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**Document Type**
Thesis

**Degree Name**
MS in Literacy Education

**Department**
Education

**First Supervisor**
Joellen Maples

**Subject Categories**
Education

This thesis is available at Fisher Digital Publications: http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_ETD_masters/360

# Guided Reading and How It Affects Reading Comprehension in Struggling, Middle Level, and High Level Readers

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

M.S. Literacy Education

Supervised by

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December 2016

Abstract

This action research study was conducted to determine the effects of guided reading on the reading comprehension of struggling, average, and accelerated readers. Twenty two 5th grade students in an Integrated Co-Taught class were involved. The student's reading levels were assessed and they were placed into struggling, average, and accelerated reading groups. The three themes that emerged from the data were that educators are aware of the benefits of guided reading instruction but inconsistent application hinders student results, students need to be equal partners in their learning, and guided reading increased the reading comprehension in average readers, but not struggling or accelerated readers. Guided reading should not be the only component of a balanced literacy program within a classroom.

**Guided Reading and How It Affects Reading Comprehension in Struggling, Middle Level, and High Level Readers**

The purpose of education is to not only teach students content, but to educate them on how to learn, question, think, and function successfully in society. Reading is a vital skill to have in order to be a functional member of society. Therefore, it stands to reason that strong reading skills are an imperative part of a student's education. However, according to the National Center for Education Statistics approximately "thirty-four percent of public school students performed at or above Proficient in reading in 2013 at both grades 4 and 8" (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, p. 14). Recent trends in education showcase the various measures being taken to combat these low reading scores.

One of these trends that has been growing in popularity over the past decade is guided reading. It is an approach to reading that is being used in classrooms around the country by teachers and reading specialists. The goal of guided reading is "to help students build their reading power—to build a network of strategic actions for processing texts" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012, p. 272). Student reading levels are assessed then the students are strategically grouped, and an appropriately leveled text is selected for each group. The teacher serves as a guide for the students and helps them make connections between the text and themselves. Each guided reading group works with texts and materials that are at their level. This flexible framework can be adapted to work with students at any age. This supportive set up allows students to work on strategies that are not out of reach as the teacher will be supporting the students as they purposefully move through the text. Discussions occur before, during, and after the text is read.

This framework is different from traditional reading groups in that the teacher's role is to scaffold the learning rather than just deliver instruction and check for comprehension. The

process of reading is interactive as students learn and apply new strategies to the text. These strategies serve to further the comprehension of text.

Guided reading is essential in today's classrooms. Now more than ever, there is a wide range of diverse learners and needs. Guided reading serves as a framework that allows teachers to differentiate instruction. As the grade levels increase, there is a wider range of needs as the achievement gap grows. In the classroom used in this research there is a range of readers; some students are at a Kindergarten reading level and some higher level readers are at an 8$^{th}$ grade level. The same guided reading framework is being used for all students.

According to the latest annual review of trends in reading education, guided reading is no longer considered to be one of the hot topics (Cassidy, 2015). In recent years guided reading has gone from merely being a trend to being a staple in balanced literacy programs across the country. Even so, it has been reported that there is a need for better teacher training, preparation, and knowledge concerning guided reading, its implementation, and its effects on different types of readers (Kropiewnicki, 2006). Guided reading is structured with the ultimate goal being to help students become independent and skillful readers. As stated by Hornsby (2000), the purpose of guided reading can be described as the following:

> Guided reading provides an opportunity for [teachers to support] small groups of children within the same developmental reading stages to apply strategies they already know to texts they do not know. The texts are carefully matched to the children so that they can apply their strategies to overcome the challenges in the text and read it independently with success. (p. 26)

This form of reading instruction has sprung up out of the teachers need to differentiate reading instruction for varying students on a wide spectrum of needs. Guided reading is now considered by many to be a best practice and an effective model of reading instruction. It is organized in a way that allows teachers to help students grow in their reading capabilities.

Reading comprehension is an area of instruction that every teacher will cover in their curriculum at some point during their careers. Reading comprehension can be defined as the act of making meaning of a text. The act of making meaning is viewed as an interaction between the reader and the text. The difference between capable readers and struggling readers is that "the former understand that reading is a process to make meaning whereas poor readers equate reading with decoding—one word at a time—and do not expect reading to make sense" (Rholetter, 2016, p. 1). Even if the text is decoded correctly, without comprehension the purpose for engaging with the text is lost. Guided reading is seen by many as a way to positively influence and improve reading comprehension in all learners.

Literacy is acquired through engagement and participation in a literate society. It is essential for students to participate in literacy events in order to develop reading and writing skills. The culture that the teacher creates around guided reading affects the success of the students; the classroom culture is of significance.

In this study, the effects of guided reading on reading comprehension abilities in struggling, average, and accelerated readers was examined. Guided reading groups were observed, teachers and students were interviewed, questionnaires were given, and field notes were taken and consulted. It was found that over the course of this study, only the average readers advanced in their measurable reading comprehension. The struggling and accelerated readers did not. In this study, it was also found that struggling readers were the only group that

indicated that they would prefer to work with students at various levels. The guided reading framework allows students to work with peers who are at or near their level. These students felt that they would benefit from the example that their peers could provide. This study has several implications for educators, such as the need for a closer examination of the long term results of guided reading for students at all levels, the importance of assessments to gather data and determine accurate guided reading group placement, the necessity of a common understanding of guided reading between educators and students, and the significance of engaging in best practices for educators.

## Theoretical Framework

Literacy is a term that has changed and developed throughout the years. Though it is a challenge to create a succinct definition, educators can agree that it is more than merely reading, writing, and speaking, but that it is also the application of these skills for use in the modern age. Literacy is defined by Kucer (2014) as the ability to "effectively, efficiently, and simultaneously control the linguistic and other sign systems, cognitive, sociocultural, and developmental dimensions of written language in a transactive fashion" (p. 5). Kucer suggests that everyone belongs to different social, cultural, socioeconomic, and family groups that impact the way we think and act. The way we think and act affects the way we produce and interpret language. Language influences and shapes our interactions with written and oral language. Real world applications of literacy, also called literacy events, involve the developmental, sociocultural, linguistic, and cognitive dimensions. There are four dimensions with direct relations to each other explored by Kucer (2014). The linguistic dimension is the nature of language, language variation, and oral-written language relationships. Kucer explores the functions that language serves and the syntactic, morphemic, orthographic, graphophonemic, and semantic aspects of

language use. Oral and written language distinctions are discussed, as are the connections between letters, phonemes, and spelling. Language variation is also reviewed. The cognitive dimension is about understanding written discourse, the nature of perception, the reading process, and the writing process. The sociocultural dimension is all about discussing literacy as a social practices and the importance of written discourse. Finally, the developmental dimension unpacks the idea of the construction of the written language system. Each dimension is linked to and affected by the other dimensions. It is control of these dimensions that defines literacy.

Literacy is acquired through immersion and participation in a literate society. Goodman (2001) states that "all children in a highly literate society become literate, even when they are part of a group within that society that values literacy in ways different from the majority" (p. 312). Participation in meaningful literacy events is essential in developing reading and writing skills. Literacy acquisition is affected by the classroom culture the teacher has created. Children acquire literacy as they are immersed into a literate society (Otto, 2009). They develop literacy by following the three major principles about written and oral language: the relational principles, functional principles, and the linguistic principles. Relational principles can be broken down into the understandings that children have about the ways that meaning is represented in written language, the ways that oral language is represented in written language, and the ways that both oral and written language interrelate to represent meaning. The functional principles are the understandings that children have about the reasons and purposes for written language. Lastly, the linguistic principles are the understandings children have about how written language is organized and displayed so that communication can occur. These three principles can be taught through guided reading programs.

Eventually, these principles develop in all children, but due to the nature of interactions with the written word the times and ways in which these principles emerge will vary for each child. According to Goodman (1984), the systems of language operate together in a supportive way so that each part takes a role in literacy acquisition. As students begin to acquire literacy, they will begin to understand how language functions as a whole, and how these systems of language work together.

It is vital for educators to understand how children become effective communicators and the ways in which educators can enhance their language development. The way in which students learn to speak strongly affects students' future literacy competencies because "oral language development and written language development are interrelated processes that culminate in children's communicative competencies" (Otto, 2009, p. 2). Language is the base on which a society stands. It is key in both our society and literacy acquisition. It affects every aspect of our lives. Without language we would not be able to categorize, organize, or clarify our own way of thinking. Language influences and shapes our interactions with written and oral language. In turn, our interactions with written and oral language effect how students respond to literacy events which are key in literacy acquisition.

The continuum of literacy development is a term used to describe the stages that a child progresses as they grow more competent in literacy. Literacy is not a skill you have or do not have, it exists on a spectrum where there are always some literacy skills present and they can improve and become more robust. Children begin the process of becoming literate when they are born and can understand what it means to be literate before they begin their formal schooling. A child can possess knowledge of reading and writing before they can actually read or write. Emergent literacy refers to the when children are in the process of becoming literate. Children's

concepts about written language change and grow with reading and writing experiences. The literacy continuum consists of four stages: beginners, novices, experimenters, and conventional readers and writers (McGee, 2012). It is educators' duty to help students continue this lifelong journey towards increased literacy skills.

Guided reading is "an instructional context for supporting each reader's development of effective strategies for processing novel texts at increasingly challenging levels of difficulty" (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, p. 25). Students use leveled books to develop reading skills and strategies in small groups. These small groups are created by placing students with similar reading abilities and needs together. In order to effectively teach using guided reading, teachers must understand what literacy is and how students acquire it. Through knowing that literacy develops on a continuum, educators will be better prepared to craft lessons tailored to the specific needs of the students in each group. Struggling, middle level, and high level readers all receive guided reading. To measure growth in reading comprehension, the ability to process and understand what is read, there must be a firm understanding of literacy and how it is acquired.

A theory that can be related to my action research study is Vygotsky's theory of Cognitive Development. This theory supports the idea that social interaction helps children learn and create meaning. Vygotsky's (1978) work supports that learning is a social occurrence. In the structure of guided reading groups, the student will always be surrounded and supported by peers that are at or near the same reading level. A well-known aspect of Vygotsky's theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD states that children learn best when they are given instruction that is "slightly too hard for students to do on their own, but simple enough for them to do with assistance" (Wass & Golding, 2014, p. 671). In guided reading groups, the students have the teacher there to support their learning as they navigate a text that will move the students

to the next level of reading. Scaffolding is a necessary and important part of teaching students in their ZPD and is and underlying basis of guided reading groups. The social nature of thinking and learning is supported by Vygotsky and seen in the structure of guided reading groups. This idea is important because “children grow into the intellectual life of those around them” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 88). The students must be supported by meaningful activities that support their social learning and keep them in their ZPD.

The sociocultural theory as stated by Kucer (2014) says that reading and writing are “not simply individual acts of thought and language, but also patterned social acts and behaviors of the group” (p. 230). Literacy is a social and cultural process that is affected by power. Learning occurs through participation in cultural contexts and literacy is impacted by social interactions. The major instructional approaches that originated from the sociocultural perspective include culturally response teaching, inquiry based learning, collaborative or group learning, and connecting in and out of school literacies. Connecting in and out of school literacies (Gainer & Lapp, 2012; Larson & Marsh, 2015; Moll & Gonzalez, 2005) is one major way that the sociocultural theory is implemented in the classroom. In Larson and Marsh, a teacher named Gatto worked very hard to connect her students’ learning in and out of school by getting to know the parents of her students even before school starts. She visited some parent’s homes to ascertain the kinds of resources that they had and what they valued in the education of their children. Gatto believes that learning is not confined to the classroom boundaries and engaged her students in learning activities within their neighborhoods e.g. visiting nursing homes and using inquiry based learning to augment her classroom instruction. She took her students to Kentucky to meet with other students from another racial background, and to learn about other peoples and cultures. The social interactions with different families, learning about science in a

lab and learning about family businesses enhanced her students learning. Most of the students traveled by air for the first time in their lives. This trip gave them once in a lifetime opportunity to experience and learn about air travel.

Moll and Gonzalez (2005) also advocated for a link between classroom learning and the larger community. They demonstrated that learning is enhanced when teachers work as researchers and make connections between students' home and classroom practices by learning about the families their students. This connection was formed by the teachers getting to know the cultures and households of students and their families. Moll and Gonzalez used the term "funds of knowledge" to describe the body of knowledge from households, including ideas and technologies that inform teaching. Through visiting the Hispanic households and learning about them, teachers were able to integrate student's funds of knowledge into the classroom. Gainer and Lapp (2012) equally discussed the importance of coming in and out of school literacies when they advocated for a remix of old and new literacies. They argued that the new literacies represent students out of school knowledge which should be integrated into the curriculum because such things like Twitter, Facebook, the internet, and others represent youth literacies which they practice out of school and should be integrated into the classroom.

The sociocultural theory as it relates to literacy focuses on the many ways that people develop and use literacy in context (Perry, 2012). Many students' experiences influence their development of literacy and their attitudes towards reading. When students are engaging in a text in a guided reading group, they are using previous experiences to help them construct meaning. Student draw upon pervious knowledge to help them understand the text and its significance. Due to this theory, teachers must be aware of how to social context they construct within their

guided reading groups affects their students. The design of guided reading is informed by the sociocultural theory (Rojas, 2014).

## Research Question

Given that student acquire literacy through participation in meaningful literacy events, how do guided reading groups affect reading comprehension for struggling, middle level, and high level readers?

## Literature Review

In order to have an informative action research study, it is vital to be cognizant of the previous literature and research that has the laid the foundation for the topic that is being analyzed and discussed. In the field of reading education, both guided reading and reading comprehension are vast topics, complicated by intricate details and nuanced information. This literature review addresses three distinct themes found in a thorough study of available literature on these topics.

The first theme discussed is how scaffolding reading experiences is essential in furthering reading comprehension. Studies that illustrate the value and success of scaffolding that naturally occurs as a part of the guided reading framework will be examined. Scaffolding requires the cooperation of the student and thoughtful implementation by the teacher. For example, if a student responds to a comprehension question with a surface level response, the teacher can scaffold this experience by asking the students to go back in the text and provide evidence for their answer. This type of teacher scaffolding is very important in supporting students learning. The teacher's role is significant in "scaffolding interactions to support [student] participation" (Scull, 2010, p. 101).

The second theme within this literature review is the importance sharing a common understanding of guided reading. It is only when there is a shared understanding of what defines guided reading that educators can successfully collaborate. The implementation of guided reading must be consistent in order to yield successful results.

Lastly, the third theme that will be examined is best practices for educators concerning guided reading. Best practices are ones that have been proven effective and are therefore considered desirable in an educator's teaching practice. It is imperative to review these three themes before beginning action research to help determine the effects of guided reading on the reading comprehension of struggling, average, and accelerated readers.

**Scaffolding Reading Experiences Furthers Reading Comprehension**

The roots of scaffolding instruction can be traced to Vygotsky (1978) and his Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The Zone of Proximal Development refers to the figurative space between the student's actual level of development and learning and their potential level of development and learning. When students are learning in their ZPD they are continuously striving towards growth and being pushed towards learning. This motivation occurs because the students are only being pushed out of their comfort zone enough to promote growth while still allowing them to feel safe. By setting small, achievable goals and allowing students to operate within their ZPD, teachers are promoting self-efficacy. Self-efficacy can be defined as "a person's belief that he or she can (or cannot) successfully organize and execute an action to achieve a desired outcome in a particular situation" (Yancey, 2014, p. 1). A student's self-efficacy will strongly affect how they approach a new learning task.

Instructional scaffolding can be defined as a technique used by educators to add support to the students learning; as the student moves towards increased independence the support can be gradually removed. Instructional scaffolds require an "interaction between a more knowledgeable other and a learner" in order to be effective as an instructional tool (Frey, 2010, p. 84). This technique provides the necessary support for students to feel successful while learning in their ZPD and gradually releases the responsibility of the learning task from the teacher to the student as the student grows more confident in his or her abilities. According to Frey:

> The gradual release of responsibility model, a framework for implementing instructional scaffolds in reading comprehension, provides a structure for the teacher to move from assuming all the responsibility for performing a task...to a situation in which the students assume all the responsibility using teacher modeling, shared tasks between teachers and students, and independent practice and application by the learner. (p.84)

Providing well-structured scaffolding is imperative when instructing students on how to activate their background knowledge and therefore furthering their reading comprehension (Shang, 2015). When using correctly structured scaffolds in before, during, and after reading the students are able to progress towards independence. This structure of scaffolding allows for learning to occur in the student's ZPD, the space between what the students know and what their potential is.

In a recent study by Frey (2010), the specific ways that teachers can scaffold reading comprehension were studied. This study was conducted in eighteen classrooms in a urban district in the United States; in all of the classrooms at least 35% of the student population were English Language Learners (ELLs) and more than 50% of students qualified for free lunch. The

results of this study found that when scaffolding, teachers commonly "[use] questions to check for understanding, prompts for cognitive and metacognitive work, cues to focus the learner's attention, and direct explanations or modeling" (p. 86). These different methods can be adapted to fit different students and reading instruction and were shown to be useful in helping students master skills taught more rapidly. The importance of using varied scaffolding strategies is further supported by Shang (2015) who states that "a considerable number of studies have suggested the advantages of applying scaffolding strategies in reading pedagogy to enhance the ability of inquiry, problem solving, and reading comprehension performance" (p. 293). In the study by Frey (2010), when teachers used the aforementioned strategies during guided reading students were more successful in engaging skills and strategies that furthered their reading comprehension. These students were successful in furthering their reading comprehension because "mastery [was] not an expectation" with the supports of scaffolding in place (p. 85). The students were being taught in a way that made them feel safe to take educational risks in a supported environment. The teacher's role was to support the students and let them learn; the teacher also had the chance to observe while working with smaller, scaffolded groups so as to know whether further instruction was necessary.

A study by Denton (2014) compared the effects of guided reading, explicit instruction, and typical school instruction on reading comprehension and other skills. This study was conducted in urban, suburban, and rural schools in the southwestern United States. Students were randomly assigned to one of the three groups and then growth was measured. The guided reading described in Denton's study was similar to that delineated by Rojas (2014), which defined this type of teaching as "guided participation between experts and novices where adults scaffold children's learning activities" (p. 143). In this study, the effects of guided reading on

the reading comprehension of students were being examined. When the students in the guided reading group struggled with a vocabulary word or made an error, the teachers would scaffold their response and try to prompt students to choose and use strategies. These strategies were intended to refocus the students on the meaning, syntax, and visual cues from the text (Denton, 2014). The results of this study clearly showed that guided reading and explicit instruction were superior to typical school instruction as it relates to improving reading comprehension. An essential part of the guided reading instruction was scaffolding the students learning; without the scaffolding true guided reading as defined by the study would not have taken place.

In a UK study, Maine (2016) found that in the teaching of comprehension strategies "modeling and scaffolding was necessary" to ensure student growth and furthered independence (p. 46). The general comprehension strategies examined were designed to be broad and applicable to any media, be it a book, film, graphic novel, etc. As was the case in other studies, the teachers role was to prompt, guide, and support the students during their reasoning. As noted by Sporer (2009), scaffolding is a vital part of instruction that promotes collaboration, independence and the application of learned strategies and skills. A measure of a student's mastery of a skill or strategy can be seen if they choose to use that skill or strategy independently; scaffolding helps lead them towards this feeling of confidence. It was also noted that by scaffolding the student's use of comprehension strategies, they were more easily able to make meaning (Maine, 2016). If a student is unable to make meaning from what he/she has read, then he/she is not comprehending the text with which they are attempting an interaction. Differentiation should mean that "students are met with texts and tasks that are appropriately challenging for their level", this type of differentiation is allowed to occur in guided reading (Berne & Degener, 2015, p. 4).

The framework of a guided reading lesson is designed to allow teachers to be able to fill the role of scaffolder for the students. In using this framework, they can "ensure that the essential elements are implemented and integrated throughout instruction" (Inaquinta, 2006, p. 418). This thoughtful instruction appropriately challenges all students in a way that is equitable. A perfect example of a teacher who does just that is show by Morgan (2013) in her exploration of how guided reading can help students meet the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for literacy. The class and teacher discussed are in a middle school setting; guided reading is more frequently seen in primary grades, but can be applied to any grade level if need be. Joe is a teacher who, through guided reading was able to create a "challenging, empowering, and scaffolded learning experience for his students" (p. 19). Joe provides a perfect example of how to use guided reading in a middle school setting to facilitate deeper reading comprehension. He provides a structure for his students to participate in guided reading and respond to the text. Joe began by setting a clear purpose for the lesson and reminded the students of past lessons. When the students had difficulty, Joe used scaffolding to help structure their response by asking insightful questions or prompting. He pushed students to work and required them to support their statements with evidence from the text. With prompting and guidance, the students better understood the text and were successful. Scaffolding supports reading comprehension and lets students develop into more competent readers. Guided reading and scaffolding "allows teachers to acknowledge and respect the skills students already possess" (Morgan, 2013, p. 23). By acknowledging and learning what the students already know, teachers do not waste their instructional time on skills that their students possess.

It is important for teachers to be realistic about their time, their students, and their own ability to scaffold. Instructional scaffolding allows for differentiated instruction that is

specifically tailored to individual student needs to occur in a realistic time frame when implemented correctly (Degener & Berne, 2014). Some teachers, even those who are knowledgeable about scaffolding, guided reading, and literacy, need to be wary of placing students in reading groups that are too difficult and supporting them with extra scaffolding. Though it may work for the moment, this misuse of the scaffolding framework will result in extra work for the teacher and the student will not learn up to their potential because they are not being given the correct balance of a challenge and support. Any signs of tension during a guided reading session may serve as an indicator that the text was too difficult or frustrating to the student (Handy Helpers, 2011). It is important for educators to know their students well so that they can quickly recognize symptoms of tension and frustration. Teachers must exercise caution when making assumptions about instruction and what level is appropriate for their students; careful collection and examination of data should be occurring frequently to ensure that the students are appropriately placed in reading groups at their instructional level (Nayak & Sylva, 2013). This issue relates back to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, which says that students need to be pushed a little beyond what they can currently do. Pushing the student further will overwhelm them and students who are not being appropriately challenged are not learning what they can. Scaffolding is meant to support the student as he or she learns to use the strategy or skill more independently; it is not designed to allow students to be placed in reading groups that are too far above their reading level (Handy Helpers, 2011). This misplacement does not allow the student to develop efficient habits and skills that are at the appropriate level.

When using guided reading as instructional framework, successful scaffolding is only possible when the lessons are carefully thought out and well planned. In a study by McKeown (2009), researchers began their study with the concern that too many students struggle to or lack

the ability to comprehend a text. This study followed the results of fifth graders for two years in an urban school district that was considered low performing. Two approaches to reading instruction were examined, these being specific content instruction and strategy development in the form of guided reading. In the guided reading group that focused on strategy instruction, the lessons were designed to scaffold the students in their learning. This scaffolding was in place to allow the students to "transfer what they had learned from teacher-led text discussions to building comprehension on their own" (McKeown, 2009, p. 234). The way that the teachers modeled, then stepped back while still providing support allowed for the transference of responsibility form the educator to the student. This gradual release helped the students to feel confident and successful in their reading comprehension. Rather than just checking or monitoring comprehension after the text was read, the teacher must dynamically enhance the student's understanding of the text (Biddulph, 2002). The teacher should not just be assessing the students, but coming alongside them to guide them through the text. This role supports McKeown's (2009) point about helping students transfer their knowledge and skills.

By providing support and a successful model in the classroom, teachers are able to have their students develop, not just merely practice, their reading comprehension strategies and skills. Many students in classrooms across the nation struggle with reading comprehension; if learning experiences are scaffolded then student morale and comprehension can be improved upon. Positive associations have been found linking teacher modeling, student morale, and increased reading comprehension skills (Stutz, 2016). By integrating modeling into a scaffolded guided reading lesson, teachers are able to provide a concrete example of what students need to be doing. Educators need to use the tools and knowledge they possess to scaffold the learning

through modeling, discussing, and questioning (Phillips, 2013). Scaffolding can look like many different things and be used with many different strategies.

In her study of the promotion, or lack thereof, of reading comprehension in special education classes, Klingner (2010) observed what happens when the necessary scaffolding is not utilized in lessons. This study was comprised of 124 observations of 41 special education teachers. These special education teachers were charged with the task of furthering the reading comprehension of their students. Their students were in grade third through fifth and were students with learning disabilities. Klingner reports that rather than crafting their lessons so that they followed a gradual release model, these teachers only used surface level questions and prompting. More complex strategies were not seen and the teachers seemed trapped in the role of the assessor, rather than acting as a guide. Scaffolding instruction is pertinent for all students, however, it is even more pressing that it be used in special education classrooms. Klinger (2010) observed that teachers "rarely provided students with the scaffolding that could have promoted deeper learning" (p. 71). This population of students must feel supported in their academic career and not have all the instruction and strategies heaped onto them at once. Unsurprisingly, it was found that the student recipients of these lessons made no remarkable strides during the time of this observation. Teaching in literacy skills and strategies is likely to be more effective if the students are provided with the opportunities to gradually take over the ownership of what they are learning (Parker & Hurry, 2007). This gradual ownership is what scaffolded instruction is. These results from the study discussed above suggest that there is "still gaps between research and what teachers are doing in practice" (Klingner, 2010, p. 72). Though it is known to educators what constitutes effective reading instruction, this reading instruction is not consistently seen in the classroom.

When a teacher has a student population such as students with disabilities or English Language Learners (ELLs), it is especially important to guide the development of their understanding in a way that they are clearly supported. These types of learning experiences help students to do better and advance in their learning. They will do better before, during, and after reading if they are supported with scaffolding. They will be able to better comprehend text and develop essential strategies and skills. A recent study conducted with seventh and eighth grade students at Solon Middle School (SMS) supports these statements (Morgan, 2013). SMS has a diverse student population with more than double the state average of English Language Learners (ELLs) and a high number of students with disabilities. The educators at SMS purposefully formed guided reading groups that would allow them to scaffold the development of their students understanding. The educators at SMS want to increase student independence in reading and improve the student's self-efficacy. This direction will also increase their independence and self-efficacy. Nayak and Sylva (2013) contributed to this line of reasoning, saying:

> A key feature of guided reading is the teacher's guidance in the development of strategies in readers to make them more independent. The extensive literature on guided reading and instructional strategies to develop reading skills in young English L1 learners provides a rich resource which can be used for ESL learners, as research evidence suggests that the predictors of reading skills are similar for young English L1 and ESL learners. (p. 86)

Teachers at SMS support this line of reasoning in regards to the guidance in the development of independent reading strategies. Their primary goals for their students in guided reading are to reinforce, extend and expand their students experiences (Morgan, 2013).

A study by Scull (2010) was designed to closely watch teachers as they interacted with students during a period of reading instruction and acquisition. The different ways that the students were supported were noted. The teacher's actions and practices were examined and the student's growth in reading comprehension was measured. The students who participated in the study were considered to be struggling readers and had trouble engaging in and comprehending texts. The teachers scaffolded all their exchanges with the students to encourage participation. It was found that teachers play a vital role in helping the learners construct meaning and knowledge. Scull (2010) states that "construction of text meanings is largely dependent on teachers modelling ways to articulate responses to texts and establishing interaction patterns that promote discussion to enhance and enrich engagement with text" (p. 101). Teacher modeling is important in showing how to interact with and respond to text. The importance of modeling relates to Fisher's (2008) point that teachers can, though scaffolding, empower their students to better connect to and comprehend texts.

An integral part of the guided reading framework is the developmentally and instructionally appropriate scaffolding provided by the teacher. As reviewed in this theme, instructional scaffolding is defined as the provision of necessary supports and guidance by the teacher to allow the students to be appropriately challenged in order gradually assist the students in achieving mastery. When provided with scaffolding, students in the studies reviewed benefited from increased reading comprehension.

**Sharing a Common Understanding of Guided Reading**

The purpose of this section of the literature review is to create a common understanding of what guided reading is, how teachers should implement it in their classrooms, and the theoretical foundations of guided reading. When examining a widely used teaching practice such

as guided reading, it is imperative to ensure that there is a mutual understanding amongst education professionals of the term and all that it encompasses. The need to know how to conduct a guided reading lesson is important. However, some teachers do not feel that they need to concern themselves with learning and understanding the theory behind what they teach. Teachers should know the theory behind guided reading because it is the foundation of why guided reading functions the way it does. It is essential that educators "be aware of and appreciate the basic understandings or underlying theoretical perspectives on which the approach is based" (Biddulph, 2002). Without establishing this understanding of guided reading is, its implementation, and the theory behind it, it is difficult to have a collaborative conversation with fellow educators about this topic. This topic is necessary because the ways in which guided reading is being implemented can vary drastically (Ford & Optiz, 2008). This inconsistency is not beneficial to the students. It may lead to increased frustration, discouragement, and unsatisfactory progress in read accomplishments.

Not knowing what guided reading is but still attempting to use this framework is detrimental to students. It allows teaching practices that were given little thought or consideration to continue to exist and deprive students of the education that they deserve. Continuing to engage in inefficient practices allows for both students and educators to develop ineffective habits (Handy Helpers, 2011). Teaching is a collaborative profession and much information is passed amongst colleagues; by remaining uninformed teachers are being allowed to pass on incomplete information to others. When allowed to continue to practice ineffectual habits, teachers may not even realize the harm they are doing to their teaching practice and their students. Explicit and correct teaching is necessary during the instruction of educators in regards to a thorough understanding of the implementation of guided reading instruction (Parker &

Hurry, 2007). If educators want guided reading to actually benefit their students, they must first be sure that they themselves are in possession of a complete and thorough understanding of guided reading and all that it entails. As evidenced by this literature review there is plenty of information available about guided reading. Guided reading may present itself as simple framework, but students cannot reap the benefits if it is wrongfully employed.

Guided reading is a framework that is built upon the belief that all children are constantly in the process of acquiring more literacy. Rather than being like prescribed rungs on a ladder that the students must climb to reach the top of, literacy acquisition functions more like a continuum. The continuum of literacy development is a term used to describe the stages that a child progresses as they grow more competent in literacy. There is always room to grow in literacy skills and knowledge (Fisher, 2008). Literacy is not a skill you have or do not have, it exists on a spectrum where there are always some literacy skills present and they can improve and become more robust. Children begin the process of becoming literate when they are born and can understand what it means to be literate before they begin their formal schooling. A child can possess knowledge of reading and writing before they can actually read or write. Guided reading is set up so that the teacher knows what the student knows, what they need to continue to work on, and what they will be learning in the near future. This knowledge allows the teacher to tailor the lessons to fit the student's needs rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach (Scull, 2010). This type of differentiation is a necessary part of today's classroom. Guided reading clearly defines the role of the teacher as a guide, not as a dispenser and assessor of information to be memorized by the pupils. In this role, the teacher is able to come alongside the students and assist them as they construct their own understandings and develop their mastery of the skill, strategy, or content being taught. The students are homogenously grouped and are placed in a

group with students who are at the same or a similar level of reading ability. The ability to comprehend what is read is a vital part of reading and a large part of the purpose of guided reading. The goal of guided reading is to eventually help students be independent readers with an arsenal of strategies and skills that they are familiar with and know how to use (Inaquinta, 2006; Morgan, 2013). By promoting metacognition, teachers are helping the students to recognize their thoughts and planning about thinking, which is higher order thinking skills. By exposing students to higher level texts, educators are always ushering them forward on the continuum of literacy and towards greater understanding.

Throughout its establishment as an integral part of balanced literacy programs across the country, many people have worked to define guided reading. All these definitions share the common agreement that guided reading is "planned, intentional, focused instruction where the teacher helps students, usually in small group settings, learn more about the reading process" (Ford & Opitz, 2011, p. 229). It is typically seen in the primary and sometimes intermediate grades. As clearly stated by Denton (2014):

> GR consists of small-group lessons in which the primary activity is text reading and instruction is focused primarily on reading for meaning. Groups are composed of students who are able to read text on about the same level and use similar text-processing strategies, based on ongoing observations and assessments. Students are matched with leveled text of appropriate difficulty and progress into increasingly challenging text. (p. 269)

This teaching approach is used in so many classrooms because it can be used with all readers, whether they be struggling, on target, or independent readers. According to Inaquinta (2006), there are three central functions provided by the guided reading framework. By knowing

the purpose of guiding reading educators can better understand what makes it effective. Guided reading allows for all students to learn strategies with teacher support (Ford & Opitz, 2008). This type of learning is beneficial for all students at varying levels. The first of the three purposes outlined by Inaquinta (2006) is "to meet the varying instructional needs of all the students in the classroom, enabling them to greatly expand their reading powers" which will allow students to reading increasingly difficult texts and comprehend (p. 414). The second purpose is to allow the students to construct meaning using strategies, which will allow students to successfully know what to do with complex words and structure. Lastly, the third purpose is to understand new ideas and concepts they encounter.

The actual length of a guided reading lesson can approximately 20-30 minutes long. This timing may vary depending on the way the reading block is set up in the classroom schedule (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Before the actual guided reading lesson can occur, several things have to happen. Teachers who use the guided reading framework typically begin the school year by assessing the reading levels of all their students, using a text reading assessment tool. A commonly used assessment tool is the *Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment* which is an assessment for reading of fiction and nonfiction texts. It also assesses a student's fluency, vocabulary knowledge, comprehension, and writing. Special attention is paid to the "complexity of the reading process and the importance of reading fluency" (Bashir, 2009, p. 196). It is made up of leveled texts that range from beginning readers (Level A) to advanced readers (Level Z).The benchmark assessment identifies a student's reading levels as the following: independent (when a student can read and understand a text without any help), instructional (when a student can read and understand text with help), and frustration (when a student cannot read nor understand a text without help and may still struggle with assistance from an adult). For each

student the teacher should find an independent, instructional, and frustration reading level (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). The student's independent reading level is just that – he/she is able to read through the text fluently and talk about what they read. The student should have perfect or almost perfect accuracy and excellent or satisfactory comprehension. The student's instructional reading level is the level that the teacher wants to use for instruction in the classroom. This level should be challenging for the student but still achievable. The frustration reading level is one that is hard for the student to read accurately and comprehend. The student is not ready for books at this level. Through this leveling, guided reading is able to "transcend instructional approaches that focus on the ideal, yet non existing, 'average level' student" (Valiandes, 2015, p. 18).

The next step for the teacher is to create several small groups of students who are all at a similar place in their reading development. These students should have similar learning needs and process text at about the same reading level (Inaquinta, 2006). This will allow the teacher focus his or her instruction to meet the needs of that particular reading level. After the teacher has thoughtfully created these groups, a schedule for when each group will meet with the teacher should be created (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Since the teacher can only meet with one group at a time, they must also plan for all the other students in the room? Just because they are not with the teacher does not mean that they should not be engaged in thoughtfully planned learning activities (Inaquinta, 2006). Since time with each guided reading group is short, only 20-30 minutes, the teacher can't be interrupted. Many teachers appoint a responsible student as the helper for when the teacher is busy meeting with the different guided reading groups so as not to be interrupted. The teacher must also select a text and plan her lesson.

Within a guided reading lesson there is general framework that is followed. However, what is taught and how it is taught is influenced by a number of variables. A typical guided

reading lesson consists of a general outline of pre-reading, during reading, and post reading activates (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). The teacher typically begins with a text introduction, then the reading and discussion can be divided into pre, during, and after reading. The teacher will set the purpose, lead in the introduction, and then demonstrate teaching point. The teacher may then confer with one reader at a time and individually discuss and respond to the text. It is only by meeting with and studying the behaviors of the individual students that teacher's area able to understand how they create meaning and comprehend the material (Goodman, 2016).

It is important for teachers to have a comprehensive knowledge of learning theory. By knowing the theory behind teaching practices, educators are more effective (Biddulph, 2002). Being effective is generally something that most teachers strive towards; therefore the learning of theory is necessary for all. Greater knowledge of philosophy behind a concept will allow the educators to best deliver instruction and create an appropriately challenging and engaging learning environment. All work that teachers do has some basis in theory (Rojas, 2014). Knowing about the theory behind an instructional technique also allows for the development of the teachers personal philosophy of teaching. Theory and practice are intimately linked; theory forms the pedagogical basis for the classroom.

Before teaching guided reading, it is important for instructors to know and understand the theoretical origins on which it was built. Teachers must appreciate the basic understandings or underlying perspectives on which the approach is based (Biddulph, 2002). The development of guided reading has been building over the years and it has become a fundamental part of a student's literacy education. Knowing the theory behind guided reading can also help teachers become better professionals and engage in lifelong learning for themselves. This practice of comprehending theoretical understandings also benefits the students. Sadly, Fisher (2008) found

in her research that evidence that "indicated that many teachers were still finding it difficult to understand the theoretical underpinnings of guided reading" (p. 19). This lack of understanding of the theory is not acceptable in educators. From a professional viewpoint, it is "important to identify and acknowledge the theoretical perspectives and understandings that underpin such work" (Biddulph, 2002, p. 7). Knowing the theory that guides guided reading is essential to understanding the purpose of this framework.

The theory of differentiation has determined and shaped the structure and purpose of guided reading. Differentiation is vital for teachers who need to reach every learner but have a limited amount of time to do so. Modern day classrooms host an increasingly diverse student population, making differentiation more important than ever before. A study by Valiandes (2015) of finding evidence that supported differentiation and how it affects students in a mixed ability classroom. Typically, classrooms are mixed ability and an observer will find students at low, average, and high levels. Valiandes' study measured the impact of differentiated reading instruction on the students reading abilities, including comprehension. Students who experienced differentiated instruction were more likely to be motivated and do well in their academic pursuits. These findings connect to a study by Stutz (2016) who examined how students who were more motivated experienced higher reading comprehension. Motivation is a key part of learning. Valiandes (2015) also noted in his study the positives associated with moving away from teacher center practices. Guided reading is a student centered practice that allows the teacher to act as a guide as the students work towards mastery. According to Oostdam (2014), in order to be "effective, an intervention must contain two critical elements: practice and support" (p. 428). Guided reading offers just that.

Another theory that guided reading is found upon is the idea that reading is a construction by the reader from written text. Work by Maine (2016) supports the idea that reading is a transaction. This idea can be traced back to Rosenblatt's (1938) transactional theory, which lends itself to the idea of a relationship between the reader and the text. Understanding this relationship is a key part of guided reading. When reading is seen as a transaction, using the student's background knowledge is essential. In guided reading, students are asked to make connections and predictions based on their schemas. Unfortunately, when engaging in discussions about texts read teachers most frequently directed their attentions to literal content (Scull, 2010). Making connections and predictions can promote engagement, which is a critical part of learning. This idea is supported by Rosenblatt (1938):

> The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination determine his response to the peculiar contribution of the text. (p. 30)

Guided reading supports the idea that social interaction helps the learning process. Students are also able to practice and learn strategies in the content of real reading.

It is vital for there to be a common understanding of what constitutes guided reading instruction, how this instruction should be carried out, and the theory behind guided reading. After all, "a working knowledge of how the system operates is different than a deep understanding of the core ideas that serve as the foundation for the system itself" (Halladay, 2012, p. 53). Guided reading is an integral part of a balanced literacy program. The way it is set up allows for the educator to meet the needs of all students in a session that has been tailored to their individual needs. Students are placed in leveled reading groups and provided with the right

amount of instructional support from their teacher to guide them towards mastery and increase independence (Denton, 2014). The teacher is able to work so closely with the students because of the small group setting. Guided reading should be carefully planned according to the most recent data that the teacher possesses about the student's ability level (Mckeown, 2009). The theory behind guided reading is anchored in the importance of differentiation, the use of the student's previous knowledge, the importance of social interaction while learning, and the teaching of strategies within the context of actual reading.

**Suggestions for Best Practices**

In order to help students reach their full potential as learners, it is essential to equip teachers with a wealth of best practices. Best practices are existing practices that have been proven effective and superior. Teachers should be striving to learn many best practices throughout their careers. Teachers must be given opportunities to access learning opportunities that will allow them to become better educators (Scull, 2010). Having these best practices available is even more vital for teachers who spend large amounts of instruction time teaching students how to read. Guided reading itself is considered a best practice, but there are many more associated with the implementation of this structured learning opportunity (Inaquinta, 2006). The use of these best practices can help students progress in their reading comprehension and can serve as a tool to help teachers effectively employ guided reading in their classroom.

Best practices in reading instruction can be communicated to teachers during teacher training. Adequate teacher training is the basis for effective guided reading within schools, and it provides teachers with the knowledge to do their jobs to the best of their ability. According to Inaquinta (2006), guided reading itself is considered a best practice. The better informed a teacher is, the more a student can benefit from their instruction. Universities and teacher

preparation programs must be well-informed as to how guided reading can be used in the classroom. Without proper preparation, even best practices can be detrimental to students. This warning is stated by Glasswell and Ford (2011):

> Our concerns about leveling grow not from the good idea at the heart of this practice but from the way the good idea has been interpreted and implemented. As with other aspects of literacy instruction, bad things can happen to good ideas because of a rigid orthodoxy that grows up around a useful practice. When orthodoxy takes hold, a focus on "one right way" to engage in that useful practice can lead to inflexible implementation of it. (p. 208)

Teachers must be prepared to teach their students, and in order to do so they must be armed with knowledge. Informed teachers can help create well informed students. Lifelong learning is an essential part of teaching, and continued PD can help with that. Conducting ongoing professional development and observations of the employment of guided reading is essential and should be coupled with training and feedback (Denton, 2014). Professional development should not fall under the one-and-done category. In order for professional development to be meaningful and successful for teachers it must be ongoing and reflective of their practice. It is also helpful for educators if observations are conducted in conjunction with professional development. This feedback allows teachers to know if they are applying what they have learned in professional development correctly. Feedback to educators also promotes self-reflection, which is an important part of any teacher's practice. Teacher success is an important factor in student achievement. Professional development programs for guided reading should be designed to enhance the delivery and implementation in the classroom. Education for teachers already in schools must be provided through professional development opportunities, but the implementation in real classrooms and schools can be challenging. Therefore, the principal and

the people in literacy leadership positions need to ensure these learning opportunities for teachers (Kamps, 2008). Principals and other literacy leaders are responsible for creating a school environment in which both teacher and student learning can thrive. Professional development should include a review of best practices in guided reading instruction, a review of the procedures, and an ongoing discussion of challenging student cases (Denton, 2014). All these are necessary components of successful professional development. Teachers must be flexible, ready to create routines that encourage student independence, and carefully select texts for their students (McKeown, 2009). These components come from careful preparation of teachers.

Teacher training and education is considered the most effective way that school districts can ensure that their students have the best literacy education (Inaquinta, 2006). It is well-known that integrating direct instruction on guided reading into teacher preparation can help districts serve their students more effectively. If teachers have not been directly taught how to properly conduct a guided reading lesson, then they cannot expected to execute guided reading in the best possible manner. If no such training is provided, teachers must speak up; educators need to ask for appropriate professional development if none is provided (Fisher, 2008). During teacher training, prior knowledge can be connected and built upon.

**Conclusion**

Guided reading is an instructional framework that is now showing itself to be a chief component in well-regarded balanced literacy programs across the nation. Many educators are turning to guided reading to support their efforts to differentiate instruction in their diverse classrooms. By utilizing a small group instruction method, teachers can have almost daily contact with each individual student as they work through tailored reading experiences together.

Research has found that "the time a teacher spends talking with students about their reading during small-group instruction (i.e., guided reading) benefits students and teachers alike" (Degener & Berne, 2014, p. 43). The student is provided with the chance to grow as an active critical thinker and reader. Guided reading is typically seen in the primary grades but can be used at intermediate levels as well. This flexibly is another aspect that makes guided reading so attractive to educators.

According to Hornsby (2000) guided reading "provides an opportunity for [teachers to support] small groups of children within the same developmental reading stages to apply strategies they already know to texts they do not know" (p. 26). The texts that are used for guided reading are thoughtfully chosen leveled texts that are suited to meet the student's needs. The students should be able to read the text independently and successfully.

Guided reading is now considered by many to be a best practice and an effective model of reading instruction. This form of reading instruction has sprung up out of the teachers need to differentiate reading instruction for varying students on a wide spectrum of needs. It is organized in a way that allows teachers to help students grow in their reading capabilities. This framework requires the educator to function as a guide as students construct their own learning.

## Method

### Context

The Concordia Central School District (CCSD) serves a student population of approximately 8,700 students. It is the third largest school district within its county in upstate New York and is continuing to grow in population. Within the CCSD there are seven elementary schools, two middle schools, and two high schools. The district serves students in grade K-12

through these schools and partners with four local daycares to provide universal pre-kindergarten (UPK) approximately 125 children.

Eagleville Elementary School is one of seven public elementary schools within the Concordia Central School District. According to the Eagleville Elementary webpage, it was built in 1971 and serviced students in grades K-6. In 1993, an addition was built to in order to accommodate the growth in enrollment. In September, 2001, Eagleville Elementary became a K-5 building. The faculty and staff at Eagleville Elementary School seek to create an environment that is stimulating, caring, and respectful. Eagleville educators are committed to excellence and have a growth mindset.

Within Eagleville Elementary, there are no self-contained special education classes. The class that has the highest number of students with disabilities is the 5th grade Integrated Co-Teach (ICT) classroom. This class has a total of 23 students; eight of these students have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Students without IEPs were placed in this classroom because they exhibited behaviors and/or academic struggles that indicated they would benefit from this placement. This class is comprised of 11 girls and 12 boys. Out of these 23 students, four of them are not Caucasian; 83% of this class is Caucasian, the remainder is African/African American or Asian American. All of the African/African American students are students with disabilities and receive services. The student who is Asian American does not have an IEP. In this class there is only one student who is an English Language Learner (ELL). This African student who is an ELL is also classified as being learning disabled by her IEP. In this 5th grade ICT classroom there are two students who qualify for and receive free lunch. These two students are African/African American and are students with disabilities (teacher observation, 2016).

**Participants**

The participants for this study were the 22 students in the 5th grade ICT at Eagleville Elementary School and their two teachers. All names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect the identity of those involved in this action research study. All reading levels described come from the *Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment* that was administered in September to all students in this class.

Kevin is a 10 year old white male. His IEP classification is learning disabled and he receives speech and counseling services. As of September 2016 he was reading at a level M. He is one of the students who is required to be placed in an Integrated Co-Teach setting as per his IEP. Kevin lives with his grandmother and has been struggling with emotional distress due to his family situation. His mother has been missing for several years and he has limited contact with his father.

Neville is a 10 year old white male. This year is his second in the Integrated Co-Teach Setting. His reading level is an R. He enjoys karate and his involvement in cub scouts. Neville struggles with spelling but enjoys reading and writing for pleasure.

Jessica is a 10 year old white female. She tested at a level U this fall. Jessica is an athlete who loves softball and cheerleading. This year is her second in the ICT classroom. Octavia is a 10 year old Asian American female. Though she tested at a level V, her competence in reading does not show in her classroom work as she is often off task. This year is Octavia's first in the ICT classroom and she was not excited about her placement.

Ashley is a 10 year old white female who tested at a level U in reading. This year is her second in the ICT class. Ashley is a polite, caring student whose compassion for others makes

her an asset to the classroom. She enjoys cheerleading with her friends and her parents would like to see her self-confidence flourish this year.

Daniel is a 10 year old white male. He tested into the R reading level this year, but that ability is not seen in his work. Two years ago his parents divorced trigged a downturn in the quality and understanding shown in Daniel's school work. He is often unfocused during instruction and rarely does his homework. His parents have admitted to teachers that Daniel's brother, who has severe ADHD, gets most of the attention at home. He is a talented dancer and is involved in the school musical this year.

Jack is a 10 year old white male whose passion for football infiltrates every aspect of his life. He is currently reading at a level R. While Jack was not placed in the ICT class last year, he was in it for 3rd grade. He is a popular, athletic boy whose compassion and kindness show in his interactions with students with disabilities.

Keith is a 10 year old white male. His IEP classifies him as having a speech or language impairment and requires his placement in the ICT class. He is currently reading at a level I but struggles with decoding and utilizing his skills and strategies.

Zack is a 10 year old white male. His IEP classification is for Other Health Impairment (OHI) and he is on the spectrum for autism. His placement in the ICT class is mandatory. He is currently reading at a letter J but struggles to make connections to texts and rarely comprehends what he reads without a high amount of scaffolding. Zack frequently throws tantrums that require him to be taken out of the room, resulting in large amounts of missed instruction. Zack loves Legos, Tom and Jerry, and playing tag with his friends.

Luke is a 10 year old white male. He is new to the ICT class this year. Luke tested at a level U in reading this fall. Luke is an energetic, mischievous, boy who is rarely where he is supposed to be. He has a behavior system in place to help him with his impulse control and lessen his interruptions of the class.

Dora is a 10 year old white female. She is reading at a level U and graduated out of ESL services two years ago. Her parents do not speak English at home. Dora enjoys reading, especially to her two cats and sister.

Benjamin is a 10 year old white male. He was found to be reading at a level T this fall. He requires consistent redirection in order to stay on task during the school day. Benjamin plays for a local football team and enjoys science.

Amanda is a 10 year old white female. This fall she tested at a level T. She enjoys spending time with her sister and is not a fan of school. Brad is a 10 year old white male. This year is his first in the ICT room. His hobbies include sewing, crafting, and memorizing poems. He is reading at a level W.

Allison is a 10 year old white female. This year is her second year with the ICT class. She is currently reading at a level V. Allison is an excellent student who loves reading and math. She is very social and enjoys cheerleading.

Amy is a 10 year old white female. Her IEP classification is multiple disabilities and she has cerebral palsy. She is on a special diet and can only consume food from home in an effort to lessen her seizures. Amy receives speech, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and music therapy services weekly. She is often aggressive with the staff and students and needs to be

removed to a different location, this often causes her to miss academic instruction. Amy is currently reading at a level F.

Alexandra is a 10 year old white female. This year is her third with the ICT class; she and her parents requested that she be placed with this group again. Alexandra is a sweet and compassionate girl who loves to help others. She is currently at reading level T.

Bruce is a 10 year old white male. This year is his second year in the ICT classroom and he was chosen to move up with this group because of his patience, kindness, and understanding shown towards others. Bruce is an athlete who loves all sports but has a particular passion for lacrosse. He is an excellent student and always gives his best effort. He is currently reading at a level V.

Robert is a 10 year old white male. His IEP classification is speech or language impairment. Robert has apraxia and wears an FM earpiece to enable him to better hear the teachers in the room. Roberts receives speech and occupational therapy services. He is currently reading at a level K and struggles with comprehension. He is becoming more social this year and enjoys playing with others at recess.

Yvonne is an 11 year old African female. Her IEP classifies her as learning disabled and requires that she be placed in an ICT classroom. She receives speech, counseling, and ESOL services. Yvonne is reading at a level E. She loves Thumper, the rabbit from *Bambi*, and will often pretend to read chapter books.

Joshua is a 10 year old male of mixed race. His IEP indicates that he is learning disabled; he must be included in the ICT class every year. Joshua is currently reading at a level N. He

struggles with oral fluency but typically has excellent reading comprehension. He loves dinosaurs and is an enthusiastic learner.

Lucy is a 10 year old African American female. Her IEP categorizes her as having a learning disability and she must be placed in the ICT class every year. Lucy is currently reading at a level T. She loves to sing and is interested in fashion.

Within the ICT classroom there is a general education teacher and a special education teacher. Both educators were involved in this study. Kim is a 24 year old first year general education teacher. She studied psychology at SUNY Geneseo and got her teaching certification at Nazareth College last year. She completed her student teaching last fall and had a long term sub job at Eagleville Elementary as a special education teacher before being hired as long term substitute for this school year.

Courtney is 27 years old and is a Le Moyne College and SUNY Geneseo graduate. This year is her second as the special education teacher for the ICT class at Eagleville Elementary School. Before that she was the teacher's assistant for the ICT class during 3rd grade. This year is her third with this class.

**Researcher Stance**

I am a graduate student working towards my Master of Science in Literacy Education (B-12) degree at St. John Fisher College. I currently hold my initial certifications in Childhood Education (1-6) and Students with Disabilities (1-6). I work as the teacher's assistant in the 5th grade ICT room in which the research took place; this is my second year working with this ICT class. I engaged in privileged participant observation. The role that I assumed within my action research study enabled me to be constantly "moving in and out of the role of teacher, aide, and

observer" (Mills, 2000, p. 85). My role in the classroom fluctuates between teaching and supporting individual students. For guided reading, I had my own group. I was involved in leading a guided reading lesson while making observations.

**Method**

I conducted my study in the 5th grade classroom that I am a T.A. in. The purpose of my study was to examine how guided reading groups affect reading comprehension for struggling, average, and high level readers. At the beginning of the year students were leveled used the *Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment* and NWEA ELA scores. Using every student's instructional reading level, guided reading groups were formed. A large part of this classes guided reading instruction centers around furthering reading comprehension.

Using the *Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment* we have students levels D-W. Part of this assessment tests comprehension. After completing a guided reading lesson cycle in guided reading and being taught specific reading comprehension strategies that were tailored to meet their needs, my students were administered these assessments again. The three reading comprehension strategies that were taught were Stop Think Paraphrase, Beginning Middle End, and Somebody Wanted But So. Stop Think Paraphrase is an easily adaptable strategy that requires students to stop and think about what they just read. Then the student should paraphrase what they just read in their own words. Beginning Middle End requires students to share what happens throughout the text while providing supporting details. Finally, Somebody Wanted But So is a summarizing strategy that requires students to give a brief overview of vital details. The pre and post guided reading scores were compared against each other. This data was then compared between the leveled groups.

During the guided reading lesson cycle I observed each of the three groups three times each. I was observing to see how each student reacted to reading comprehension instruction and how they employed the strategies that were being taught. Each observation ranged from 15-30 minutes. I have my own guided reading group that I teach so I was involved in leading a lesson while making observations for that group. As a result, I engaged in privileged participant observation.

I formally interviewed (Appendix A) both the general and special education teachers in the room. I also collected data through both formal and informal interviews (Appendix B) and gave the whole class a questionnaire (Appendix C) to fill out about what they knew about guided reading and reading comprehension. I observed the different guided reading groups (Appendix D). I also collected student work from the guided reading lessons.

**Quality and Credibility of Research**

In order to ensure the quality and credibility of my action research project, I aligned all components of my study to Mills' (2014) and Guba's (1981) four components of trustworthy research. These components are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. By ensuring these four characteristics of trustworthiness were present within my study, I was safeguarding the quality and credibility of my data.

The first characteristic of trustworthy qualitative research is credibility. Mills (2014) defines this as the "researcher's ability to take into account the complexities that present themselves in a study and to deal with patterns that are not easily explained" (p. 115). This characteristic means that the researcher must be able to work with the data they get. The real world is messy and the data collected will not be perfect. It is up to the researcher to take

inconsistencies and errors in the data in stride and still make effort to see the connections. In order to make sure I handled this properly, the three methods of data collection that I utilized in my study were chosen to ensure triangulation. Triangulation is suggested by Guba (1981) as a method to be used to guarantee credibility.

The second characteristic of trustworthy qualitative research is transferability, which is "qualitative researchers' beliefs that everything they study is context bound and that the goal of their work is not to develop 'truth' statements that can be generalized to larger groups of people" (Mills, 2014, p. 116). In other words, the data and knowledge gathered through a study is only true for the population that in the study. I ensured transferability by developing a detailed descriptions of the context.

The next characteristic of trustworthy qualitative research is dependability. Dependability "refers to the stability of the data" (p. 116). This definition refers to the quantity and quality of the data collected. I ensured this dependability in my study by overlapping methods. I utilized more than one method of information gathering. I used interviews, observations, and questionnaires.

Lastly, the final characteristic of trustworthy qualitative research is the confirmability of the study. This is defined by Mills as "the neutrality or objectivity of the data that has been collected" (p. 116). This definition means that my opinions will not be included in this study or in the analysis of the data. I am doing this through the process of triangulation.

**Informed Consent and Protecting the Rights of the Participants**

During any research project, it is important that all participants are aware of what research is being conducted, the process, and any risks involved. This openness is a part of

protecting their rights. Before beginning my research I needed to first obtain permission from my principal. As principal, he must be vigilant about protecting the students in our school so obtaining permission from him was an important first step. Next, I needed to ask permission from each student's parents who will be participating in my study. This permission form clearly outlined the study, its purpose, and a request for their child's participation. After receiving all these permission forms, I collected assent forms in which my students agreed to knowingly participate in this study. I also collected two consent forms from the general education teacher and the special education teacher. In all data collected in my research names have been changed and any identifying marks have been removed from collected artifacts.

**Data Collection**

The three methods of data collection that I utilized in my study were chosen to ensure triangulation. I engage in privileged participant observation. I work as a TA in the 5th grade ICT class involved in this study. My role in the classroom fluctuates between teaching and supporting individual students. For guided reading, I have my own group. I was involved in leading a guided reading lesson while making field observations.

I collected enquiry data through both formal and informal interviews. I formally interviewed the general and special education teachers in my classroom. I informally interviewed the students in my reading group. I also created a questionnaire that was filled out by all students in the class.

I collected student work as artifacts for my study. I also collected reflection writing and any student work that was connected to reading comprehension. I used district data to support

my study as well. This data included NWEA scores, *Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment* results, and student grades.

**Data Analysis**

After collecting the data, a thorough examination of what I had gathered was necessary to uncover the findings and implication of this research. I began by gathering the transcripts from the two formal teacher interviews, transcripts from the informal student interviews, students questionnaires, guided reading group observation forms, student work samples, and field observation notes. I began my coding process by reading through all the gathered materials several times. As I read, I marked any statements found about guided reading, reading comprehension, or how either of these affects student reading capabilities so I knew where to later focus my attention. During this process, several similar statements and phrases began to emerge. I coded the transcripts from the two formal teacher interviews, transcripts from the informal student interviews, students questionnaires, guided reading group observation forms, student work samples, and field observation notes by assigned specific codes to each statement. I created a list of all the codes and where they could be found within my gathered data. When I had the list of codes and the frequency with which they occurred gathered into a single document, I was able to see the three distinct themes that these codes could be categorized under. Additionally, I used the student assessment results from the *Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System* as data. The test results were scored according to the teacher's guide that accompanies the *Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment* System. I created codes for these results that indicated whether the student had made progress to the next reading level or had remained at the reading level they initially tested at. One of the themes was compared to the research I have done about the importance of creating a common understanding of what guided

reading is, how teachers should implement it in their classrooms, and the theoretical foundations of guided reading.

## Findings and Discussion

After thoroughly analyzing formal teacher interviews, informal and formal student interviews, student questionnaires, guided reading group observation forms, student work samples, and field observation notes, I identified three distinct themes that emerged from the collected data. These three themes are completely supported by the data compiled throughout the course of this study. The first theme is that educators are aware of the benefits of guided reading instruction and what it is, but inconsistent application hinders results. All teachers involved in this study gave complete and well thought out definitions for guided reading. However, the guided reading structure that was actually used is not always accurate. The second theme is that students need to be equal partners in their learning by understanding it. In student interviews, questionnaires, and work samples, it was clear that many students did not have a good understanding of their own personal strengths and weaknesses as readers and writers. This flawed self-perception effects the learning process for these students. Additionally, even though guided reading is a structure used by all teachers in every grade at Eagleville Elementary School, students did not know what guided reading was. Lastly, guided reading increased the reading comprehension in average readers, but not struggling or accelerated readers. This widely used structure for reading instruction did not yield any improvement in struggling and accelerated readers over the course of this study.

### Educators Are Aware of the Benefits of Guided Reading Instruction, but Application May Be Inconsistent

After analyzing the data, it was found that the educators included in this study were aware of the benefits of guided reading and what it is, but inconsistent application of this framework hinders results. The two teachers showed that they had a complete understanding of guided reading and its purpose, but data collected from guided reading group observations, field notes, and interviews highlighted inconsistencies in the administration of the guided reading framework. As stated by Courtney (teacher interview, 2016), a 5th grade special education teacher, the definition of guided reading can be described as the following:

> Guided reading is creating individualized reading instruction based upon a student's instructional reading level. It may be in the form of small reading groups with reading and writing activities or independent reading tasks that are catered to a certain student. Guided reading allows students to explore and learn the many ways to read and comprehend a text. (p. 1)

Courtney believes that guided reading allows educators to differentiate instruction and meet students' needs at their level. This definition is aligned with the definition put forth by Fountas and Pinnell (1996) which states that "guided reading is a teaching approach designed to help individual readers build an effective system for processing a variety of increasingly challenging texts over time" (p. 45). Both definitions express the importance of catering to the students instructional level.

The 5th grade general education teacher, Kim, expressed a definition along a similar vein of thought, mentioning that "guided reading [was] an approach that involved the educator teaching small groups of students who are at or around the same level of reading capability" (teacher interview, 2016, p. 1). She attributes this knowledge to her coursework in her master's program, which she completed last year. In informal interviews with the aforementioned

educators, both teachers expressed their confidence in knowing and implementing guided reading very well. When asked if they utilized guided reading successfully in their classroom, both teachers responded positively. Kim (teacher interview, 2016) elaborated on her answer, sharing:

> Yes! Guided reading is crucial for student growth. Grade level curriculum often has to be modified in order for all students to access it. Guided reading is an opportunity for students to learn more right at the level they are working at. By slowly building up those skills they eventually make bigger gains, which is what we want! This is something that Courtney and I do every day. (p. 1)

In this definition, Kim shares her belief that she and Courtney are correctly and successfully using the guided reading framework within their classroom. This is contradicted by observations from this study where it was observed that Kim left the accelerated group to run independently without teacher guidance or supervision on three different occasions (field notes, 2016).

During two of the nine guided reading group observations conducted during this study, Kim allowed two guided reading groups to meet at the same time (observation, 2016). While Kim met with the average readers guided reading group, she allowed the accelerated readers to operate as an independent guided reading group. This practice goes against the basic principles of guided reading instruction, as the students in the accelerated reading group lacked a teacher to guide and scaffold instruction. The role of the teacher in guided reading instruction is so important because “if the reading process is fragmented, carried by the teacher, or uneven during guided reading, students are likely to transfer this inefficiency to their independent application” (Handy Helpers, 2011, p. 147). The goal of guided reading is to move students towards

independence as readers and writers and this cannot be done without the teacher to guide them through guided reading. The teacher's job is model and support correct reading behavior. When asked about this situation later, Kim lamented the lack of time to do things properly, stating that "there isn't enough time to do it all" (informal teacher interview, 2016, p. 1). It was seen on three different occasions that "the accelerated group was left to function without a teacher", which goes against the definition of guided reading (field notes, 2016, p. 2). Not having enough time is a common struggle for educators, as they lack ample time to conduct their guided reading groups (Morgan, 2013).

In a discussion about the implementation of guided reading, Kim expressed the importance of frequent assessments to confirm that the students are appropriately placed in the leveled reading groups that are essential in a guided reading structure stating that "you can't know what level they're in, what group they're in, without assessing" (informal teacher interview, 2016, p. 2). Kim understands the value of assessing her students so she knows what their strengths and struggles are. In guided reading the groups should be created based on ongoing observations and assessments. (Denton, 2014). These assessments should be ongoing to account for any changes in a student's reading level. Frequent assessments are a basic tenet of guided reading that allows teachers to ensure instruction is at the students' levels. However, during the length of this study, the students were not assessed by Kim and Courtney again following their initial assessment required for group formation and placement in September (observation, 2016). This observation goes directly against Kim's statement where she said that "continual assessment is important" (teacher interview, 2016, p. 2). The final assessment of their reading level was conducted by myself in order to gauge any changes in the students reading level. Assessment provides systematic feedback that educators need to make informed decisions

about instruction (Valiandes, 2015). Both educators voiced the importance of assessments but did not follow through with actual action. In an informal teacher interview, Courtney stated that "it's really important to keep on top of [assessment] to know how and what to teach" (teacher interview, 2016, p. 1) which shows that she understood the value creating lessons based on ongoing observations and assessments (Denton, 2014).

**Students Need to Be Equal Partners in Their Learning by Understanding Their Learning**

When examining the data collected throughout this study, it was found that the majority of students could not define guided reading, reading comprehension, or other terms relevant to reading instruction. Defining these terms is something that they should be able to do, as guided reading has been a framework used with this group of students since first grade. Additionally, there has been a push within Eagleville Elementary to have students be active participants in their learning by understanding what they are learning and why they are learning it. Furthermore, students who were placed in the struggling readers group did not identify as struggling readers. However, the majority of average and accelerated readers identified as such. Positive self-image and self-efficacy is important in learning, but so is being aware of your strengths and weaknesses as a learner so that steps may be taken to improve.

When asked to define guided reading only four students were able to give definitions that were close, saying "it's when a teacher helps you read" and "guided reading is someone helps you read when you need help" (student questionnaire, 2016). These answers show a basic understanding of the guided reading framework but lack deeper connections. Seven students responded "I don't know" when asked to define this term, and 11 gave incorrect answers such as "guided me", "when you read close", and "reading a little and someone writing out loud" (student questionnaire, 2016). These students showed that they lacked an understanding of a

framework that they engaged in learning with on a daily basis. Students' awareness of what they are learning and how they are learning is very important (Morgan, 2013). Guided reading is a framework used by all teachers, kindergarten through fifth grade, at Eagleville Elementary, yet these fifth graders did not know what it is (field notes, 2016). This lack of student knowledge about what they are learning and how they are learning it shows a lack of communication between educators and their students. Educators must not make the mistake of assuming student knowledge (Halladay, 2012).

When asked to define reading comprehension, only three out of 22 students were able to do so, saying it is "understanding what you read", "being able to answer questions about the book", and "reading something and knowing what it is about" (student questionnaire, 2016). Reading comprehension is a highly valued essential skill in Eagleville Elementary, yet none of the students know what it is. Students should be active participants and partners in their learning (Frey, 2010). Nine students responded I don't know, and 10 gave incorrect definitions such as "someone who writes about the book they are reading", "a just right book to work with someone", and "reading for a long period of time" (student questionnaire, 2016). Reading comprehension is a term frequently used by the teachers in this classroom, yet the majority of students had no idea what it was (field notes, 2016). Student should be aware of this important component of their reading education, students need to understand what they need to improve upon (Fisher, 2008).

During this action research study students were asked to self-identify if they were a struggling, average, or accelerated reader. Figure 1, seen below, is a bar graph that represents the student's responses. When this question was asked, the teachers had already categorized the students based on their reading level. Along the bottom of the graph are the names of each of the

three groups that students were placed in. They were classified by their teachers as struggling, average, or accelerated readers. The three bars above each group shows what the students within that group identified as. This graph (figure 1) is intended to show student's self-perception of themselves as readers.

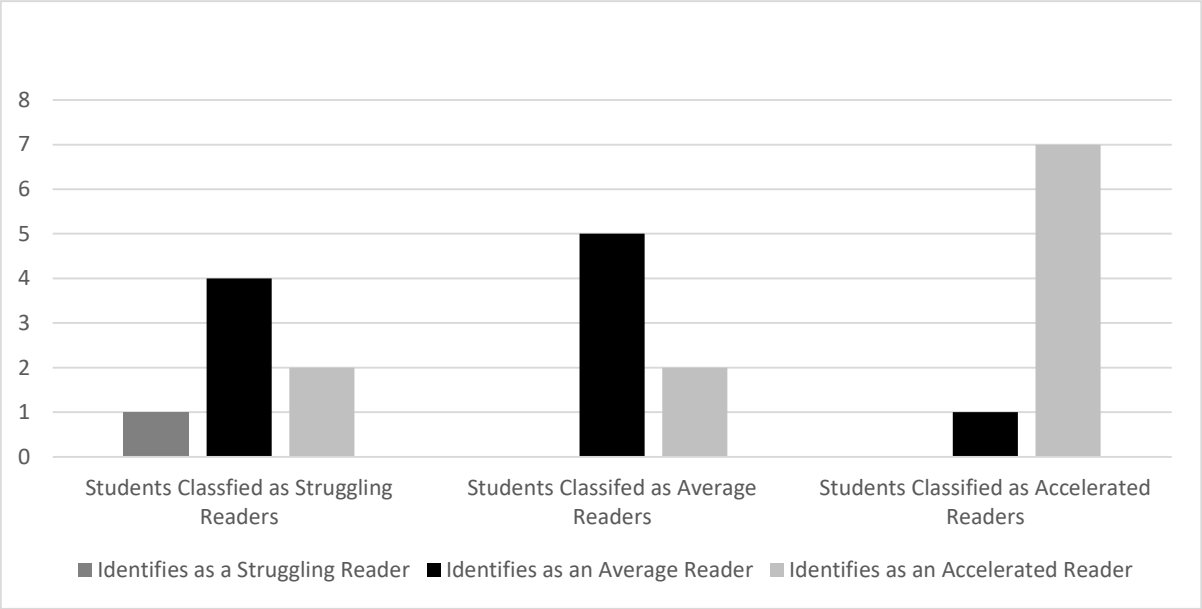


*Figure 1*. Student's self-perceptions of themselves as readers.

When asked to assess themselves as a reader, seven of eight accelerated readers identified as such (figure 1). The one accelerated student who did not identify as an accelerated reader identified as an average reader (figure 1). Five of seven average readers identified as average and the two average readers who did not identify as one did identify as accelerated readers (figure 1). Overall, students in the average and accelerated readers groups typically identified with the same group that the teachers had confidentially classified them as. However, only one student in the struggling reader group identified as a struggling reader (figure 1). Four of the six remaining struggling readers identified as average readers, the other two struggling readers considered themselves to be accelerated readers (figure 1).

When asked questions about self-efficacy, what they thought they were capable of in reading, and general strengths and weakness as a reader, students in the average and accelerated readers group were able to identify what they were good at and in which areas they needed improvement. Dora, an accelerated reader said that she “need[ed] to work on reading more smoothly” and was “good at understanding what she read” (informal student interview, 2016). Benjamin, an average reader shared that he was able to “read for a long time and stay focused” while he need to improve his ability to “use context clues” (informal student interview, 2016). These accelerated and average students know themselves as readers. Self-awareness of ability is important in improving reading comprehension (Fisher, 2008). Students who are considered to be struggling readers were not able to identify specific strengths and weaknesses for themselves, and instead gave general responses, such as “read better” and “I read really good” (student interview, 2016). These definitions show that struggling students may have more difficulty verbalizing and being aware of what they are good at an what they need to improve upon, which is an important skill for improving reading comprehension (Fisher, 2008).

When observing the guided reading groups, it was seen that many student were stumped by reading terms such as accuracy, comprehension, alliteration, antonym, synonym, context clues, digraphs, figurative language, guided reading, and idioms (observation, 2016). These are terms that the teachers said the students should know; when asked directly Kim said “Yes they should know those [terms]” and was surprised to learn her students did not know them (teacher interview, 2016). Knowing reading terms helps students to take ownership of their education and understand more of what they are learning (Klingner, 2010). When students are unaware of important components of their reading education such as what they need to improve on, what

they are good at, and general vocabulary associated with what they are doing, they are not being informed as they should be.

**Guided Reading Increased the Reading Comprehension in Average Readers**

Throughout the course of this study, it was found that guided reading increased the reading comprehension abilities in average readers, but not struggling or accelerated readers. Students who had Fountas & Pinnell reading scores of N or below were considered to be below grade level, and thus, struggling readers. Seven of the 22 students in this study matched this description.

In table 1, shown below, the *Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System* score from September for each individual student is shown. These scores are what the teachers used to classify students as struggling, average, and accelerated readers and the table shows which students are in each group. Additionally, this table also shows each student's *Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System* score from October is shown.

Table 1

*Student's Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System*

| Student Name | Student Classification as Reader | Fountas & Pinnell Score (September) | Fountas & Pinnell Score (October) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Yvonne | Struggling | E | E |
| Amy | Struggling | F | F |
| Keith | Struggling | I | I |
| Zack | Struggling | J | J |
| Robert | Struggling | J | J |
| Kevin | Struggling | M | M |
| Joshua | Struggling | N | N |
| Neville | Average | R | S |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Daniel | Average | R | S |
| Jack | Average | R | S |
| Benjamin | Average | T | T |
| Amanda | Average | T | U |
| Alexandra | Average | T | U |
| Lucy | Average | T | U |
| Jessica | Accelerated | U | U |
| Dora | Accelerated | U | U |
| Ashley | Accelerated | U | U |
| Luke | Accelerated | U | U |
| Octavia | Accelerated | V | V |
| Allison | Accelerated | V | V |
| Bruce | Accelerated | V | V |
| Brad | Accelerated | W | W |

Students in the struggling reading group did not have any change in their reading scores (table 1), which includes reading comprehension. Throughout the course of this study, students were taught three reading comprehension strategies: Beginning Middle End (BME), Stop Think Paraphrase (STP), and Somebody Wanted But So (SWBS). During guided reading time, the struggling students received direct instruction at their level about these three strategies. However, at the end of this study, no student in the struggling readers group could successfully and independently utilize any of these three strategies. This shows that in this action research study the guided reading framework did not help struggling students improve. According to Hornsby (2000) guided reading is aimed at supporting struggling students by placing them in small groups with peers at their level. These seven students were only able to do so with prompts and

redirection from the educators (observation, 2016). Despite guided reading instruction at their level, they were not able to function independently. Guided reading is structured with the ultimate goal being to help students become independent and skillful readers (Kropiewnicki, 2006). Additionally, this group of struggling readers had to rely solely on the example set by their teacher. All students in this group are not strong students or readers and were reluctant to take academic risks in front of their peers.

Students who were placed in the average reader's guided reading group were the only students who showed growth in their reading level in this study. Six out of the seven average readers advanced one reading level during this study (table 1). These students were attentive during guided reading instruction and were able to frequently model strategies and correct reading behaviors for each other. During discussion, these students frequently built off of each other's ideas and questions (observation, 2016). Having other students who were able to easily respond and formulate ideas independently was beneficial to them. It is important for students to work together to "to see how texts construct their worlds, cultures and communities" (Fisher, 2008, p. 20). By communicating with each other and building of each other's knowledge, students are able to form deeper connections with the text and each other. These average readers still had room to grow in their reading comprehension skills before they could be classified as accelerated. These students were also taught the three comprehension strategies and were able to remember and use them successfully (observation, 2016).

The accelerated reading group did not advance in their reading levels (figure 3) but were still able to successfully use the taught reading comprehension strategies (observation, 2016). These students were able to remember and use the strategies taught without adult prompting. This means that the accelerated group was fulfilling one of the purposes of guided reading as

they had moved towards “independent practice and application by the learner” (Frey, 2010, p.84) The accelerated reading group frequently modeled and explained new concepts to each other, supporting the teacher’s role (field notes, 2016). Having peers who quickly grasped the lesson allowed this group to have more models than just the teacher. Teacher modeling is important in showing how to interact with and respond to text. Having students model for each other increases the benefits. The importance of modeling relates to Fisher’s (2008) point that teachers can, though scaffolding, empower their students to better connect to and comprehend texts. This allows students to become better readers.

In a student questionnaire the students were asked to indicate their group preference. They were given the two choices of working with a small group with students who were at/near the same reading level as themselves, which is consistent with the framework of guided reading. The second choice was to work in a small group with students who were at all different reading levels. The collected answers are represented below in the form of a bar graph (figure 2). Along the bottom are the names of the names of each of the three groups that students were placed in. They were classified by their teachers as struggling, average, or accelerated readers.

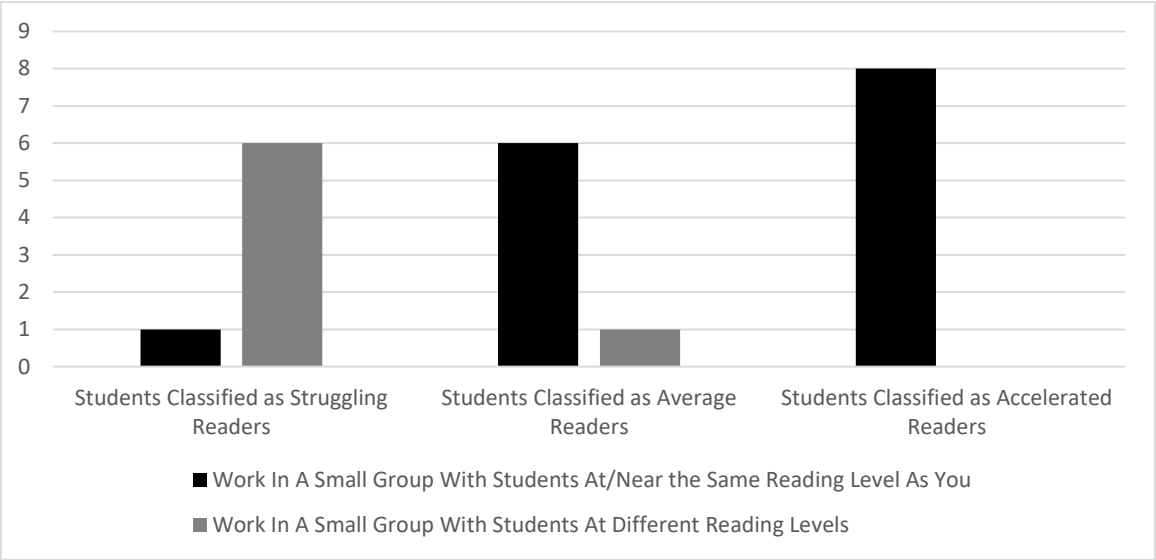


*Figure 2.* Student group preference.

Students who had been classified by their teachers as accelerated readers all indicated that they preferred to work in a small group with students at or near the same levels as themselves (figure 2). This is how the guided reading framework is structured, indicating that these students work better within the framework. Six of seven students who had been classified by their teachers as average readers indicated that they preferred to work within a small group of students who were at or near the same level (figure 2). The majority of the students classified as average readers prefer to operate within small groups like the ones used in the guided reading framework. The results for students who were classified as struggling reader showed that all but one of these seven students actually preferred to work in a small group with students at different reading levels (figure 2). When asked to explain his choice, a student in this group explained that he "thought that kids who got it could help others" (student interview, 2016, p. 1). This data suggests that struggling readers are not satisfied with the small groups they are required to work in when learning with the guided reading framework.

Interestingly, when asked about their student group preference (student questionnaire, 2016) six out of seven students indicated that they found working in a small group with students at different reading levels preferable to working in a small group with students near or at the same reading level as themselves (figure 2). The average and accelerated students were more comfortable with the guided reading framework in which they were leveled and placed with other students with similar levels (Fountas & Pinnell, 1968). These results vastly differed from the responses from the average and accelerated readers. When asked to explain their preference, these struggling readers offered reasons why they preferred working with mixed ability groups such as “high read can help low reading”, “if they are struggling they get help”, “kids who are done quick can help people who are stuck”, and “the kids who are good at reading can help the kids who aren’t” (student questionnaire, 2016, p. 5-9). The struggling readers did not enjoy the guided reading framework that required them to be grouped together.

Unlike the struggling readers, the majority of these students indicated that they preferred to work with other students who were at or near the same reading level as themselves (figure 2). They did not want to wait for slower readers or feel rushed by those faster than themselves. This was considered in the structuring of the guided reading framework, thus “students are matched with leveled text of appropriate difficulty and progress into increasingly challenging text” (Denton, 2014, p. 269). When asked to explain their preference, these students said “if we are at the about the same level, they we know about the same things”, “it is easier to get through the work that way”, “we can work together to get smarter”, and “it’s harder when some people are ahead of you or behind where you are in the book” (student questionnaire, 2016, p. 9-14). This shows that the higher performing students preferred to work with peers at their own level in order to make gains in their reading abilities. This ties in to the goal of guided reading, which is “to help

students build their reading power—to build a network of strategic actions for processing texts" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012, p. 272). Student reading levels are assessed then the students are strategically grouped, and an appropriately leveled text is selected for each group. Average and accelerated students prefer these groups.

Like the average readers, this group also preferred to work with students who were at or near their own reading level (student questionnaire, 2016). The accelerated students preferred to work with other accelerated students, this is in line with the framework of guided reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 1968). Their reasoning was that "working with students at a lower level can sometimes slow you down", "it's hard to stop and explain it to others", and "it's better when everyone in the group works at the same speed" (student questionnaire, 2016).

## Implications and Conclusions

The findings in my research have several implications for teachers. I began this study focusing on how guided reading affects the reading comprehension of struggling, average, and accelerated readers. Guided reading has gone from merely being a trend, to being a staple in balanced literacy programs (Cassidy, 2015). It is considered by many educators to being an essential part of reading instruction. Even so, it has been said that there is a need for better teacher training, preparation, and knowledge concerning guided reading, its implementation, and its effects on different types of readers (Kropiewnicki, 2006). Guided reading is structured with the ultimate goal being to help students become independent and skillful readers. The purpose of my study was to examine if guided reading is truly the best framework for all levels of students when it comes to improving their reading comprehension levels.

Guided reading is an excellent framework that provides the necessary supports so that students can learn successfully and move towards independence as readers and writers (Fountas

& Pinnell, 1996). However, it should not be the only component of a balanced literacy program within a classroom. Educators should be supplementing with additional resources, lessons, and experiences that will benefit their students reading and writing abilities (Sporer, 2009). As evidenced in this study, students in the struggling and accelerated reading groups did not make progress in their reading level, which includes an assessment of their ability to comprehend. Additionally, students in the struggling reading group indicated a preference for reading groups that included different levels of readers. These students prefer to work with students at different levels because the accelerated students provide additional support for struggling readers rather than just having the teacher as support. The accelerated reader's preferences must be taken into account as well, since they indicated that they prefer to work with students at their own level, perhaps a compromise can be struck so that struggling readers are occasionally exposed to student leaders and models.

Another implication for educators is that they must consistently assess and then use the collected data to assist in lesson planning and group formations (Klingner, 2010; Glasswell & Ford, 2011). In this study, the educators only assessed the students with the plan to use the results for group formation. Since that time, the teachers have not conducted another formal assessment. Without the knowledge that data provides, students may remain in a group that they have outgrown or that has become too difficult. Without these formal assessments, the teachers are also missing out on an opportunity to collect data that may help them understand individual and class learning trends which can then inform their teaching (Phillips, 2013).

This study also made it apparent that having a common understanding of guided reading between educators and the students is imperative (Biddulph, 2002; Ford & Opitz, 2008). Students should be active, knowledgeable participants in their own learning and they cannot do

this if they don't even understand the structure that guides their reading lesson. By being clearer about terms associated with the reading process and their lessons, teachers can ensure that students understand what is going on in their classroom and in their learning. For example, if students are being taught a strategy that should help increase their reading comprehension, then they should know what reading comprehension is, what the name of the strategy is, and any relevant terms. This common understanding should also help student gain a clearer picture of who they are as learner (Morgan, 2013). Students will know this when they are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses as a reader and writer. By allowing a struggling student to think that they have a complete and thorough understanding of a skill when they don't is a disservice to them. They will not know what they need to improve on, and this will impact their ability to take ownership of their learning and work.

Educators must stay well-informed and know the best practices of their teaching (Scull, 2010; Inaquinta, 2006). It is not enough to merely know what guided reading is and what it looks like, guided reading must be implemented carefully and consistently in the classroom. In addition to professional development, reinforcement from continued learning opportunities and observations are essential.

In this study, the effects of guided reading on reading comprehension abilities in struggling, average, and accelerated readers was examined. Guided reading groups were observed, teachers and students were interviewed, questionnaires were given, and field notes were taken and consulted. It was found that over the course of this study, only the average readers advanced in their measurable reading comprehension. The struggling and accelerated readers did not. In this study, it was also found that struggling readers were the only group that indicated that they would prefer to work with students at various levels. The guided reading

framework allows students to work with peers who are at or near their level. These students felt that they would benefit from the example that their peers could provide. This study has several implications for educators, such as the need for a closer examination of the long term results of guided reading for students at all levels, the importance of assessments to gather data and determine accurate guided reading group placement, the necessity of a common understanding of guided reading between educators and students, and the significance of engaging in best practices for educators.

Issues for further examination in the future are that struggling students need and want the example of more accelerated learners? How can student models be provided so that the struggling readers benefit while the accelerated students are not experiencing any detrimental effects? Additionally, what social factors must be considering since the average and accelerated students indicated that they would not prefer to work with students at different levels? Another issue that warrants further examination is that since only the average readers progressed, should the guided reading instruction be looked into more closely for struggling and accelerated learners? Is guided reading truly the best framework for all? Are there any downsides to keeping the students separated by level? If I were to conduct this same action research study again, I would have attempted to adjust the timing so that I would be able to observe not just one, but two cycles of the guided reading process. I would also try to attempt to formally interview all twenty two students that participated in this study. Additionally, I would have preferred to observe each reading group every time it met, but was unable to do so due to time constraints.

Upon the completion of this action research study and following my analysis of the data, I am left with several questions. How can we reconcile the struggling students' desire for a student role model with the average and accelerated students desire to remain in their own

groups? This study also highlighted a troubling social aspect of guided reading. Guided reading necessitates the separation and grouping of students based on ability. Not all, but many students are aware of who's who. When asked in informal interviews if they knew which group was the high one, all students responded that they knew. Students are very aware of what goes on around them and cute group's names will not disguise which group is which.

There were several limitations in this action research study. The time in which I had to conduct this study was only a few weeks. I would have liked to follow these students progress throughout the whole school year and measured their growth during a larger span of time. Developing skills that increases reading comprehension can takes some time to occur and I believe that I would have gotten more reliable results if I had been able to examine the participants through several cycles of the guided reading framework over the course of the school year. There were many participants in this study but they were all the same age. If I were to conduct this study again, I would like to have students of all ages participate. Furthermore, this study did not consider student motivation or additional outside factors that could potential have positive or adverse effects on the participants reading comprehension.

The experience of this study has highlighted for me the importance and value of inspecting data gathered very closely. I noticed patterns about my students learning that I would not have picked up on without close and careful inspection. I was also reminded that educators must trust their instincts. We have the education and the training to make informed choices about our students learning for their benefit. Our students reading education shouldn't rest solely in our blind trust of a beloved framework. Using all the tools at your disposal means not only relying on guided reading, but on other methods as well. Every student is different and different approaches may be considered.

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## Appendix A

Teacher Interview Questions

1. What grade level are you currently teaching?
2. How many years of experience do you have teaching at that grade level?
3. How many years of teaching experience do you have total?
4. How is guided reading defined?
5. Do you currently use guided reading in your classroom? Why?
6. What are some negative aspects of guided reading?
7. What are some theories/research that supports guided reading?
8. How were you trained in guided reading?
9. Do you think that guided reading is beneficial for all levels of readers? (Struggling, average, accelerated)
10. How is reading comprehension defined?
11. Does guided reading affect reading comprehension?

## Appendix B

Student Interview Questions (Formal)

1. How did this guided reading session further your reading comprehension abilities?
2. Think about the other students in your guided reading group. How do they help you? How do they hinder your learning?
3. What did the teacher do during this guided reading session that help you?
4. What is one strategy or skill that you can take away from this guided reading session?

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Informal Student Interview

Student:

Date:

Questions asked:

## Appendix C

Student Questionnaire

1. **What is guided reading?**

   _____

   _____

2. **What is reading comprehension?**

   _____

   _____

3. **Should you read books that are at your reading level? Why or why not?**

   _____

   _____

   _____

4. **I think that I am a _____ reader. (circle one)**

   struggling average accelerated

5. **Which situation is preferable? (circle one)**

   You will work in a small reading group with other students who are at or near the same reading level as you.

   OR

   You will work in a small reading group with other students who are at different reading levels.

   **Explain your choice:**

   _____

   _____

   _____

## Appendix D

Guided Reading Group Notes

Date(s): _____Group: _____Level:_____

Title: _____Genre:_____

Goal: _____Strategy:_____

| **Student** | **Notes** |
|---|---|
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