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Differentiated Reading Instruction: Strategies to Reach All Students

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### **Abstract**

Many elementary education teachers employ differentiated teaching strategies during reading instruction to ensure all students' needs are being addressed, based on well-established evidence that not every child learns the same way. Differentiated instruction is not as simple as altering expectations or standards. In order to provide academically diverse learners an equal opportunity to access and demonstrate learning, changes need to be made in the instructional delivery method, assessment method, or both. By using differentiated instruction and employing various delivery methods and assessments, teachers can develop an inclusive classroom environment where students have opportunities to be successful regardless of their learning styles and learning abilities or disabilities. This study looked at four differentiated instructional strategies for teaching guided reading: flexible grouping, ongoing assessment, instructional choice, and modeling. The purpose was to discover which differentiated instruction strategies are most successful and applicable for teaching reading in the elementary grades. Through observation, the employment and effectiveness of teachers' differentiated-instruction strategies for teaching reading were observed, recorded, and analyzed using field notes. The three fourth grade teachers were each observed using guided reading techniques to instruct their students during reading. Students were placed in homogenous reading groups and given a leveled text to read with comprehension questions to respond to and discuss within their group. Direct instruction was used to teach isolated skills when needed to each group or whole class, based on ongoing formal and informal assessments performed by the teacher. In a differentiated classroom, these teachers created a supportive learning environment where instruction was designed to meet individual student needs.

## **Introduction**

Differentiated instruction involves numerous teaching methods to ensure all students are learning in a way that applies to them. Through a semester of data collection, the implementation of guided reading was observed as being the key strategy used to differentiate reading instruction in the three fourth grade classes. Some of the methods used through guided reading include flexible grouping, ongoing assessment, instructional choice, and modeling. Guided reading is small-group reading instruction designed to provide differentiated teaching that supports students in developing reading proficiency (Fountas and Pinnell, 2016). The teacher uses a tightly structured framework that allows for the incorporation of several research-based approaches into a corresponding agenda. For the student, the guided reading lesson means reading and talking (and sometimes writing) about an interesting and engaging variety of fiction and nonfiction texts. For the teacher, guided reading means taking the opportunity for careful text selection and intentional and intensive teaching of systems of strategic activity for proficient reading (Fountas and Pinnell, 2016).

## **Literature Review**

Differentiated instruction is an inclusive and flexible process that includes the planning, preparation, and delivery of instruction to address the diversity of students' learning needs within the classroom (Tomlinson, 2016). Some of these strategies presented in the literature include: flexible grouping, ongoing assessment, instructional choice, and modeling.

### **Flexible Grouping**

Flexible grouping is a classroom organizational strategy that is designed to address a broad range of student needs within a single classroom (Castle, Deniz, Tortora, 2005). The purpose of flexible grouping is to group and regroup students based on particular student

learning needs as determined through continuous assessment. Flexible grouping is based on the assumption that “every instructional episode demands careful attention to matching students’ needs with the most appropriate group experience” (Castle, Deniz, Tortora, 2005). This strategy allows teachers to focus instruction based on students’ particular learning needs, keep students engaged in the task at hand, and increase their confidence in reading.

### **Ongoing Assessment**

Ongoing assessment should be diverse and happening all the time. Assessment is “the process of observing children in everyday experiences, analyzing those observations and recording the information” (Pollitt, Cohrssen, Church, Wright, 2015). Assessment should be ongoing, take many aspects of learning into account, and be integrated in the learning program. Ongoing assessment should also adapt planned learning experiences to better fit each child’s interests and needs, and to evaluate the effectiveness of the program itself (Pollitt et al., 2015). Differentiated instruction is necessary to meet the needs of all students in diverse and developmentally varied classrooms.

### **Instructional Choice**

Instructional choice is easy to implement and supports content instruction in the classroom. Instructional choice has been associated with promoting decision-making and other self-determined behaviors in students (Lane, Royer, Messenger, Common, Ennis, Swogger, 2015). By making simple shifts in how teachers provide instruction, teachers can reduce the likelihood of challenging behaviors, such as disruption, occurring and increase engagement (Lane et al., 2015). Incorporating instructional choices into daily lessons is one such strategy that

can be used by educators in a range of contexts to achieve the shared goal of maximizing the amount of time students spend engaged in high-quality instructional activities and support students in engaging in self-determined behaviors such as choice-making, which can ultimately offer them a sense of control. Current research on choice has included a range of topics, such as: examining students' preferences, increasing students' opportunities to make choices in their life, the mechanisms that support choice, and examining the effects of choice on students' engagement, task completion, and disruption (Lane et al., 2015).

### **Modeling**

Modeling is a simple and effective way to engage students in learning a routine or skill that needs to be done in a specific way. Teachers use modeling during reading instruction to encourage the self-implementation of learned reading skills and strategies. The UKLA *Teachers as Readers* (TaRs) project documented the positive difference Reading Teachers can make to children's reading identities and their pleasure in reading (Cremin, Davis, Williams, Thomson, 2014). Through considering their own reading lives and practices, many of the TaRs practitioners transformed their understanding of the nature of reading and creatively adapted their pedagogy and classroom positioning as a result (Cremin *etal.* 2014). Through these strategies, teachers not only become motivated and enthusiastic fellow readers, but also thoughtful and interactive reading role models.

### **Methodology**

This study examined what guided reading strategies three fourth grade teachers employed to differentiate learning during reading instruction. This qualitative, naturalistic study was conducted at a suburban intermediate school in southeastern Massachusetts. This study employed multiple data collection methods including hours of participant observations, field notes, and

semi-structured teacher interviews (Appendix A). Surveys and focus groups were not used. This study investigated the strategies teachers strived to use to ensure all their students had an equal opportunity at learning how to read. Five hours were spent in each classroom. Each classroom was neatly organized with well established rules and routines. Although the environment of each classroom was relatively the same, each teacher differed in their instruction. Teacher A has been teaching for over twenty years and has reputable routines and classroom management. She is very knowledgeable of her craft and is highly respected by her students as well as other faculty members. Teacher B has also been teaching for nearly twenty years, but has a more laid back demeanor. She is very consistent with her practices and her students know exactly what their schedule will be like each day. Teacher C is a newer teacher, in her second year in the profession. She has rich, engaging ideas and is always switching lessons up, keeping her students on their toes. The four teachers observed each used guided reading to differentiate their instruction and employed these four strategies during their guided reading lessons in their own effective and applicable way.

## **Findings**

### **Guided Reading**

Throughout the fifteen hours of observation, it was noted that each teacher was using Fountas and Pinnell's guided reading program. Guided reading has long been an accepted form of effective reading instruction (Ferguson, Wilson, 2009). Through Fountas and Pinnell's work, guided reading continues to be considered a best practice in general education classrooms. Fountas and Pinnell defined the practice of guided reading as, "an instructional setting that enables (teachers) to work with small groups of students to help them learn effective strategies

for processing text with understanding” (Fountas and Pinnell, pg. 6, 2016). Both of these researchers do not limit the use of guided reading to primary grades or just to struggling students.

In the primary grades, guided reading increases students’ oral reading fluency, phonetic understanding, as well as their overall reading level (Ferguson and Wilson, 2009). As students move into the upper elementary grades, guided reading has the potential to teach critical reading strategies, engage students in word study, and increase students’ self-regulation. Each of these skills are important aspects of reading for meaning. During guided reading lessons, teachers work with small groups of children using leveled books. 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. During observation, it was noted in each classroom that every guided reading group had a different goal that they were working toward. With the low group of readers, word-decoding skills were their target. At level readers worked on their fluency while reading leveled texts and the higher-level readers worked on comprehension. Books are selected with specific students in mind so that with strong teaching, readers can meet the demands of more challenging texts over time.

Students are actively engaged in the lesson as they learn how to decode words as well as read with the correct speed and accuracy, while they are also 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 as, “an instructional context for supporting each reader’s development of effective strategies for processing novel texts at increasingly challenging levels of difficulty” (Fountas & Pinnell, pg.11, 2016).

### **Strategies Used in Guided Reading**

Flexible grouping, ongoing assessment, instructional choice, and modeling were successful strategies that were observed in this study that could be implemented when using guided reading in an elementary classroom.

#### **Flexible Grouping**

Flexible grouping is a classroom organizational strategy that is designed to address a broad range of student needs within a single classroom (Castle, Deniz, Tortora, 2005). The purpose of flexible grouping is to group and regroup students based on particular student learning needs as determined through continuous assessment. Groups are formed based on students' needs in reading instruction and their reading level. The ideal guided reading group has three to four students in it, each with similar strengths and needs. Two effective measures can be taken to determine a student's reading level. These measures include a primary spelling inventory and a running record. Although individuals always vary, the students in the group are alike enough that they can be effectively taught in a group setting. Texts are selected from a collection arranged along a gradient of difficulty. The teacher selects a text that students will be able to process successfully with instruction. One teacher interviewed stated that she tries, "to find reading materials that are just slightly above their reading level. Everyone should have a 'comfortable struggle' to be able to grow and learn." This strategy allows teachers to focus instruction based on students' particular learning needs, keep students engaged in the task at hand, and increase their confidence in reading (Castle, Deniz, Tortora, 2005).

### **Ongoing Assessment**

Ongoing assessment is a term that signals that assessment should be diverse and happening all the time. Assessment is “the process of observing children in everyday experiences, analyzing those observations and recording the information” (Pollitt, Cohrssen, Church, Wright, 2015). Assessment should accordingly be ongoing, take many aspects of learning into account, and be integrated in the learning program. Through guided reading, assessment is constantly ongoing as the teacher listens to students read orally, decode words, read with speed and accuracy, recall events in the story, and answer comprehension questions about the text. One teacher that was interviewed explained that, “individual and small group experiences always provide the best opportunity to check in with students, but I also give whole class assessments. If a student is struggling, I assess their oral reading fluency and comprehension every two weeks using grade level passages from our reading series. For the whole class, I give a comprehension assessment every other week to gather information. I also meet with small groups once a week, which is a terrific informal assessment.” After systematic assessment to determine students’ strengths and needs, students are grouped for efficient reading instruction.

### **Instructional Choice**

Instructional choice is a low-intensity strategy that requires little preparation, is easy to implement, and supports content instruction in the classroom. Instructional choice is used during guided reading to ensure that all students feel equal during reading instruction in the classroom. One teacher stated during an interview that she tries, “to make sure that my below level readers are given the same opportunities as the rest of the class to do activities on their tablet, read in a small group, meet with me, and work on vocabulary at their desk during guided reading time.

Luckily all of the guided reading books are set up identically, so I can assign something to the whole class, and then each student can respond using their own book. It makes it seem as though every book is the same, even though they are not.” Instructional choice has been associated with promoting decision-making and other self-determined behaviors in students (Lane, Royer, Messenger, Common, Ennis, Swogger, 2015). By making simple shifts in how instruction is provided, teachers can reduce the likelihood of challenging behaviors, such as disruption, occurring and increase engagement (Lane et al., 2015). Instructional choice in guided reading may look like a book club where students get to choose the book they want to read rather than having an assigned book based on reading level. Instructional choice may also involve working with different partners, working on the same task with different books, a choice between two books, a choice in which order they complete their reading assignments for the day, or a choice in where in the room they want to go to read or complete their reading work.

### **Modeling**

Modeling is a simple and effective way to engage students in learning a routine or skill that needs to be done in a specific way. Teachers use modeling during reading instruction to encourage the self-implementation of learned reading skills and strategies. In order to set the expectation for reading behaviors, teachers must model how they should be done. Teachers model predicting, inferring, visualizing, making connections, self-monitoring and summarizing aloud to their students. It is important for these strategies to be modeled so that when students read on their own, they know how and when to implement them. While teaching reading, teachers are responsible for encouraging, motivating, and engaging students in their reading (Guthrie, Kluda, Ho, 2013). In order to do this, teachers talk about their reading experiences to connect to students, and let their students see them reading, too. Teachers also encourage reading for

pleasure outside of guided reading time through book clubs and book choice. In this stance, teachers who read become readers who teach. These teachers arguably adopt a more personal stance in the classroom by seeking to explore the potential of teaching from the dual perspectives of a teacher and a reader (Guthrie, Klauda, Ho, 2013). The UKLA *Teachers as Readers* (TaRs) project documented the positive difference Reading Teachers can make to children's reading identities and their pleasure in reading (Cremin, Davis, Williams, Thomson, 2014). Through considering their own reading lives and practices, many of the TaRs practitioners transformed their understanding of the nature of reading and creatively adapted their pedagogy and classroom positioning as a result (Cremin *et al.* 2014). Through these strategies, teachers not only become motivated and enthusiastic fellow readers, but also thoughtful and interactive reading role models.

### **Teacher's Role**

In addition to observing guided reading with four effective and applicable strategies, each teacher was interviewed (Appendix A). Each fourth grade teacher explained their role in their students' reading success differently, but each shared the quality that their overall goal was to instill a love of reading in their students. Teacher A compared her role to being similar to a coach. By assessing their abilities when they begin the year, to then providing them with the tools, instruction, and practice that they need to improve. Teacher B stated that, at this point in their education, she feels that her role is to cultivate and enhance their reading skills. She felt that they should start to develop deeper thinking skills to be able to analyze and compare texts. Teacher C said she feels her role is teaching them effective comprehension strategies, reassuring their thinking, and monitoring as well as celebrating their success to create an

enthusiasm and excitement for reading. Each teacher displayed enthusiasm and support for each of their students during every hour of observation as well as during each interview.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate effective reading strategies three fourth grade teachers employed during guided reading instruction. Teachers used guided reading to differentiate their reading instruction by implementing various methods, including: flexible grouping, ongoing assessment, instructional choice and modeling. The four strategies discussed in this study can be used in all disciplines throughout elementary school. Homogenous, flexible grouping is important for students to learn how to work in a group to solve problems, collaborate, and evenly distribute work amongst themselves. Ongoing assessment can be used in a whole class, small group, partner, or individual setting. Calling on students to answer questions, listening to small group or partner collaboration and conversations, or glancing at their independent work are each ways to perform ongoing, informal assessments. Instructional choice can be easily transferred into math, science, and social studies assignments. By giving students a choice of whether they want to design and build a bridge or a raft in a STEM lab, they feel more independent and motivated to complete the assignment. Modeling strategies and skills in each discipline is both applicable and imperative.

From this study, it can be concluded that using differentiated reading instruction strategies such as flexible grouping, ongoing assessment, instructional choice, and modeling, can help elementary readers develop deeper meaning and understanding of text. All three teachers observed throughout this study developed an inclusive classroom environment where students had opportunities to be successful regardless of their learning styles and learning abilities or disabilities. Each teacher's instruction was directly geared towards creating a supportive

environment where instruction is designed to meet individual student needs. The guided reading strategies observed throughout this study can be used in other disciplines to help students feel equal during instruction, have their strengths and needs addressed, feel independent and motivated, as well as understand how to implement these skills and strategies on their own. This study contributes to the body of research on guided reading strategies and the importance of differentiated instruction in the elementary classroom.

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**Appendix A – Interview Questions**

1. What do you feel is your role in your students' success in reading?
2. What is the most effective way for you to check in with students about their reading skills and progress?
3. What are some strategies you use to make all students feel equal when you have below level readers and above level readers in the same classroom?
4. What are some ways you assess your students' comprehension?
5. What are some strategies you use when teaching reading that you find to be most successful?
6. Anything else you want to add about teaching reading: