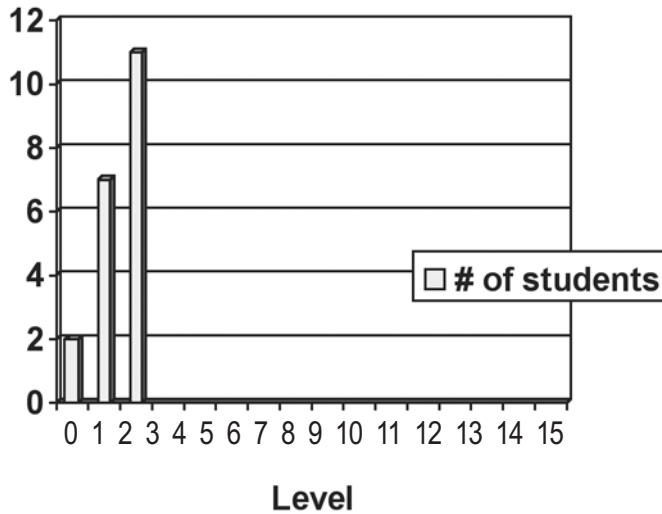


Figure 1: Number of Students at Each Reading Level in November

In January, after the leveling was completed again, most of the students had made some progress. Nine of the twenty students had reached level 5 and higher. Eleven of the twenty students were reading below level 5, with two students not showing any progress (see Figure 2). As shown in Figure 2, two students were below level 0, one student was at level 1, four were at level 2, one was at level 3, three had progressed to level 4, eight had moved to level 5, and one student was reading at level 6.

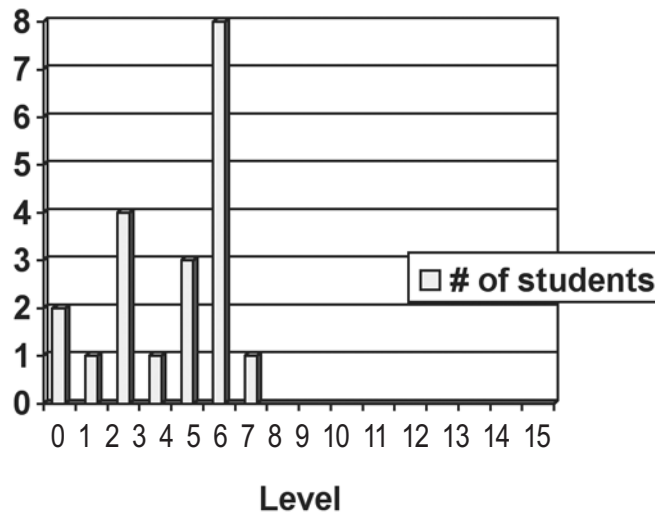


Figure 2: Number of Students at Each Reading Level in January

The most drastic change in levels was evident in the final benchmarking period. There were a variety of levels of reading achieved, with level 15 being the highest and level 2 being the lowest. Eight out of twenty children scored above a level 10, eight scored between 5 and 10 and four scored below a level 5 (see Figure 3).

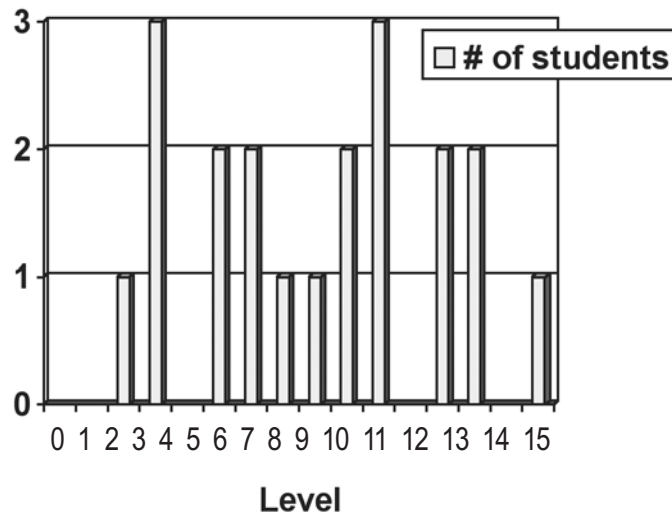


Figure 3: Number of Students at Each Reading Level in March-May

STEP FOUR: REFLECTIONS FROM THE GRADE ONE TEACHER

At the end of the project, Sheila Dosch provided the following reflections on her experience in using Guided Reading in her grade one classroom:

I feel the students have benefited from being a part of this project. There are many things that I have learned through this project about guided reading. I look forward to learning more and continuing using guided reading in my classroom for the upcoming years. Using guided reading in my classroom has improved my instruction as well as reporting to parents.

Guided reading gave me a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of my students. I have always thought that I had a good understanding of what level students were at in their reading but this opportunity provided me a much better understanding of what exactly the students were learning. Benchmarking and student reading levels gave me an idea about the students' progress and the strategies they were applying in their reading. I was able to provide group support and prescriptive teaching strategies for the large class, small groups and individuals. Extra support was given where needed which directly addressed the skills and strategies students would need to progress to independent reading.

Guided reading also allowed me to report to parents more specifically. By having parents practice with their children at their individual reading levels, students were also getting one on one reading practice at the level they needed to read and progress

toward independent reading. Specific data was collected for each student that could be reported to parents.

Although this project has been a very positive one, there are different areas that I still need to reflect upon, question and experiment with in order to make guided reading most effective. I am looking to try and improve my center time in guided reading. Most of the centers I tried were successful but there was always a group of students who were not on task and therefore not benefiting from the practice that the center would have provided. I am hoping to somehow get our librarian and resource teacher and maybe even the principal involved in the guided reading process in the upcoming year. I believe that this would make the center time during guided reading more successful for everyone.

Another obstacle I encountered was the limited amount of lower level books that I had in the classroom. There were a few students who did not advance as quickly and as a result I needed lower level books. With the purchase of new books at the end of the year this problem should not arise next year.

STEP FIVE:

SHARING INFORMATION AND ENCOURAGING TEACHER RESEARCH

Part of this project included sharing the results with other teachers in the school division. Some teachers had already used Guided Reading. The project provided an opportunity to share information, open discussion, and network with these teachers. Other teachers had questions about guided reading and how to use it in their classroom. A presentation on Guided Reading was also needed to provide these teachers with the information necessary to lay the groundwork for implementing Guided Reading in their classrooms.

The presentation on Guided Reading presented to the elementary teachers in our school division on September 17, 2006 is available with this report on the McDowell Foundation website. The hour-long presentation provided opportunity for understanding the research completed through the Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation as it is described in this report.

The goal for including this research in the presentation was to convey the importance of teacher research and to encourage other teachers from the school division to undertake such a project. Secondly, the presentation included opportunities to level books, which gave teachers an opportunity to understand how books are leveled in order to progress through the stages of reading to independent reading level. Understanding the diagnostic and prescriptive aspects of Guided Reading gave teachers a good understanding of the purpose of using Guided Reading. Thirdly, the presentation included a question and answer period that provided an opportunity to network with other teachers who were using Guided Reading and to give other teachers an opportunity to pose questions. The last part of the presentation gave the grade one teacher the opportunity to outline her plans to continue to improve reading instruction in her classroom.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the project was very successful in providing the teacher involved with the opportunity to experiment with a new teaching strategy that she might not have otherwise attempted to use. The support provided by the school administration allowed the teacher the time to spend on understanding the process of Guided Reading and the time to get everything organized to be able to implement such a strategy in the classroom. The knowledge acquired through research and implementation of such a program will only add to the teacher's ability to provide reading instruction to her students. Not only will her new knowledge help the students in the school, but it will help the other teachers in the school and the school division. She is able to share her experience with them which may spark an interest in others in undertaking a similar project.



Resource List

- Creative Teaching Press. (2002). *Guided reading*. Creative Teaching Press Inc., Huntington Beach, CA.
- Fredricks, A. (2003). *Guided reading in grades k-2: Guided reading strategies, activities, and lesson plans for reading success*. Rigby Best Teachers Press, Austin, TX.
- Fountas, I & Pinnell, G. (1996). *Guided reading: Good first teaching for all children*. Heinemann; Portsmouth, NH.
- Nelley, E. & Smith, A. (2004). *PM Benchmark kit: Second edition*. Thomas – Nelson, Toronto, ON
- Saunders-Smitn, G. (2003). *The ultimate guided reading how-to book: Building literacy through small group instruction*. Zephyr Press, Chicago, Ill.

Appendix 1: Consent Forms

PERMISSION FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPATION

Title

Guided Reading to Improve Reading Instruction in a Grade One Classroom.

Introduction

Research shows that Guided Reading is an effective strategy to improve the reading levels of individual students. The project in which we are asking your permission to participate is aimed at developing and recording the use of Guided Reading in the Grade One classroom at St. Mary's School.

Procedure

Students' reading level will be determined using benchmarks set out in the Nelson Benchmark kit. This will determine the students' reading level according to the Nelson program. Weekly Guided Reading Sessions will be scheduled into the Grade One program. Students will read independently or with the classroom teacher. Student reading levels will be re-evaluated on a regular basis.

Risks and Benefits

The benefits of this research will serve to develop the Guided Reading Program in Grade One and to evaluate its effectiveness. There are no known risks of participation in this program.

Research Personnel

The Grade One Language Arts Teacher, Mrs. Dosch, is the primary researcher. Mrs. Barreth, St. Mary's School Principal, will support Mrs. Dosch. If you have any questions, please feel free to call.

Confidentiality

Any information derived from participation in this study will be kept confidential by the researchers. There will be no identification of individual students in the research report. Individual student information may be reported to their parent or guardian.

Voluntary Participation

All students will participate in the classroom Guided Reading Program. I understand that using my child's results as part of the research study is completely voluntary and that I can deny the use of the information at any time.

Guided Reading to Improve Reading Instruction in a Grade One Classroom is a project funded by the Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation for Research into Teaching. The Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation will publish the final report for Research into Teaching.

Consent

Having read the above, I agree to allow the use of the information obtained through the participation in the Guided Reading Program for the purpose of this project.

Signature of Parent/Guardian

Signature of Researcher

Date

Permission to Use Student Photographs

May 25, 2006

Dear Parents,

If you recall, at the beginning of the school year you signed a permission form for your child to take part in a Guided Reading project I was involved in. The time has come to write a report using the results from the Guided Reading project. As part of the report I would like to include pictures of the students during the Guided Reading sessions. I require your permission to include these in my report. The report will be published and available through the Stirling McDowell Research Foundation in hard copy and internet. No names will be included in the photographs or the report itself. Please find attached a permission slip for you to sign if you agree to this. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sheila Dosch

I give my permission for my child _____
to have their picture used in the research project for the Stirling McDowell
Research Foundation.

Parent's signature

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