

Experiences Teaching Guided Reading in the Primary Classroom

by

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Abstract

This project, which is informed by narrative inquiry, examines one teacher's experiences as he navigated the pedagogical challenges of teaching guided reading in an early Primary grade after years of teaching English Language Arts (ELA) in a Middle year's context. A review of the literature examines salient factors in the consideration of the guided reading approach including: reading assessment; levelling texts; grouping students; instruction away from the teacher; and teacher factors associated with guided reading instruction. It concludes with a description of an alternative to traditional guided reading based on side-by-side, rather than small group, instruction. Considerations of personal, contextual, and theoretical factors impacted his practice and the students' reading experiences. The combination of changing educational contexts, shifting from a Grade 6 to a Grade 2/3 classroom with children from a lower socio-economic background, had a significant outcome on the teacher's initial attempts to establish guided reading. A critical examination of the literature during his M Ed program, combined with the personal journaling of his emergent teaching experiences, and the discovery of an evidence-based alternative to its traditional form, led the teacher to an effective and highly successful method of supporting guided reading through side-to-side instruction with his Primary students.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

I wanted to be a better teacher; to know how to teach my students to be effective readers and writers. I also wanted to return to the University of Victoria. The latter may sound like a strange reason to begin a graduate degree, but that is how I felt. I still love to learn, which is an important trait for a teacher to possess. Further, a year after beginning my Master's of Education degree, I reached a professional goal that was 12 years in the making. My teaching transfer from a Middle years to a Primary classroom was approved. It would prove to be a year of surprises that began with equal amounts of excitement and apprehension.

First Day

The children did not look that scary; in fact they were pretty small. But I was still scared. It was September fourth; the first day of school. Everything was as new for me as it was for my students. I searched for some form of reassurance that I was going to be okay. I told myself that these were children like any other children, they were just younger than those whom I was used to. This grade level was the one that I wanted to teach; that I had waited 12 years to teach. I silenced an inner voice that dared to contemplate second thoughts about my transfer to a Grade 2/3 classroom from a Middle years school. It was a little too late for that now anyway.

Fifteen minutes earlier, I had been so surprised that I was not nervous. I was in the school library, talking to the teacher librarian (an old friend from a previous school) holding a coffee and making immature jokes that would have made any 12 year old proud. I remember noticing that I was not even sweating. Strange, since I had spent most of the summer wondering, or rather worrying, about whether I could still teach Primary aged children.

I had not taught a Primary grade in over eight years. Even then, I had been teaching Primary grades only in my final practicum and as a teacher-on-call. So I wondered, or rather worried:

What if I've lost my ability to teach this age group?

They won't get my sense of humour.

What if I scare them?

I don't know what to do for art.

What if we can't relate to each other?

I hope they don't cry when I don't hug them.

And, this school is inner-city!

Are some of the students going to be violent?

They'll be tough kids.

"Time to head to the gym, buddy," said my colleague, where the students and parents had assembled for the day's start-up. I followed my friend, half beside, half behind him. I was no longer calm and cool. I was sweating.

On the walk to the gym I tried to reassure myself by remembering my earlier successes teaching Primary grade students. My final practicum was in a Grade 1/2 classroom, and people told me that I was a natural. "You've got it all!" I was told; my lessons were innovative, enjoyable, and educationally sound. Most importantly, I loved teaching Primary aged students. But that was 12 years ago. Being a Middle school teacher for the past eight years and a teacher-on-call for the four previous years, would have undoubtedly left a few of those Primary teacher skills a bit rusty. I would soon find out. But first, I will describe how I arrived at this juncture in my career and why the wait was so long.

The obstacles that prevented me from becoming a Primary teacher during the past 12 years were rooted in labour politics and my own sense of right and wrong. In my school District and, to a lesser extent, in the rest of the province of British Columbia, transferring to a new teaching position does not follow the typical hiring process of applying and being interviewed for job openings. Although it makes sense that principals and vice-principals evaluate applicants on factors such as ability, seniority, training, and the degree to which an applicant can meet the particular needs of a school and its students, that is not how hiring classroom teachers works in BC. In my District, seniority and level of education are the only factors. A teacher's curricular knowledge, expertise, his ability to relate to children, or to manage a difficult classroom, count for very little in the hiring process. The social and emotional needs of the children are not taken into consideration either. For example, when a principal posts a position for Grade 1, the only two considerations are teaching seniority, specific Primary training, and experience. A principal cannot take into consideration such factors as a teacher's performance evaluations, his experiences working with Aboriginal children, English language learners, or inner city children, or the school's need for male role models in the earlier grades. Unfortunately, for keen "youngsters" like myself with only a decade or so of seniority, there is little chance of gaining a continuing Primary teaching position – one that begins on the first day of school – when the average seniority of most Primary teachers who successfully apply for transfers is approximately the two decade mark.

I, myself, had been the other obstacle that prevented me from acquiring my dream teaching position teaching in Primary grades. During my last few years as a Middle school teacher, Primary positions became available in my District that I could have applied for. These positions opened up when a school received more students than it had planned for in September

and required another classroom. To obtain these positions, one did not need to possess a great deal of seniority. The problem for me was that applying for one of these would require leaving a class of Middle years students in late September that I had already begun to teach. Although it would have been professionally acceptable to leave in this manner, by the fourth week of September my students and I had already formed meaningful relationships. For many students in our large Middle years school, I was the teacher they wanted to get as homeroom teacher: I was looked upon as one of the ‘cool’ and ‘fun’ young teachers to have in Grades 6 and 7. I felt that it would have been unfair to leave my Middle years classrooms in September, so soon after my students and I had started what had usually been rewarding teaching and learning situations. So I stayed.

Starting my Master’s

In the summer of 2009, I found myself wandering around the idyllically situated University of Victoria (UVic) campus staring up at ancient cedars and firs imagining that I was a student again. Every summer, I spend hours and hours soaking up the tranquility, just walking around or sitting in a cozy sunbeam reading a book and sipping a coffee at the university. With fewer university students buzzing from class to class in the summer it is quiet and peaceful. In fact, the entire campus seems to slow down a step or two. But there was another reason I was there that afternoon in 2009: I loved to learn. It was such a powerful realization that, to this day, I remember the exact spot where I experienced it – between the Bob Wright Centre and the Engineering Office Wing.

And, I wanted to be a Language Arts expert. I wanted to be one of the best Language Arts teachers in my District. I thought that I might even host an in-service or two, but mainly I wanted to be a better teacher for my students.

I went home that day and began looking through the UVic Faculty of Education website to find out how to enrol in a graduate programme. I sent emails that were pleasantly and promptly answered by cheerful faculty and staff in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. By the end of the week, I was energized and felt renewed as a teacher. No, I still had not realized my dream of having my own Grade 1 or 2 class, but I was at least now going to enjoy being a student again; learning and becoming a better Language Arts teacher. I would begin in the fall of 2010.

A Graduate Student - Now what?

When I began my graduate studies in Language and Literacy I had many questions. Would I have more tests than papers, or would it be the other way round? Would I make new friends? When would night classes end? But those were minor curiosities compared to the real question behind my whole endeavour. What did I want to get out of being a graduate student?

Often the first thing that colleagues said when I told them that I had started my Master's degree was, "Good for you. That extra money will help out with your pension big time." My response was usually something like, "Believe it or not, I am doing this because I want to be a really good Language Arts teacher. And it'll be fun to be a student again up at UVic." I am not sure if they believed me. I am sure many walked away thinking, "Yeah, sure, Paul. You should have violins playing when you tell folks that one." Was the money a factor driving my decision? If it was, my main questions upon starting my studies probably would have been along the lines of how long will graduate studies take, and what can I do to make this really easy on myself. Those were not my questions.

When I began my graduate studies, I had already had my own classroom for six years. Five years of teaching Grade 7, and one year teaching Grade 6. However, I never felt like I was

really teaching Language Arts very well. I often questioned myself and the quality of my lessons. Was my reading instruction effective? Novel studies often ended in a whimper rather than a bang. When I did make the lessons exciting with props, costumes, and multimedia, I questioned if my students were getting enough substance. My students read lots of poems and some great short stories – that was good. The associated pre-reading and post reading activities were solid too. They engaged the students and met BC’s curricular outcomes. The during reading activities were a little weak however. My writing instruction was similar. I considered it to be solid, with some highlights as well as a few areas that needed definite improvement. I was not satisfied with my pedagogical practices and I knew it. I wanted it all to be spectacular. Instead, I often felt like I was haphazardly providing reading and writing strategies hoping that some of them would hit the mark and actually help students to become better readers and writers. At the time, I did not consider listening, speaking, and viewing to be anywhere near as important as the reading and writing components. This haphazard approach to instruction all led to “teacher guilt.” Regularly attending workshops and professional development sessions did little to relieve these feelings and that is when I looked into a graduate degree. Perhaps earning a Master’s degree in Language and Literacy would finally help to relieve the guilt. I also hoped that it would help me to achieve a goal that I set back in my undergraduate years as an Education student.

During my final year in post degree teacher Education at the University of Victoria, I discovered, quite surprisingly, that Primary education was a passion for me. Although that word is overused in resumes and job applications, it accurately described how I felt about Primary education then, and how I feel about it now. From this passion came a desire to be one of the best Primary teachers in my School District. A lofty goal indeed, yet it is one that, tempered

with a bit of maturity and experience, I still carry with me today. To achieve this goal, I had to know how children learned to read and write. And once I knew this, I could learn how to incorporate this knowledge into truly effective reading and writing instruction.

Thus, from these three different, but connected factors emerged the following two questions that directed my learning during my coursework and final project for my Master's of Education Degree: How does a teacher help children become better writers, and how does he help children become effective readers? Or, in simple terms, how does one teach reading and writing? I never lost sight of these questions even when I struggled with a myriad of topic choices for my culminating project.

Many other questions and discoveries unavoidably emerged when a world of learning opened up for me during my graduate studies. Questions of classroom pedagogy and politics, as well as research methodologies and the changing nature of pre-service Teacher Education arose. Graduate studies also revealed to me the importance of both listening and speaking processes within the construction of meaning. The degree to which dialogic-based instruction enhances reading and writing cannot be understated. In fact, I could now make a strong argument that an individual cannot fully create meaning from text without some form of dialogic interaction, but that is yet another graduate topic and project. As well, I discovered the important role that representing and viewing play in comprehension. All of these facets of literacy education and learning are interconnected, and they all contributed to changing the way I teach today.

As my studies drew to a close, however, my two key questions on reading and writing had my complete and total focus. The final course I took was a directed study course based exclusively on my need to answer the question of how to teach writing effectively. The inquiry approach in that course was just what I was looking and hoping for, and I found that I answered

that question satisfactorily. My other question, partially answered during my coursework in reading, now focused on a specific facet of reading instruction that I still had questions about: guided reading with Primary aged children. This form of reading instruction became the basis of my M Ed project's question: How does a teacher establish an effective Primary guided reading programme in his or her classroom?

To make sense of my experiences and later transform them into a set of teaching ideas and recommendations, I wrote this project paper informed by a narrative inquiry approach. It was through the process of writing that I made sense of what I had experienced. Rather than using it simply to report findings and conclusions, writing became my tool to synthesize, transform, and evaluate the multiple streams of information that came from graduate coursework, studying the literature, and my personal teaching experiences. It became clearer than ever that writing truly was analysis and thinking (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005).

This project is autobiographical in nature, as are all experiences, including traditional scientific research methods. As a postmodern qualitative form of constructing meaning, narrative inquiry is in its relative infancy compared to well-established scientific, quantitative methodologies. Nonetheless, it deserves legitimacy alongside the more established methods of investigating the world. Although the two are often seen to be at odds, they should not be; both attempt to make sense of the world around us, to construct knowledge and meaning through human experience. In addition, just as scientific quantitative research can open dialogue, so too can qualitative narrative inquiry (Leggo, 2008).

I did not set out with the intention that this M Ed project paper would be so personal and autobiographical. I envisioned something that would look, sound, and read as more 'scholarly'. But that simply did not happen. It was as if something else was guiding the process of writing

this paper; something I did not completely control. Even though I set out with a plan and an outline just as I had been taught since the early days of junior high school, whenever I started to write in my journal, which later became this paper, I wrote about my experiences of the day or week trying to teach my students, often very personal and emotional. What makes this reflective journaling highly valuable is its integration of critical perspectives grounded in the theory of reading instruction and learning. As I worked to understand my own experiences, I located not only my own practice but also made connections to what others could learn from. This process both informed and became my M Ed project. In the next section, I describe guided reading and its place in the British Columbia English Language Arts Curriculum (2006).

What is Guided Reading?

Guided reading “is the heart of a balanced literacy programme” (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, p. 1). It plays an essential role guiding students to the ultimate goal of becoming competent, fluent, and independent readers who read for enjoyment. Guided reading allows a teacher to support a small group of students who are at similar stages of reading development as they practice selecting and using reading strategies with a common text. During a typical guided reading session, the teacher introduces a text and then listens to each student read quietly to herself. As the teacher listens, he monitors the student’s strategy use and offers prompts when the student encounters difficulty. The teacher ends the guided reading session with a group discussion of strategy use and may assign an extension activity (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

The English Language Arts Curriculum in British Columbia

Guided reading assumes a major role in the British Columbia Ministry of Education’s English Language Arts Integrated Resource Package from 2006. The aim of the curriculum is “to make meaning of the world and to prepare [students] to participate effectively in all aspects

of society” through reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and representing (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 2). Fundamentally, guided reading instruction addresses the four guiding principles of the English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum: Students take an active role in their learning; teachers differentiate instruction to meet the different ways and rates at which individuals learn; learning is as much a group process as it is an individual one; and the most effective learning takes place when students think about their learning (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 3). Guided reading instruction also helps students develop their abilities to comprehend and critically respond to text, two additional key aspects of the curriculum. Teachers can accomplish both through guided reading by directly supporting the use of meaning making strategies (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Iaquina, 2006). Furthermore, guided reading instruction helps teachers to meet the curriculum’s mandate that students use reading to improve thinking and to foster reflection, self-assessment, and other metacognitive processes (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 2).

Guided reading is a valuable instructional tool that fits well into the ELA curriculum’s suggestions for programme delivery. In its suggestions for planning and instruction, the ELA curriculum (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006) outlines several key concepts that effective guided reading instruction incorporates:

- the link between literacy and thinking
- the connections among oral language, reading and writing
- comprehension and metacognition in literacy learning
- the gradual release of responsibility
- early literacy development and intervention
- oral language to support learning

- reading comprehension and fluency
- classroom diversity and differentiated instruction (p. 16)
- use of a three part cueing system during reading (p. 21)

In the following chapter, I briefly describe the theoretical foundations of reading and examine the literature surrounding guided reading. In Chapter 3, I describe my experiences attempting to implement guided reading in my classroom. Finally, in Chapter 4, I examine the implications of what I discovered about guided reading and reflect upon my graduate experience.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Guided reading is a necessary component of every balanced literacy programme. In this chapter I describe the theoretical foundations of reading and the importance of scaffolding and metacognition in reading instruction. I examine the position of traditional guided reading in the literature as well as assessment, the levelling of texts, affective considerations for instruction, grouping students, teacher talk during guided reading sessions, and the controversy surrounding what teachers should teach during guided reading. Finally, I address gaps in the literature. When I began writing this review, guided reading had one structure. By the end, however, I had discovered a new, alternative way to guide my students as they read.

Theoretical Foundations of Reading

Theories of reading have undergone significant change over the last 60 years. These theories occupied, and will continue to occupy, important roles not only in current best practices, but in future ones as well. Often reading theories reflected societal attitudes and political agendas. While some theories dominated reading practice for a few years, others have lasted decades.

Skinner, the space race, and the bottom-up theory of reading.

Following the Second World War, Skinnerian behaviourism, fear of Russian supremacy in space, and a naïve trust in the absolute truth of quantitative science, lead educators to espouse a new theory of reading based on conditioned learning: bottom-up reading theory. This reductionist model contends that scientific study can reduce learning to read to a set of isolated components (Alexander & Fox, 2004). Assembling these components from the bottom-up results in the coherent activity of learning to read. This bottom-up theory dictates that reading

instruction is simply a rote exercise of stimulus and response learning. Teachers train students to respond to the stimulus of perceived phonemes by assembling them into words, then phrases, and finally sentences (Pearson & Stephens, 1994). According to this bottom-up theory of reading, higher cognitive processes are not involved in learning to read (Unrau & Alvermann, 2013). Consequently, systematic, prescribed phonics based instruction became the logical form of reading instruction (Chall, 1995). Typical of bottom-up reading instruction is a reliance on quantitative diagnostics and remediation based on identifying sources of errors (Alexander & Fox, 2004).

Top-down theory of reading.

Cognitive psychology was diametrically opposed to the behaviourist, oversimplification of reading described by the bottom-up theory. Rather, cognitive theorists turned their focus to theories of knowledge and how people stored, organized, and accessed it, especially prior knowledge (Alexander & Fox, 2004). The top-down theory of reading focuses on the prior knowledge a reader brings to a text. The effectiveness of a reader's integration of prior knowledge with the information in a text is directly related to her reading performance and understanding (Stanovich, 1986). A reader's prior knowledge originates from schema, or pictures, that she recalls in association with words and sentences (Pearson & Spiro, 1982). The linking of schema with words in the text results in understanding. According to the top-down theory of reading, students who do not possess the prior knowledge associated with a text will be at a reading disadvantage unless the teacher provides such knowledge before reading. Even if a reader does have the required prior knowledge, she may still have difficulty understanding a text if she makes errors organizing, storing, and accessing the knowledge (Pearson & Spiro, 1982). Uncovering these retrieval errors forms the basis of reading intervention (Alexander & Fox,

2004). This intervention is possible because a reader's knowledge is modifiable (Alexander & Fox, 2004). Thus, the quality of reading instruction along with timely interventions can change reading outcomes for students. The teacher whose pedagogy adheres to a top-down model of reading emphasizes what students do before reading (Hewitt, 1979). Including previewing texts by examining illustrations, tables of contents, and headings.

Interactive theory of reading.

Some cognitive theorists believed that learning to read involves both bottom-up and top-down processes. This belief became the foundation of an interactive theory of reading. Reading is an interaction between the text and the reader, where both lower (perceptual) and higher level (cognitive) processes play a role in creating meaning. Interplay between various interactive, parallel processing centres occurs during reading. Unlike the non-interactive views of bottom-up and top-down theories, where information moves in one direction only, interactive reading theory espouses a two-way flow of information between reader and text to create meaning. Another feature of this theory of reading is that readers access cueing systems to process simultaneously graphophonic, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic information during the two-way interaction between reader and text (Rumelhart, 1982). According to this two-way system, a reader can use higher level processes to assist lower level processes to figure out unknown words. For example, when a reader encounters difficulty decoding a word, he skips the word and reads ahead to find a contextual clue to help reveal the identity of the difficult word. Similarly, a reader can re-read what came before the difficult word to gain further contextual information.

Transactional theory of reading.

Rosenblatt's (1978) socio-cultural transactional theory contends that meaning is located in the reader's personal response to text rather than solely within the text itself. Meaning is created within the transaction between the reader and the text. When a reader transacts with a text he creates a mental entity that he can evoke, reflect upon, and change. This theory of reading relies heavily upon prior knowledge, setting, and higher level cognitive processing (Alvermann, Ruddell, & Unrau, 2013). Being time and context specific, a reader can arrive at different meanings over several readings. Dominant in Rosenblatt's theory is a reader's stance. A reader takes an efferent stance when she primarily reads to gain information to be acted upon after reading, such as reading a recipe (Rosenblatt, 1988). She takes an aesthetic stance when she reads to experience a feeling during reading, or during the "lived experience," such as in a story or poem (Alvermann, et al., 2013, p. 62). Finally, readers can take both stances since they are not mutually exclusive. Rather, the stances exist on a continuum from efferent to aesthetic (Rosenblatt, 1988). Rosenblatt's theory was partially in response to the overly analytic views of the day by both behaviourists and cognitive theorists (Alexander & Fox, 2004). For classroom teachers, this theory emphasizes the values of simply losing oneself in a book and personal response to text (Alexander & Fox, 2004).

Reading theory in effective guided reading instruction.

Elements of all the reading theories occupy a place within guided reading practice. Each one contributes essential information to what we now know about effective reading instruction. Decoding, schema, cueing systems, and the reader's individual interpretation of text are all elements to be considered when planning guided reading instruction. A reader cannot make meaning from text without communication between perceptual and higher level cognitive

processes. Not surprisingly, balanced literacy programmes espouse the two-way, interactive theory of reading. During guided reading, students practice both bottom-up and top-down based reading strategies to create meaning, from chunking words and noting orthographic patterns within words, to accessing prior knowledge and evaluating the validity of a text. Metacognition is another key element of effective reading instruction.

The Role of Metacognition in Guided Reading

Metacognition refers to being aware of, and in control of, one's thinking (Proust, 2010). During effective reading, several cognitive functions are occurring unconsciously and simultaneously to create meaning. When a reader pays attention to these cognitive functions, he is thinking metacognitively. Since emergent readers do not use all of the cognitive reading strategies available to them, or do not use them effectively, they require the support of a teacher. The support begins when the teacher thinks out loud during interactive read alouds. Before reading, the teacher examines the cover and title, makes connections to prior knowledge, and looks to see how long the text is. During reading, she pauses at important events, re-reads, makes inferences, further predictions, evaluates, and checks back with her initial preview of the text. After reading, the teacher re-evaluates, checks once again with her preview, organizes thoughts and checks them against previous beliefs. She may re-read certain parts. If this teacher is reading silently to herself at home for pleasure and not modeling for her students, she may reject what she has read and not store much of it for later retrieval and further processing (Pressley & Gaskins, 2006). In other words, the effective reader uses a system of mostly unconscious processing to create one big idea from a set of smaller ones (Van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). In addition, by learning to think metacognitively, students are able to monitor and assess their own learning, to set their own goals and become lifelong learners and readers.

Metacognitive readers work towards their goals, re-evaluate their progress, and adjust their reading to make it more effective (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 17, p. 176).

The Gradual Release of Responsibility

In 1978, Vygotsky outlined the zone of proximal development (ZPD). This zone is the state in which the most efficient learning occurs because the learner is at the boundary between being able to accomplish a task unaided and not being able to accomplish the next, more advanced task without assistance. This learner achieved as much success at the first level as she is capable of and is in a prime condition to learn the new, more advanced task. However, she will only be able to learn the more advanced task if that the learner is paired with a more knowledgeable and capable individual (Vygotsky, 1978). Further elucidating the concept, Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) coined the term *scaffolding* to refer to the process whereby a student is able to learn or realize a goal only with the direct support of a tutor. The ZPD and scaffolding form the basis of the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model. With this model, the teacher builds “instructional scaffolds” that provide the necessary amount of support that students need to learn a new task (Frey & Fisher, 2010, p. 84). As learners gain competence, the teacher removes levels of support, or scaffolding. The teacher moves from a position of total responsibility for task completion to one where each student assumes total responsibility (Duke & Pearson, 2002). During guided reading, a teacher provides several levels of scaffolding such as providing prompts to figure out challenging words or eliciting inferences and judgements (Frey & Fisher, 2010). Recalling that the goal of guided reading is to foster the development of independent readers who read for enjoyment and knowledge, one can see how the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model plays an essential role in effective guided reading instruction. Next, I describe what good readers do before, during, and after reading.

What do Good Readers Do?

Reading is one of the most complex mental processes that humans undertake. Fortunately for the teacher of reading, researchers have provided a great deal of evidence describing what successful readers do before, during and after reading. This evidence should form the basis of reading instruction as it provides practitioners with a valuable reference (see Figure 1). The following list describing what good readers do includes aspects of the interactive and transactional theories of reading as well as aspects of metacognition. Good readers depend on higher cognitive abilities to evaluate the text that they are reading, to access prior knowledge, and to perform several other cognitive tasks. Good readers also pay attention to the visual aspects of words and use graphophonic strategies to decode words. Good readers read narrative and expository texts differently. Good readers continually monitor their thinking and their abilities to make sense from what they are reading. Fortunately, all of these aspects of what good readers do are outlined in the British Columbia ELA curriculum document (2006).

- Good readers are active readers.
 - From the outset, they have clear goals in mind for their reading. They constantly evaluate whether the text, and their reading of it, is meeting their goals.
 - Good readers typically look over the text before they read, noting such things as the structure of the text and text sections that might be most relevant to their reading goals.
 - As they read, good readers frequently make predictions about what is to come.
 - They read selectively, continually making decisions about their reading - what to read carefully, what to read quickly, what not to read, what to re-read, and so forth.
 - Good readers construct, revise, and question the meanings they make as they read.
 - Good readers try to determine the meanings of unfamiliar words and concepts in the text, and they deal with inconsistencies or gaps as needed.
 - Good readers draw from, compare, and integrate their prior knowledge with material in the text.
 - They think about the authors of the text, their style, beliefs, intentions, historical milieu, and so forth.
 - Good readers monitor their understanding of the text, making adjustments in their reading as necessary.
 - Good readers evaluate the text's quality and value and react to the text in a range of ways, both intellectually and emotionally.
 - Good readers read different kinds of text differently.
 - When reading narrative, good readers attend closely to setting and characters.
 - When reading expository text, good readers frequently construct and revise of what they have read.
 - For good readers, text processing occurs not only during "reading" as we have traditionally defined it, but also during short breaks taken during reading . . . [and] even after the reading has ceased.
 - Comprehension is a consuming, continuous, and complex activity, but one that, for good readers, is both satisfying and productive.
-

Figure 1. What good readers do when they read. This figure describes the many complex processes occurring in the minds of effective readers before, during, and after reading. Adapted from *What research has to say about reading instruction* (p. 56), by S. J. Samuels & A. E. Farstrup, 2011, Newark, DE: International Reading Association. Copyright 2011 by the International Reading Association.

Traditional Guided Reading

As mentioned earlier, in its most basic form, guided reading involves a small group of students with similar reading needs, receiving differentiated support from the teacher as they read a text at their instructional level. Scaffolding allows children to safely and effectively employ newly learned skills and strategies first encountered in whole class instruction (Avalos, Plasencia, Chavez, & Rascon, 2007; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Tyner, 2004). Often, this process involves using a text that would be slightly too challenging for students to read on their own. As is explored later, reading level need not always be the sole reason for matching text to student. Most importantly, the prime focus during guided reading sessions is the construction of meaning by students (Scharer, Pinnell, Lyons, & Fountas, 2005). However, decoding and the

development of fluency are also important elements of guided reading instruction (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, 2013; Iaquinta, 2006). Two essential aspects of guided reading are that the explicit instruction of reading strategies precedes guided reading practice and that ongoing assessment drives instruction (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, 2013; Iaquinta, 2006).

A common theme discovered in the literature on guided reading is that there are as many different models and practices for guided reading as there are authors who write about guided reading. Researchers (Ford & Opitz, 2008) confirmed this variation in approaches among the teacher participants who completed a survey about how they conduct guided reading in their classrooms. Before conducting their survey, Ford and Opitz examined the literature on guided reading to define effective guided reading practices. They discovered eight common beliefs in the literature: all children can learn to read; the teacher must be proficient in the use of guided reading techniques; guided reading is the final step to independent reading; children learn to read through reading; the primary goal of guided reading is reading for meaning; guided reading teaches children metacognitive reading skills; children should enjoy the reading experience; and, all guided reading lessons must include the use of a strategy and be planned with before/during/after reading components (Ford & Opitz, 2008, pp. 310-311). Ford and Opitz surveyed 1500 American Kindergarten to Grade 2 teachers to discover their beliefs and practises surrounding guided reading. Opitz and Ford selected teachers from a list of 3,000 names: 1,500 names were from the customer database of a company selling guided reading resources; and 1,500 were from an educational data firm. Of the 53% of teachers who returned surveys, all “self-reported being knowledgeable about guided reading” (Ford & Opitz, 2008, p. 313). The survey’s 28 items were designed to gather information on five elements related to guided

reading: the purpose of guided reading; grouping techniques; texts; instruction with and away from the teacher; and assessment.

The survey data were analyzed quantitatively by converting the number of responses to percentages. The findings of the survey were surprising. Ford and Opitz concluded that teachers were confused about the purpose of guided reading, often using the sessions to introduce and demonstrate reading strategies rather than having students practice strategies. There was also significant variability in grouping techniques. Not all grouping was dynamic as many teachers (65%) reported never changing guided reading groups or changing groups less than once per month. Most teachers responded that they maintained three to five guided reading groups and met with the groups three to five times per week. Additionally, Ford and Opitz discovered that most texts (56%) were “little books,” but teachers also used trade books and basal readers during guided reading instruction (2008, p. 317). Of these texts, most were narrative in nature. Data analysis also revealed inconsistent use of instructional level texts with teachers reporting that students read at instructional level 58% of the time. For assessment, most teachers used informal methods with daily observation being the most common. Finally, teachers reported an extensive use of learning centres and seat work for students working away from the teacher.

Ford and Opitz (2008, pp. 323-324) concluded that ongoing professional development was needed to address some major weaknesses in guided reading practice. They recommended the following: helping teachers to gain a clear understanding of the goals of guided reading; integrating guided reading instruction with the rest of the literacy instruction in the classroom; demonstrating multiple ways that students can respond to text; placing more emphasis on quality instruction rather than quantity; increasing the use of instructional level texts; incorporating more informational texts; creating powerful learning opportunities away from the teacher; and using a

variety of assessment techniques to inform their instruction. Lastly, Ford and Opitz suggested that school districts distribute their own surveys to guide the development of local professional development.

The Big Controversy: What do we Teach During Guided Reading?

Although some may argue that the phonics versus whole language debate is over, one may not realize this debate has ended from looking at the literature on guided reading. Should we teach decoding and word recognition, meaning-making strategies, or a combination of the two?

For researchers who view decoding and word recognition as the focus of guided reading, the goal of these sessions is to help children become fluent and accurate readers (see Conderman & Strobel, 2006; Dean, 2010; Kouri et al., 2006; Otaiba & Rivera, 2006). These researchers who focus on decoding do not ignore comprehension and meaning-making instruction. It is simply that this instruction should not occur during guided reading. It is worth noting that these researchers largely base their findings on results derived from statistics and quantitative science, not qualitative data. Some researchers reduce reading to a set of mathematical calculations. For example, Conderman and Strobel (2006) considered that the number of words a child reads correctly reading the same passage over several days is an accurate measure of reading progress.

Most of the literature on the decoding side of the guided reading debate examines two aspects of decoding and word recognition: the analysis of, and teacher feedback to, oral reading errors (Dean, 2010; Kouri et al., 2006; Schwartz, 2005), and how best to teach guided reading through decoding and word recognition (Conderman & Strobel, 2006; Otaiba & Rivera, 2006). The former works to determine which types of teacher feedback most effectively increases students' word accuracy and fluency. For example, one study (Kouri et al., 2006) compared

meaning-based (syntactic and semantic) feedback to phonemic based feedback. Another article outlined how teachers' responses to decoding errors must be made in light of a complex cueing system based on a child's previous response history and the decoding strategies the child uses (Schwartz, 2005). Common to both of these studies is the concept, whether explicit or implied, that reading is the act of reading a text aloud, accurately and fluently. What the researchers of these studies failed to examine, however, is the effect of teacher feedback on meaning-making. How does a teacher's response effect a reader's creation of meaning? Also absent from the studies is the aspect of timing. Should corrective feedback occur immediately, at the end of the sentence, at the end of a paragraph, or at the end of the text?

Fortunately, a review of much of the literature (e.g., Avalos et al., 2007; Burkins & Croft, 2010; Fawson & Reutzel, 2000; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Guastello & Lenz, 2005; Scharer et al., 2005; Swain, 2010; Villaume & Brabham, 2001) reveals a recognition that guided reading in Primary classrooms must involve teaching children strategies to create meaning as well as decoding and word recognition skills. Decoding skills, word recognition, and meaning-making strategies are all part of learning to read for meaning, the goal of guided reading as outlined by Fountas and Pinnell when they redefined it in 1996.

Assessment

Although just as many differences as similarities characterize guided reading models in the literature and in the classroom, there are some areas of agreement amongst researchers and experts. One of these is in relation to reading assessment. Before a teacher can begin a guided reading session with his students, he must be aware of their diverse learning needs. Although the literature contains different advice for teachers on the nature of this assessment, it is unanimous in stating that it must guide a teacher's instruction. Whichever assessment tools the teachers use,

they must know how to use them properly (Clay, 2000; Conderman & Strobel, 2006; Ford & Opitz, 2008; Fountas & Pinnell, 2013). In addition, assessment must be systematic. It is insufficient to assess three times a year, at the beginning, middle, and end, which is common in many classrooms. Children progress at different rates, some make significant gains in a few weeks while others require several months. For this reason, assessment must occur systematically within the periods between the beginning, middle, and end of the school year (Fountas & Pinnell, 2013). However, not all students need to be assessed at the same frequency. Struggling readers require more frequent assessment than the most proficient readers in the class (Good, Kaminski, Simmons, Kame'enui, 2001; Fountas & Pinnell, 2013).

Two other significant aspects of assessment to consider are how teachers assess and how they use assessment data. The systematic use of a running record accompanied by a conversation about the text should be the primary tools used to assess readers (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, 2013). These tools allow the accurate measurement of the three elements of guided reading assessment: decoding, fluency, and understanding (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, 2013; Iaquinta, 2006). However, for too long, some teachers have used running records – often without engaging students in conversation – simply to assign reading levels to students with no in-depth analysis of miscues (Ford & Opitz, 2008; Fountas & Pinnell, 2013). The detailed analysis of a student's errors in running records provide information for “precision teaching” (Fountas & Pinnell, 2013, p. 276). A teacher can explicitly address each student's needs when she examines their errors as well as what her students do when they encounter difficulty and attempt to make sense of text. The running record can reveal where errors originate in a student's cueing system: Do the errors result from graphophonemic, syntactic, or semantic miscues or a combination (Clay, 2000; Fountas & Pinnell 1996; Johnson & Keier, 2010)? The

conversation following the running record reveals the strategies a reader uses, or does not use, to make sense of the text (Fountas & Pinnell, 2013; Johnson & Keier, 2010).

There are differences in the literature in relation to motives for assessment. In the light of the 'No child Left Behind' legislation (2001) in the United States and the National Reading Panel's findings (2000), some researchers responded by ensuring that accountability and quantitative measures are stressed in the assessment parts of their articles (Conderman & Strobel, 2006; Dean, 2010; Kouri, Selle, & Riley, 2006; Otaiba & Rivera, 2006). This emphasis on quantitative measures led me to question whether the assessment tools they cite are truly best for assessing students' needs, or whether they are best for getting published in an American journal. As some researchers point out, qualitative assessment is not only necessary, but accurate to assess a reader's strategy use during reading (Burkins & Croft, 2010; Iaquinta, 2006; Schwartz, 2005). There is an equal amount of disagreement surrounding texts, reading levels, and grouping techniques in the literature surrounding guided reading.

Texts, Levelling, Grouping, and Affective Factors

As I planned and organized this review, I began writing separate sections for levelling texts, grouping students, and the role affective factors play in guided reading. However, as I began to write the section on levelling, I realized that I could not do so without including the other two factors. The three elements are inexorably linked, and to write about any one in isolation, would be to adopt a reductionist and simplistic view of children and learning.

Much of the recent literature has shown that teachers spend a great deal of time and effort testing students' reading abilities, assigning reading difficulties to texts (levelling), and matching students to texts based on the test results. Educational publishing companies and teachers assign reading levels to the texts that will be read during guided reading. Readers are matched to these

levelled texts through careful assessment. Using a running record to assess a student's reading, the teacher determines the student's decoding accuracy rate at specific levels of text. According to Clay (2000), when the student's accuracy rate is between 90% and 94%, that student is reading at *instructional level*, or the ideal level of text required for growth and development. Clay stated that reading a text with an accuracy rate below 90% frustrates the reader and impedes reading development. This is the *frustrational level*. When the reader reads text above 94%, she is reading at *independent level*, or the level of text she is able to understand and enjoy without support (Clay, 2000). Some researchers believe that many teachers are spending too much time and effort outside of instructional time trying to match texts to students' reading levels (Burkins & Croft, 2010; Dzaldof & Peterson, 2005; Ford & Opitz 2008; Glasswell & Ford, 2010). At first, levelling texts may seem like a worthwhile expenditure. In fact, there is still a body of current literature that encourages strict levelling (Allington, 2002, 2006; Reutzel, Jones, Parker, Fawson, & Smith, 2008). But the end result of excessive levelling is less time spent on developing the dozens of other components that make up a balanced literacy programme, and an overtaxed reading teacher. As well, spending too much effort on levelling texts can mean less effort given to other aspects of text selection for guided reading, such as ensuring that a variety of genres is represented. It is essential that children read a variety of genres, from fairy tales to instruction manuals, to develop comprehension skills for all types of information (Duke & Pearson, 2002). As seen earlier from the Opitz and Ford study (2008), most texts used during guided reading tend to be narrative in nature. Strictly matching students to levelled texts without other considerations can also contain a hidden pitfall. Some of the basic levels of these texts have a low word count that limits a struggling reader's exposure to text. These readers need more, not less, exposure to words. They need more chances to read rather than fewer (Glasswell

& Ford, 2010). There are, however, alternatives to strict levelling that a teacher must incorporate into her guided reading sessions, especially considering that reading level is only one aspect of matching text to reader.

In their seminal work, *Guided Reading: Good First Teaching for All Children*, guided reading pioneers, Fountas and Pinnell (1996), stress that a text need only be at the *approximate* developmental reading level of a child. In fact, a teacher can use a text that is *beyond* a reader's instructional level as long as he supplies the necessary support so that the reader does not struggle (Glasswell & Ford, 2010). For example, a teacher can have his students read the parts of a challenging text (beyond instructional level) that are still easily accessible to them – parts such as those that are rich in graphical representations and then supply direct support and modelling for the difficult passages. Alternatively, he can use a less challenging text (below instructional level) if the goal is for his students to practice a particular strategy that they are struggling with. Allowing students to read above or below their instructional level has a positive effect for both readers and teacher. Readers have exposure to more texts and genres since they are no longer limited to specific book bins, and the teacher need not spend time and money searching for a specific topical text at level F. Maximizing students' exposure to a variety of genres further makes sense when one adopts a holistic view of literacy. Creating independent readers who read for enjoyment is not as simple as helping children to read at a specific difficulty level. Scharer et al., (2005) state that limiting students to reading instructional level texts and preventing them from reading texts above or below that level may result in successful reading. However, the researchers question if doing so will foster a love and passion for reading in students. Will they be able to lose themselves in a story? How engaged will they be if a text is at the right level, but is boring, or does not match their interests or other emotional needs

(Allington, 2006; Scharer, et al., 2005)? The important role of enjoyment in learning to read explains why literacy teachers cannot ignore the *affective* factors, or those social and emotional aspects of learning to read.

Meeting the affective needs of readers is necessary in every literacy programme and has a central role in how teachers form reading groups and select texts for guided reading. Educators should not ignore the fact that enjoyment engages readers and is a major motivator in learning to read (Allington, 2006; Burkins & Croft, 2010; Duke & Pearson, 2002; Fisher, 2008; Guastello & Lenz, 2005; Scharer et al., 2005). For example, a teacher can select an easier text during a guided reading session that she knows will be particularly engaging for a group of children who need to be further hooked into reading, even if it is below their instructional level. Cultural, social, and experiential factors also fit into this affective realm and must be addressed as teachers attempt to engage their students in the guided reading session (Dzaldov & Peterson, 2005). Students need to feel that they belong to a community while they participate in these sessions. They must feel supported, not only by their teacher, but by their peers (Iaquinta, 2006). It is also important to recognize the cultural *Discourses* of students in the class. Capital “D” discourse refers to Gee’s definition of *primary* and *secondary* Discourses (Gee, 1990). These Discourses arise from a combination of language and socio-cultural factors. We learn our primary Discourse at home as infants, which differs from culture to culture. We learn secondary Discourses within the social constructs outside of our family, such as the Discourses of school, of law, and of teaching. Thus, taking primary discourses into account, including stories from our students’ cultures is a highly effective way to engage these readers. For instance, Indo-Canadian students may become more engaged in reading when their teacher includes stories that match the Discourse of the stories they hear at home.

Obviously, grouping must be dynamic, and fortunately, there is universal confirmation of this aspect in the literature (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, 2013). Students remain in a particular group only as long as that grouping meets their needs. Teachers must assess regularly, and use the results of these assessments to guide their groupings. If a student demonstrates proficiency reading at her group's level or using the strategy under focus, she should move on to a group matching her needs so that she continues to develop and grow (Jaquinta, 2005). Students change, needs change, and so too, should groupings change.

What About the Rest of the Students?

As noted previously, successful guided reading cannot occur without meaningful literacy activities taking place away from the teacher. Ideally these activities will result in student success during guided reading because they reinforce the same skills and strategies (Ford & Opitz, 2002; Guastello & Lenz, 2005). It is therefore surprising and unfortunate that the much of the recent literature neglects this important aspect of guided reading. Researchers, educational scholars, and teachers are forced to look in books based on either older, but not necessarily irrelevant, research, or information that has not passed the scrutiny of peer review. Considering that a teacher may be spending as much as an hour, five times a week away from most of his class during a literacy block, this element of guided reading requires further examination. What is clear in the recent available literature, however, is that managing students and activities away from the teacher is a challenge for those who embrace guided reading as a component of their literacy programme (Dzaldof & Petersen, 2005; Fawson & Reutzel, 2000; Guastello & Lenz, 2005).

Although there are many models and programmes outlining learning activities away from the guided reading session, all require careful planning. In creating a schedule for guided

reading instruction, a teacher must have an organized, and easily implemented system for her away-from-teacher activities. The timeline for this schedule depends on the specific model, as some suggest a one week cycle (Guastello & Lenz, 2005), while others suggest a two week cycle (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Tyner, 2004). Common to all guided reading models, however, is that these activities are not just “sponge” activities to soak up children’s time. They must contain rich, learning opportunities that are integrated with the entire balanced literacy programme (Ford & Opitz, 2002; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Guastello & Lenz, 2005).

A “learning centres” model is very common. These are physical areas devoted to open-ended inquiry tasks around literacy (Ford & Opitz, 2002; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Ford and Opitz (2002) have outlined traits that are common to effective centres: they require a minimum of teacher preparation; they are engaging; they are within reach of students; they present few, if any, management difficulties; they have built in assessment and accountability; and they follow classroom routines. Some examples of centres that meet this criteria are reading/writing stations, pocket charts for word work, listening stations, and readers’ theatre. It is also important that these away-from-teacher activities incorporate all of the components that make up literacy: reading, writing, viewing, listening, speaking, and representing. An example of a model that incorporates most of these is called guided reading kidstations (Guastello & Lenz, 2005). This model has four stations that children rotate through, spending one day at each: word work, responding to literature, critical analysis and evaluation, and a final presentation in front of the class based on what students have accomplished at the kidstations.

The Teacher Factor

Perhaps the most crucial factor of all, not only in the success of the away-from-teacher learning activities and the guided reading sessions themselves, but in a teacher’s literacy

programme as a whole, is whether or not he creates a positive and supportive community of learners.

A common point in the literature that transcends international boundaries, pedagogic dogma, and educational faddism, is that teachers are the cornerstone of learning in the classroom (Allington, 2002, 2005, 2011, 2013). More so than a wealth of rich texts, expensive commercial programmes, or the latest technology, the teacher is that one individual who determines whether or not students will be successful in guided reading (Allington, 2002; Fountas & Pinnell, 2012; Iaquinta, 2006; Skidmore Perez-Parent, & Arnfeld, 2003). The findings from two surveys of guided reading, one in the United Kingdom (Fisher, 2008) and the other in the United States described earlier (Ford & Opitz, 2008), revealed that a large number of teachers, many of whom consider themselves experts on guided reading, are not practicing guided reading at all (Fisher, 2008; Ford & Opitz, 2008). Adding to the concern, researchers found that a large number of teachers struggle with all facets of guided reading: levelling and text selection; assessment; responding to errors in decoding or comprehension; and, managing students who are working away from the teacher. Why is confusion about guided reading instruction so prevalent? Why are teachers struggling with the elements of guided reading?

The simple fact is that some teachers of guided reading have not had the proper training and ongoing professional support to effectively teach guided reading. I believe that a lack of government initiative in training and educating teachers contributes to an absence of, or poor delivery of, guided reading instruction. Additionally, because of the political power of unions it is difficult to provide education and support for teachers who will not accept it even if it is for the benefit of the province's children. Without good teachers who know how to teach guided

reading effectively, finding solutions to the other concerns I have noted in this review, is unfortunately, moot.

Teacher talk.

A teacher's actions during guided reading are a key determinant of student success. During guided reading, the skilled teacher makes split second decisions of what to say based on each learner's specific needs (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). These decisions could be in relation to helping a student to select the appropriate strategy to figure out a challenging word or to construct meaning. Moreover, what teachers say and how and when they say it shapes the entire discourse, and Discourse, of the session. Teachers can continue to hold onto this power, or begin to share it with their students.

Teachers should not act as the sole holder of knowledge, but should see the guided reading session as an opportunity to create new meanings with students rather than transfer old ones (Brown, 2008; Fisher, 2008; Skidmore et al., 2003; Swain, 2010; Villaume & Brabham, 2001). The key is teachers being conscious of their use of talk, what power position they adopt in the group, and how they can hand more of this power over to our students. Although relinquishing control has been historically difficult for teachers, there are some instructional methods and strategies to help them do it. To start with, rather than conduct the discussion part of the guided reading session like a traditional whole group lesson, where students raise their hands, wait to be called upon, and respond to questions in a typical initiate-response-evaluate manner, teachers can step back, assume a participant-guide role, and provide students with more open-ended, discussion oriented ways to activate prior knowledge, solve word problems, and respond to literature during guided reading (Brown, 2008; Fisher, 2008; Villaume & Brabham, 2001). For example, rather than asking specific questions after her students perform a picture

walk before reading – questions such as, “What do you think the story will be about? Why do you think the boy was crying?” – the teacher simply asks the children if they have any questions or if they noticed anything interesting. One specific method that helps teachers give more control to their students, called transactional strategies instruction (TSI), calls for teachers to relinquish this control as soon as possible during guided reading (Brown, 2008). The teacher models when and where to apply one or more the strategies, and then hands the responsibility of selecting, coordinating, and using multiple strategies to create meaning over to the students. This instruction transpires within the reading of an authentic text and a whole-class, small-group, or one-to-one discussion. With this truly dialogic form of instruction, even Grade 1 students can conduct the discussion with only minor input from the teacher (Brown, 2008).

When a teacher listens to a student, that teacher must be able to make quick decisions regarding her response to decoding errors. As outlined in the British Columbia ELA curriculum, by understanding how readers process text using a complex cueing system involving graphophonemic, syntactic, and semantic information, teachers are able to appropriately respond to students’ errors (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006; Clay, 2000; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Johnson & Keier, 2010). When a teacher recognizes the cause of a student’s reading error, she selects from a variety of prompts to guide the student to correcting his response. These prompts address a student’s use of graphophonemic, syntactic, and semantic cues. “Does that look right?” addresses graphophonemic errors; “Does that sound right?” addresses syntactic errors; and “Does that make sense?” addresses semantic errors. Errors may also result from a combination of cueing system errors (Clay, 2000; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Johnson & Keier, 2010). It is equally important to reinforce successful decoding (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Pinnell & Fountas, 2009; Johnson & Keier, 2010).

Alternatives to Traditional Guided Reading

Upon examining the literature on guided reading, it became clear that few alternatives departed significantly from the traditional model of guided reading described, discussed, and evaluated above: Guided reading involves a small group of children sharing a common text as they read and receive instruction from their teacher. Most research was concerned with variations on this theme: whether to focus on decoding, making meaning, or a combination of the two; teacher talk during a session; types of texts; levelling texts; and teachers' knowledge of guided reading practices. But are there effective alternatives to guided reading? Are there ways we can improve upon the traditional model?

In Chapter 3, I describe my experiences attempting to implement guided reading in my classroom during 2012-2013 as well as describing a significant change in my approach that began the next September. This alternative approach to guided reading was based largely on the research and writings of Richard Allington, hence, the following review of his findings on effective reading instruction.

Allington (2002, 2012) espouses the core components of guided reading: children reading a text at a specific level as the teacher guides them through word work, self-monitoring strategies, comprehension and meaning making strategies. He knows that small group reading instruction, such as traditional guided reading, works (Allington, 2005). Although Allington does not directly outline an alternative for it, he provides enough evidence on effective reading instruction and learning that has enabled some teachers to do just that, all in the name of better serving their students.

Allington (2002) and colleagues at the National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement conducted studies of exemplary teachers in Grades 1 and 4 and found 6 specific

instructional behaviours common to all. In all of these teachers' classrooms, students demonstrated particular proficiency in reading and writing. Allington (2002) attributed their success to consideration these teachers gave to the following instructional factors: time, text, teaching, talk, tasks, and testing. Allington described how exemplary teachers ensured that students spent approximately 50% of the school day actively reading and writing. These teachers also had large selections of authentic fiction and non-fiction texts to choose from. Exemplary teachers also had students reading text at high accuracy rates – above 97%. The only exception to reading books at this accuracy rate occurred when reading for instructional purposes (Allington, 2002). Additionally, exemplary teachers provided explicit instruction of reading strategies while fostering the development of their students' metacognitive awareness. (Allington, 2002). These teachers modelled the thinking that proficient readers do before, during, and after reading. Exemplary teachers modeled decoding strategies as well and avoided phonics worksheets. Typically, students who have well developed sets of decoding strategies do well on phonics worksheets while struggling readers, those who require the most support, learn relatively little from such tasks (Allington, 2002). Additionally, exemplary teachers fostered the development of dialogic interaction in their classrooms (Allington, 2002). In these classrooms, Allington found an abundance of not only teacher/student talk, but student/student talk. Questions were open-ended and encouraged discussion, not simply responses to be verified or corrected by the teacher. As well, exemplary teachers ensured that student tasks were appropriately challenging and required more self-regulation and higher cognitive processing than tasks in classrooms with less effective teachers (Allington, 2002). Tasks in classrooms with exemplary teachers were long and complex, not simply worksheets to be completed by the end of a lesson. Students also had more choice of learning activities in these classrooms. Students

often worked on similar, but different, tasks which provided a degree of differentiation. Finally, exemplary teachers based evaluation on improvement and effort more than achievement aspects (Allington, 2002).

Allington's findings are similar to those of other researchers who examined effective reading instruction. Most reading experts agree that the following are necessary components of effective reading instruction: teaching metacognitive skills; providing explicit strategy instruction; following the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model; conducting small group instruction; providing large amounts of teacher coaching; providing authentic phonics instruction; teaching higher order thinking and reading strategies; and using whole texts rather than worksheets (Frey & Fisher, 2010; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000).

Allington (2012) redefines the accuracy level at which children should be reading *most* of the time. He advocates that, for the most part, students must read text in which they can achieve 98% percent accuracy (with an equal level of fluency and comprehension). He points out that successful adult readers tend to put down any text in which they can decode and understand only 98% of the words, maintaining that there is a danger to struggle below this level (Allington, 2002, 2011, 2013). This accuracy rate is significantly higher than the 90 to 94% instructional accuracy rate that educational leaders in early reading and literacy deem necessary for effective instruction and growth (Clay, 2000; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). It is important to note, however, that Allington states that the appropriate *instructional* accuracy rate is lower than 98%. It is equally important to note that he does not define what that appropriate instructional accuracy rate is. Additionally, the one study that Allington cites supporting a 98% accuracy rate demonstrated only a correlational relationship between this accuracy rate and improved reading achievement (Ehri, Dreyer, Flugman, & Gross, 2007).

Allington's reasoning further differs from the traditional thinking surrounding effective reading instruction around the topic of choice. Most of the time, students must be able to select their own texts to read during reading instruction and practice. He cites evidence that shows how high quality, daily side-by-side reading instruction using text that a student has selected, accelerates learning to read (Allington, 2002, 2006, 2012). Each student must not only read text at the appropriate level, but one that he or she finds interesting (Allington, 2002, 2012, 2013; Allington, et al., 2010). Once again, that is what successful adult readers do: they choose their own books to read for pleasure. In my experience as both an Elementary and Middle years teacher, I have seen just how powerful choice and relevance are in learning.

Developing readers must also read large amounts of text. Meeting three or four times a week in a traditional guided reading session is not enough. Students must receive guided reading instruction everyday. Not only that, they must achieve success reading all of the texts they read during the school day, including mathematics worksheets, spelling lists, and science textbooks (Allington, 2002, 2007).

Finally, Allington suggests that learning support be provided in-class. He states that this form of reading support is more effective than pull-out programmes for struggling readers because it results in less fragmentation of the reading programme, fosters higher levels of self-esteem for struggling readers, and results in better reading instruction due to collaboration between classroom and learning support teachers (Allington, 1993, 2006, 2007; Allington & Cunningham, 2002). However, Allington does not provide direct evidence to support that in-class learning support is superior to pull-out models, simply stating that it is becoming a recognized fact that pull-out support programmes are not effective (Allington, 1993). He does, however, cite evidence that indirectly supports in-class learning support. Borman, Wong,

Hedges, and D'Agostino (2007) discovered that struggling readers had higher achievement levels when they followed the same reading programme as the rest of the students in the class even if they received pull-out learning support (Allington, 2006). Allington also states that in-class learning support benefits the stronger readers in the classroom in addition to those who struggle (Allington, 1993, 2006, 2007; Allington & Cunningham, 2002). These students achieve higher degrees of reading success compared to students in classrooms who do not receive the additional support of the learning support teacher as part of their daily reading instruction.

What follows in Chapter 3 is not only a description of my attempt to establish an effective guided reading programme in my first year of teaching Primary aged children, but is also the product of the act of making sense of my experiences. The situations and children are representations of many events that occurred. Through narrative inquiry and writing, I processed, analysed, and evaluated these many and varied experiences that led me to a better understanding of how to teach Primary aged children to read.

Chapter 3

My First Year Teaching Guided Reading

When I first considered guided reading as a topic for my final project, I had a good idea of what it would look like. It would be an examination of current best practices in guided reading based heavily on current research and my experiences in the classroom. However, when I began my new assignment in an elementary school, I discovered that none of my coursework, nor the hours spent pouring over peer reviewed journals, could have adequately prepared me for the reality of teaching in an inner city classroom. My project began to change direction, to take the shape of something I had never envisioned. As I began jotting down and then typing my notes, I found myself not writing about Fountas and Pinnell, my schemes for levelling books and heterogeneously grouping students, or how I effectively used teacher talk during guided reading sessions. Instead, I wrote about my feelings and experiences on a very personal, rather than an academic level. Whenever I sat down at my keyboard to write, I was back in my classroom - whether I was actually at my brother's house on Christmas holidays, sitting at my dining room table on the weekend, or in the university library after a school day.

This project began to take the shape of something that was as much about the personal lives of a group of children and their teacher as much as it was about guided reading. That just made sense: learning in any Elementary, Middle, or High school classroom, whether in the confines of the city or the affluence of the suburbs, is based on the quality of the human relationships within. It was not surprising then when I discovered that I could not write about guided reading in my classroom without framing it in the very human – as in non-academic – experiences of both my students and myself. So the following is as much about the emotions,

struggles, and successes of a group of children and their teacher as it is about the pedagogy of guided reading, language and literacy.

I begin by describing my planning and preparation during the summer break and my early experiences as the school year began. Following this section will be a description of my attempts to establish guided reading instruction, the impact of my students' home lives on their learning, and the eventual pedagogical compromises I made with guided reading instruction. Finally, I come back to my focus question: How does a teacher establish an effective, Primary guided reading programme in his or her classroom?

Summer Set Up and Planning for Guided Reading

It was the summer of 2012 and I finally had my own Grade 2/3 classroom at a vibrant and enthusiastic inner city school of approximately 300 children. Casting doubts aside that would soon resurface, I felt more than ready for this new assignment, so ready that I was in my new classroom preparing at the beginning of August. After the physical setup of my room was complete, I jumped right into planning instruction for the year. When it came time to plan for guided reading, I turned to my project's literature review for direction. Having read countless articles and having completed most of the review, I felt confident about teaching this component of my balanced literacy programme. I thought that it would not be that difficult to incorporate all of this new knowledge into practical, guided reading instruction. Not only that, I had the 1996 classic on guided reading by Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell and had read through their latest journal article. No one approach has all the answers, but by incorporating this classic text with the latest discoveries in the literature, I felt ready. Although anxious and plagued with doubts in many regards, I remember feeling confident and ready for action as far as guided reading was concerned. My plan was set.

Now having the benefit of hindsight, perhaps I should have been more cautiously optimistic rather than so boisterously confident when it came to guided reading. My guided reading plans began to unravel before our very first session.

I was more than surprised to discover that there was a lack of learning resources available at my new school. This situation was a mystery because I knew that inner-city schools received extra funding over and above the standard formula in my school district. For example, there were few levelled books for individual reading instruction, and the one set present had to be shared among four teachers. When I visited my colleague's school in June, I saw that each Primary teacher had their own set (in fact, the very same set). How were they able to acquire so many of these expensive sets when they did not even receive the extra funding we did? I now had a problem because my plan called for a reading station where each of my students would choose a levelled book to read and respond to. Then I discovered that there was no classroom television/DVD player in my room. The second floor of six teachers had to share one that was on a trolley. To further complicate any attempts to view a piece of digital media, there was no way to connect the Internet to the television for streaming video. I had used streaming educational videos for years as part of everything from Language Arts to Physical Education instruction at Middle school. This lack of connected technology would certainly impact my implementation of the Ministry of Education's plan for 21st century learning (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2011; Premier's Technology Council, 2010), as would the fact that my classroom's five student computers lacked even the rudimentary basics of software that could work as listening stations or other forms of language and literacy learning centres. I had neglected to factor this lack of resources into my planning. Anyone who would listen was now fortunate enough to hear my rather scathing indictment of educational funding in British

Columbia. And although it may have seemed to any listener that I was unhappy in my new situation, I loved it.

Soon, my room began to take shape and look like a Primary classroom. During August, like all new teachers, I spent a little too much money on flashy items for my room. I had two pocket charts, one of which spanned almost an entire whiteboard. My word wall was set up and ready to lend assistance to my burgeoning readers and writers. I had numbers 1 to 120 in a perfectly straight line, spanning three walls above the whiteboards. Hundred's Day would be amazing in my Primary classroom. My Classroom Helpers display consisted of eight miniature, laminated paper houses each denoting a classroom job and containing a removable paper owl, which I laminated, too, of course. Each one of these owls would have a student's name on it. My kids would love these – I did! My independent reading library was large and replete with many levels of interesting books thanks to several generous, retired Primary teachers. I even had enough books to create a roughly levelled home reading collection. I spent hours enjoying the process of going through each book to estimate the level based on a reference set of professionally levelled books. I would later have to *re-level* many of them as experience would shine a more discerning and accurate light on each one's difficulty.

At this point, I was ready to find some centre based activities for students who would not be reading with me at my little round table. But first, I had to decide on an effective approach to guided reading. I had a general idea of what guided reading would look like in my classroom, including some ideas for my centres. As mentioned earlier, I had read and skimmed several books as well as countless articles in peer reviewed journals about guided reading and had discovered a vast array of approaches.

The approach for guided reading that I would eventually choose had to have its roots in the literature, be established through practice, and be engaging for my future students. Its associated centre activities had to be easily implemented and simple in execution for me. If the centres were too difficult to manage, my entire guided reading programme would fail because I would be too busy and quite exhausted. These centres had to involve rich learning experiences for my students and provide opportunities to reinforce and practice language and literacy skills learned in class. The activities had to be open-ended as opposed to the traditional comprehension questions and other close-ended, lower order cognitive tasks (Herr, 2007). These activities also had to provide a degree of student accountability; my students would have to realize that the activities were important for their learning, not just tasks to complete and get out of the way (Perlmutter & Burrell, 2001). Finally, the activities needed to come from, and fit into, my whole balanced literacy approach (Ford & Opitz, 2002; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, 2012). They would cover the spectrum of language and literacy elements: reading, writing, viewing, listening, speaking, and representing. With all of these aspects in mind, I decided to follow an approach outlined by Guastello and Lenz (2005) called guided reading kidstations. Something about their approach simply excited me. I really, really wanted to use their kidstations in my classroom and, of course, the more a teacher is excited about an approach, a text, or an activity, the more likely his students would feel the same way.

Guastello and Lenz (2005) conducted their research at an inner-city school in South Bronx, New York. If Guastello and Lenz could make it work there, I could make it work in my Victoria, British Columbia inner-city classroom. The more that I read about it, the more it seemed like their research was specifically carried out for me, a new inner-city classroom Primary teacher! I appreciated how the researchers first listened to the teachers at their school,

and recognized the unique challenges of teaching guided reading in an inner-city school. I appreciated how they recognized that it was challenging to teach guided reading in any busy classroom, let alone one with the issues inherent in these ones. Throughout their article, Guastello and Lenz seemed to reiterate that part of their goal was to simplify, yet not detract from, the quality of guided reading and its related centre tasks. In addition, their approach focused on making children accountable for their learning while not overburdening the teacher. This approach made sense and resonated with me. When a lesson is simple to manage and the students are engaged, a teacher has more time to offer support to those who need it.

The kidstations.

The guided reading kidstations approach is based on a one week cycle (Guastello & Lenz, 2005). In addition to the guided reading group, student groups spend one day per week at three stations engaging in word work; viewing, listening, and responding to text in written form; and critically analyzing and evaluating text. The fifth day of the cycle involves a culminating student presentation in front of the class based on these activities. However, only one group presents on the fifth day while the rest of the students listen. In this way, each group presents approximately once a month. At the time, I believed that this approach was pedagogically sound in terms of a balanced literacy programme. Only near the end of completing my Master's degree project did I discover the approach to be fundamentally flawed.

During this August, "studentless" set-up phase of my guided reading programme, due to a lack of planning Primary instruction, I prepared singular activities that differed only in difficulty, not task. For use at the first kidstation, I immediately thought of using the word study programme, *Words Their Way* (Bear, Invernizzi, Johnstone, Templeton, 2010). Like guided reading, students are grouped by level in this programme. Although all students perform the

same activities, they use words at their level of decoding. I had not yet used this pattern recognition and sorting based programme, but a friend had given me an introduction in June and I had become instantly keen to try it out. I went to the local teacher supply store and purchased the three necessary books. Delving into them near the end of August revealed that *Words Their Way* was not going to work as a kidstation activity because too much teacher time was required, including a component where I would have to sit down with each group of students to work with the week's words. This requirement would defeat the necessary independent nature of kidstation activities. I went back to the Guastello and Lenz (2005) article and their list of Kidstation 1 activities. Some were familiar to me, since I had used them with my Middle school students. However, most of the ones listed for Primary grades were familiar by name only, having only read about them in teacher guides, articles, and graduate courses. To teach these activities, I would have to find detailed how-to descriptions. I added this to my growing "To Do" list.

At the second kidstation, students would read, listen to, and view selections of literature. The activities would require students to use lower to mid level cognitive skills such as sequencing and inferring. This station would also be where they would hone their writing skills: students would practice a variety of writing strategies that would help them express their thinking by writing. Once again, I knew of several activities from my Middle school days, but only a few Primary ones that I had used years ago in my practicum. Guastello and Lenz (2005) listed several for Grades 1 to 3, but these also were familiar to me in name only. My To Do list was growing.

At the third kidstation, my students would elaborate on selections of literature through analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. These activities are at the top of Bloom's Taxonomy of higher order thinking skills (Herr, 2007). Students would make connections: text to self; text to

world; and text to text. They would question and then they would take what they had learned and put it all together to make intelligent judgements about characters' morals, about right and wrong. The children would synthesize new ideas. My Grade 2 and 3 students would even try their hand at persuading their readers to change their views.

The final station was not an actual station but a presentation by each student in one of the groups (one group per week). As Guastello and Lenz (2005) described in their article, Kidstation 4 is where student accountability factors in. Each student would have an opportunity to show the class what he had accomplished or created at his Kidstation.

Thus my guided reading plan was set.

September Adjustments

My plan was to spend the first five to seven weeks setting the stage for the kidstations. During this period I planned to teach my students how to complete a variety of language and literacy activities for them to perform at the kidstations. It was around this time that my lack of knowledge and Primary experience made me feel like a rookie teacher again. To combat this negative feeling, I turned to one of my favourite books for teachers, *Voices of Experience: Practical Ideas to Start Up the Year, Grades K-3* (Cameron, Gregory, Politano, Paquin, 2004). Written by a group of master teachers from British Columbia, I was reminded of, and re-inspired by, the following words: "Relationship . . . first in our classrooms" (p. 3). Whether teaching 13 year olds or 6 year olds, I have always been highly effective at developing strong and healthy relationships with my students. Although I soon found that developing these kinds of relationships in an inner city classroom was more complicated than I had imagined, once the relationships were strong and healthy, I allowed myself to feel good again about my teaching. At least I was doing something right.

The first three weeks at my new school were an adjustment period, which I expected but I was still surprised by some of what I encountered. It was not just that teaching Grades 2 and 3 was so different from what I was used to, but so much of the culture was different in elementary school. Even dealing with colleagues required a completely different mindset: I quickly learned that it was best to abandon the casual swagger and extroverted manner of the Middle school teacher. I was also surprised that it took me as long as it did to adjust to teaching younger children. My expectation was that I would be as comfortable and competent as I was with the younger children during my final practicum and work as a teacher-on-call. But I was not. At one point, I clearly remember feeling disheartened and somewhat ashamed of myself. I was sitting in my chair at circle time, surrounded by 19 (at the time) highly energetic and needy children. We were about to learn our first song. I had looked so forward to this moment, guitar in hand, singing with my students. But things were not going well. Some children were trying to sing along, but others were either not participating or beginning to act out. I began to question whether teaching in a Primary classroom was right for me.

I might as well have been struck by lightning. I was mortified that I allowed myself to experience this even for a split second. I immediately, but silently, chastised myself. It would never happen again.

Fortunately, for whatever reason, by the end of the third week, these feelings left me. I still do not know how or why because things were not getting any easier in my classroom. But by this point, I now felt energized and ready to begin some quality instruction. However, with one set of doubts gone, one set about to be revealed.

An Early Challenge: Assessment

Problems with the PM Benchmark assessment tool.

It was the end of September, which meant it was time to assess my students' reading abilities in order to learn where they needed support, as well as help me form my guided reading groups. Initially, I decided to group the students solely by reading ability. Once I knew them better, I could start making groups based on interests, need for engagement, and other factors. I used Nelson's PM Benchmark assessment tool (Nelley & Smith, 2004) which was the common assessment tool used in my school to assess students in September, February, and June. But I had a problem because I found it provided an incomplete picture of a reader's ability. Quite simply, whether Nelson Publishing intended it or not, the decoding component dominates the assessment. As is described below, the comprehension element is allocated a decidedly minor role as it is incomplete and too time consuming to perform in the reality of a hectic classroom. What my colleagues and I intended to be an assessment of reading became mostly an assessment of decoding ability.

To start the one-to-one PM assessment, the teacher reads a sentence describing what the text is about – there is no activation of prior knowledge. The student then reads a 100 hundred word piece of text while the teacher keeps track via a running record. Subsequently, the teacher reads four questions, one by one, and records the student's response. Most of these questions are designed to elicit retelling, while one or two focus on inferencing. Upon completion, the teacher analyzes both the oral reading errors as well as the student's responses to the questions in order to determine instructional level of text.

Unfortunately, this assessment takes more time than most classroom teachers can afford to spend in a busy classroom. I needed a minimum of 25 minutes to complete one. Being new

to using this tool, and thinking that I was just really slow, I asked my colleagues if it took them just as much time. It did. Considering that I had 19 children, I required eight hours of classroom time for the assessment. Fortunately, the learning support teacher assessed six students for me and I managed to assess the rest of my students over several days during art, lunch, math, independent reading time, and any other moment I could find. Feeling overburdened in September, I am reluctant to admit that I focused mostly on the decoding component, and neglected to use the comprehension section. I found out that I was not the only one doing this however, which was mildly reassuring. In those frantic first days of September, being new to both school and grade levels, I simply did not have the time.

I had another concern with the PM Benchmark assessment tool. The comprehension section neglects higher order thinking processes such as questioning and evaluating, although there is one question devoted to inferring. Simply retelling a story and answering some basic, lower order comprehension questions does not provide a complete and accurate picture of reading ability. It can tell teachers whether or not a student understands what he is reading, but only at a basic to mid level of comprehension. If teachers want a complete assessment of reading ability, they have to ask questions that elicit responses using critical, higher order thinking skills. After all, we want to know how much meaning a student is able to create from a piece of text.

A final clue led me to conclude that the PM Benchmark assessment tool was more of a decoding assessment rather than a complete reading one. The authors of the package dedicated very little space and effort in the teacher guide for showing how to assess comprehension. Indeed, approximately one page is dedicated to describing how to assess comprehension, and 10 pages focus on assessing decoding. So what did I do? For the most part, I created my first term guided reading groups based on students' decoding abilities. Therefore, I made decoding groups,

not reading groups. It was unfortunate that this decoding score weighed heavily in determining my students' reading instruction for the first part of that term and played a large role in determining whom I sent to the learning support teacher for further testing. My "teacher sense," something akin to the comic superhero Spider Man's "Spidey sense," which set off internal alarms when he knew something was wrong or something disastrous was about to happen, was tingling that something was not right. However, I ignored it.

I was not the only teacher who believed that the PM Benchmark assessment tool was not a strong reading assessment. One study determined that the PM Benchmark tool was especially poor in screening for struggling readers (Atkinson-Cornthwaite, 2012). The author of that study recommended that it not be used at all for screening purposes. Nonetheless, I used the PM Benchmark tool. I clearly remember thinking as I returned the large box of assessment materials to one of our learning support teachers that I should mention its shortcomings. Maybe we should look into a new form of assessment, maybe even design our own? However, I did not say anything. In my defence, I had entered a new, somewhat foreign environment. Not only was it a new school for me, but I was teaching a significantly lower grade. I also felt that all eyes were on me: the Middle school teacher who came down to elementary. The fact that I was a male teaching Primary, a rather rare sight in an elementary school, only heightened my perceived scrutiny. For all my new colleagues knew of me at the time, they may have seen me as someone who simply found Middle school too challenging and was taking a wild stab at teaching younger children. So the last thing I wanted to do was question the established procedures and assessment tools. Anyway, I was free to use any assessment tools I wanted in my classroom as long as I supplied a PM Benchmark reading score to our learning support staff.

I also felt that a one time reading assessment did not provide an adequate assessment of a student's ability, especially if this assessment was to determine the reading instruction she would receive and be the documentation to determine whether or not I would send her for more specialized testing from the learning support teacher. At first, I was critical of this fact and was quite ready to add it to my list of silent criticisms of our assessment model. However, after I began my quasi-guided reading sessions several weeks later, I realized that I knew who was struggling to read and who needed to move on to more challenging texts. As well, there simply was not enough time to sit down and perform a second PM Benchmark assessment with each child because it was especially hectic around my classroom at this time.

When it was time for our second school wide assessment in February using the PM Benchmark assessment tool, I approached the process somewhat differently. I made sure to activate the readers' background knowledge, asking what they knew about the topic of the text and briefly discussing it. I also adjusted the criteria for determining the reading level of a student. The PM Benchmark assessment tool instructs the teacher to assign levels based on a 95% accuracy rate. However, as I described in Chapter 2, a variety of opinions exist in the literature about what rate determines instructional level. I decided on splitting the difference and chose 93% to start with. I also attached more importance to a student's comprehension level during this winter assessment. Although I used the comprehension component and had my students retell what they had read, I also asked the students some open-ended and higher order thinking questions of my own that required them to make inferences, judgements, and evaluate information. If I found that a student decoded at level 22, but did not demonstrate that he understood what he read, I assigned them to level 20, two levels below. This process may have been a lot of improvisation on my part, but I believed that teachers had a bit too much of an

obsession matching an accuracy rate to an instructional reading level and neglecting how much comprehension factors in to determining instructional reading level. At the time, I felt that as long as a student's accuracy rate was approximately 95%, then he was within instructional level. Thus, when matching a student with a text level, it did not matter if he read a particular text at a 93% or a 96% accuracy rate. I gave him texts that corresponded to the PM Benchmark level for reading at a 95% accuracy rate. What was the overall goal, after all? I wanted my students to be completely literate adults: decoding and understanding with the ease of automaticity; being discerning and critical listeners and viewers; and most of all, possessing the tools they needed to read for the pure joy of the experience. I believed that their reading development would not be impeded if I assigned a text that was a level or two off of the *true*, just right text. Since then, I have changed my view several times on the accuracy rate used to determine instructional reading level, which I discuss later on in more detail. At least I was able to assess a student in about 15 minutes, quite an improvement in all regards over my first round of assessments.

The PM Benchmark assessment results.

There was a large variation in my students' PM Benchmark decoding scores. My students' scores indicated that some of them were reading at a Kindergarten level while some students were reading beyond a Grade 4 level. My principal had warned me about this situation. Being an inner-city school, many of my students came from homes, often with a single caregiver, that did not contain any books and were devoid of rich opportunities to talk, to listen, and be read to. Some families struggled to feed themselves healthy and balanced meals. The vast majority of the children came from loving homes, but some, unfortunately, did not. Some of my students were neglected and unfortunately, a few had witnessed abuse or were abused themselves. However, others children had two active parents who shared the responsibility to take them out

for walks, explore nature centres and libraries, go camping, and watch IMAX movies. They had grandparents who took pleasure in reading to them. These families had rich conversations, told stories, and took an interest in pointing out natural learning opportunities as they arose.

I was seeing first hand the results of these two contrasting home environments. Of course, there were as many home environments that fit in between these two extremes as there were students in my class. Coming from a middle socio-economic neighbourhood school to one which was at the lower end of this spectrum, I expected that my students would have challenges. I was just a bit unprepared for how much of an impact their home lives would have on their abilities to learn. In the following sections, I contextualize the challenges that many contemporary teachers face in their classrooms through my own experiences. I further represent a pastiche or combination of characteristic teaching and learning events through the personas of ‘David’ and ‘Chase’ (student names pseudonyms).

Challenging Lives, Learning Challenges.

As mentioned, I had a class of extremes. There were students who read at the extreme lower end of the reading spectrum, and students at the opposite end. Although the majority of my Grade 2/3 class read one to two levels below I had to meet the learning needs of those who did not know all the letters of the alphabet as well as those who read better than some of my Grade 6 students from the year before. I was not prepared for this huge variation. Most of my students were in some kind of learning support for reading and writing by the beginning of October. At one point, I had fewer than 10 students to teach as most had gone for learning support just after the first bell of the day. I found it curiously entertaining when a staff member or parent would enter my room during the first morning period and ask, “Where’s your class?”

The plight of two youngsters in my class illustrates some of the challenges my students and I faced. For these two students, something had failed them. David was in Grade 2, was outgoing, possessed an effervescent personality, loved to talk to people, both children and adults and he was kind and often thought of others – you could not miss him. Obviously, he was a child with more than just a few life skills that would serve him well in school and beyond. He also loved books. David adored looking through anything with illustrations, especially books I had just read aloud. One of the highlights of the week for him was our visit to the library. He could not wait for the opportunity to select his own books. David also brought me books he had acquired, not just to read to him or to the class, but to give me for my own reading pleasure. He often handed one to me with the instruction, “You can put this in the class library when you’ve finished reading it.” This acquiring of books actually became a bit of a problem, however. Whenever a teacher put a box of old books in the hallway with a sign saying “Free” on it, he would return from recess or lunch with an armful of tattered paperbacks and hardcover editions, some for him, some for me, and some for his classmates. One complication with David’s collecting was that he was simply too small to carry several kilograms of books home in his backpack. We solved this problem by having him take a few books home each day. The other problem, for me anyway, was that the books had been expunged from other teachers’ collections for good reason. They were often severely outdated or so threadbare that they fell apart just by looking at them. However, I never had the heart to reject David’s offerings.

David also demonstrated the skills of an advanced reader in many respects. In response to stories he heard, he created complex drawings with minute details which he would take great pride in explaining. During any discussion of a text we had read, I could count on David to raise his hand and provide some of the most intelligent and well developed responses in the class:

Equal with even my most capable readers, his responses demonstrated the higher order thinking processes. They showed that he could make text-to-text as well as text-to-self and text-to-world connections. He made inferences that few, if any, of my other students could make. David often synthesized what he heard to formulate completely new ideas and answer his own questions of, “What if . . .” David was a bright young student.

But David could not read. He could recognize only half of the letters of the alphabet. Of those, he could associate only a handful with their sounds. The fact that he was now in Grade 2 and had no special learning designation compounded his difficulties. I was dismayed that he had gone through two years of our public school system and had not even been tested by a psychometrician. So here was a wonderful youngster who could not wait to be immersed in the world of text waiting for the adults around him to do something about his difficulties.

Guided reading would be a challenge for both of us. How could I deliver guided reading instruction to a student who needed the kind of instruction found in early Kindergarten? In my graduate work in language and literacy, I focused on Middle years and Primary aged learners. And within the Primary age group, I focused on Grades 1 to 3 since I knew that I never wanted to teach below Kindergarten. To complicate matters for both of us, I was fully occupied with learning the culture of a new school and planning for a year of instruction at a level I had last planned for 12 years ago. I was still trying to discover where all of the teaching supplies were kept, to not get lost on the way to the staff washroom, and to learn the names of my colleagues. Needless to say, I was at a loss for how to help David.

Then there was Chase. Chase was in Grade 3 and had a learning designation associated with reading and writing. I assumed this fact alone would mean that he would receive the necessary support and I would not encounter the same dilemma that I was experiencing with

David. Well, perhaps not to the same degree, but there were some challenges to overcome. Chase could recognize the letters of the alphabet, but did not know all of their associated sounds. And unlike David, Chase detested almost any act of reading or writing. He loved to hear stories and interesting expository texts, and was always keen to respond orally to them, but that is where all literacy enjoyment ended for him. In fact, Chase reacted quite antagonistically to having to read or write, enough that the principal would periodically have to come to my class to physically remove him since his disruptive behaviour made it impossible for the rest of the class to learn.

To make matters even more of a challenge, I incorrectly assumed that when learning support began near the end of September or early October, the brunt of Chase's and David's reading needs would be met in the Resource Room. This structure is what I was used to in Middle school, but this support model would not be the case here. In Middle school, the children with a Learning Disabled designation received learning support for most of the morning. From approximately 8:45 until 11:10 am, they would be in the Resource Room. So I was surprised to discover that Chase received only 40 minutes of support each morning to start with. For David, whose needs far exceeded Chase's, it was even worse. He received no extra learning support at all for the first part of the school year. Because he was new to our school, our learning support teachers were largely unaware of the severity of his needs. This situation was compounded by the fact that he did not possess any kind of learning designation and was not even on the psychometrician's list for testing! Indeed, David had slipped through the cracks. For me, the challenge was now finding a way to include both of them in guided reading.

Many students' lives are equally as challenging as David's and Chase's, some even more so. Though indirectly, the challenging home lives played a significant role in derailing my first

attempts at guided reading since the students' backgrounds resulted in huge social and emotional needs that needed to be met before successful learning could occur. For some, there were no adults at home modelling positive ways to get along, to problem solve, and to model empathy and forgiveness. Children arriving hungry and sleep deprived was a daily occurrence and I did not know my students well enough at this point in the year to recognize the symptoms.

Eventually, I could recognize the lethargy and moodiness caused by staying up until one am playing video games or watching television. I knew all too well the signs of low blood sugar caused by not eating breakfast. Even though we have a breakfast programme at my school, many students arrived too late to get a meal.

At both of my previous schools, there were children who had just as challenging lives, but there would be a handful in the entire school population, not several in one classroom. I did not realize the burden that so many of my students brought with them to school in September. The summer vacation meant two months away from the safe and structured world of school. When they returned to school after this break, many were not ready to learn what I had planned for them. Below I describe how these needs affected every aspect of my students' lives with a typical example.

Each morning, I went to gather my flock from their line-up outside Door C at 8:40, right when the bell rang. What was becoming routine was that before I had even made it out of the school and through Door C, there would be two or three students fighting to be the first one to reach me. This competition was not due to some form of popularity. Usually, at least one child was in tears or in a rage over something that had happened on the playground or in the line up. By the time I was fully outside, the group of two or three would include at least another three or four witnesses to the incident. Then I would notice that there was no line up at all. Instead, there

was a gaggle of youngsters in various grouped formations, none of which resembled the perfectly straight line we had practiced forming countless times. “Line-up order, boys and girls!” Each student had a number corresponding to where they would be in all of our lineups. Simple enough, or so I thought. I would wait. One or two, usually those nearest to me, looked around trying to figure out where the person who was supposed to be in front of them. Another of my youngsters would start to organize those around her because she remembered where they all belonged. But for the most part, my group of 19 souls either looked at me blankly or carried on with their conversations. I had to leave my spot at the front of the line to quickly move from child to child asking their numbers and then directing them where to go. For many, it took another two or so weeks just to memorize their numbers. All of these events happened in front of an audience of parents and colleagues.

I consider myself to be highly effective when it comes to classroom management. I know kids. My style of management is not heavy handed or based on any form of healthy fear. I earn my students’ respect, form relationships, create an environment where we all respect each other and have fun learning. It works with all ages. The above described scene did, indeed, catch me off guard, and it would not be the first and only time that year. So that evening, I did what any self reflective teacher would do: I relived every moment of the experience, looking for clues that could point me to the solution. Why did this line-up mayhem happen? What could I do to prevent it from happening again?

I came to two conclusions. One, it had been a long time since I had taught this age group and I had not gone over appropriate line-up expectations adequately. Two, I had never taught children with so many social and emotional needs and I had failed to address them properly – I go into this oversight in more depth later, since this inexperience is the reason for my failure to

launch guided reading on time. This entire episode at the door illustrated something I would have to factor into every aspect of my teaching throughout the year: Many of these children had extreme needs outside of their academic ones. Certainly, they had those, too, but their most pressing learning needs were in the social and emotional realms. If I could not help them grow in these areas, then I would definitely not be able to effectively address their academic ones. When time finally came to conduct our first kidstation activities, and later on our first guiding reading sessions, these needs made themselves evident once again.

There Goes the Plan: Pre Guided Reading Activities Stall

Teaching and failure: The kidstations.

When I had settled in at my new school, and assessed all of my students using the PM Benchmark assessment tool, I began teaching the preliminary lessons required for guided reading and kidstations. This is the point at which we hit a roadblock.

My plan for guided reading called for a five to seven week preparatory period where I would support my students in learning the activities they were to perform at the kidstations. But once again, just like what had happened in my class line-ups, I was caught off guard. September was gone, we were well into October, yet not even close to having learned enough of the station activities to move on to guided reading. It was obvious that my children were not ready to work independently and without support at a guided reading kidstation. Years ago, during my undergraduate studies, my assessment and evaluation professor put a chart in front of us undergraduates showing what months elementary students were most productive in. September and October were two of the best. In my previous years as a Middle school teacher I found this to be true. In my Grade 2 and 3 classroom, I attributed our slower start to the younger age of my students. Soon enough, I was sure, they would demonstrate a keenness rivalling my Middle

school students. But that was not to happen.

The following scenario illustrates what I encountered when my students began learning the kidstation tasks in September. At first, they seemed to be doing just fine. I would read a book aloud and then model how to complete the kidstation activity from start to finish using a document viewer and projector. Then I would read another story and complete the same task, but this time we would complete it together. This pattern of gradual removal of support, where each subsequent lesson had less and less scaffolding, lasted until the majority seemed ready to tackle the activity on their own. So the next day during Language Arts period, I read another text and instructed my students to complete the activity independently. I thought that I had set the stage perfectly and all of my students were working on a literacy task that would become one of the kidstations.

I stood back and watched my students work. A few continued to smile and engage in classroom talk that reflected they were on task and challenged enough to find the activity interesting and worthwhile. The majority, however, stalled. Half a dozen hands went up. Their faces conveyed “I’m lost. Help me.” Some forgot the established routine of waiting patiently at their desks with hand raised. Rather, these students began to surround me while I was on one knee helping another student at his desk. Soon, I had a gaggle of four or five children with those now familiar, sad faces surrounding me. To add to the rising tension, as often happens when children are frustrated or disengaged, and believing that I would not notice, two of them, in that hunkered down position a child assumes when trying to use her desk to cover what her hands are doing, began the process of cutting up erasers to save for the lunch hour eraser bits war. Others were chatting away at some obviously non-school related topic, and another was colouring and beginning some form of craft activity. An argument broke out between two girls over the issue

of who was best friends, while another argument began between two boys who were comparing whose dad had the “hottest” car.

It was obvious that I was not going to be able to give the required support to the dozen or so who needed it, help a group who were working on modified tasks, and check on another small group who were happily completing the activity and were ready for the next one. I redirected those who were off task with a combination of the “teacher stare” and body proximity. I also praised those who were on task quite vocally. All of these efforts gave me a brief opportunity to respond to the raised hands and listen to the issues the children were having with what seemed like such a straightforward endeavour a mere five minutes ago. The description of these issues, and the many nodding heads of those in the vicinity who had heard the statements of, “I don’t get it,” or, “I don’t know what to write in the next box” told me that I needed to back up a bit.

Deep breath, Paul. It’s okay. Another deep breath, then regroup. Five claps from me. Five claps echoed back. “Boys and girls, please put your pencils down and touch your shoulders.” Wait. Teacher stare at the three of them who have not put their pencils down. Good. “Alright, a lot of you have questions about . . .” I had questions too. We were well into October with no guided reading in sight.

This lack of progress towards guided reading was not how I expected my guided reading programme to start. A colleague at another school described modeling literacy centre activities with her students and it was quite different from what I was experiencing. During an early summer visit to her school, she told me how impressed she was when she first taught her centre activities to her students. They simply followed her modelling and proceeded to complete the centre activities as instructed. Of course, as with all students, they needed support at first, but soon after their first efforts, they were ready to complete the tasks on their own. She actually had

trouble keeping up with their demands for more and more challenging centre activities. She warned me not to expect the same rapid progress at an inner city school. Not being a complete novice, I had already taken this fact into consideration. Sure enough, I was not seeing similar behaviours in my students. I knew that they would need more support and have greater learning needs, but I did not expect the latter to be so severe.

Reflecting on teaching the kidstation activities.

How and why did teaching the kidstations fail? It was going so well the day before. Although I had removed some of the scaffolding and support, my students had demonstrated that they were ready to move on. I was certain that I had scaffolded their learning perfectly, gradually removing support bit by bit with each lesson. During the previous lesson, the last before they were to complete the task independently, my students were engaged, writing and sketching happily. These behaviours usually indicated that they were ready to complete a task independently.

Upon reflection, I realized that I had, in my haste to become a stellar Primary teacher, rushed into the “meat and potatoes” of language and literacy learning. My students simply were not ready to learn as independently as I thought they were or should be. Some still needed to readjust to school life after the turmoil that was their summer holidays. They had to become accustomed to following a routine again. They needed to learn strategies to get along with each other, to learn about empathy, and to feel safe and cared for in their classroom and school

Relationship must come first. I thought that spending a week and a half at the start of September focusing on relationship building was enough. My students had played games to learn about each other. They found out what their classmates liked to eat and what they liked to do in their spare time. They played cooperative games that stressed teamwork. But these efforts

were not enough. It was not enough to help them get along in the line-up outside, and it was not enough to help them focus on academic tasks and work independently without their teacher nearby to referee.

There were signs that hinted at my students' need for more time to build relationships. Major arguments and disagreements continually arose during class. At recess it was even worse. As I previously described, if there was one thing I could count on, it would be that tears and heated voices would greet me at the end of each recess when I went to collect the children at the line-up. I put out the spot-fires but did not recognize the latter as something that needed to be addressed holistically with all of my students. I wanted to teach! I had waited long enough to teach Primary, and I was going to get right into the thick of teaching and learning as soon as possible!

I regrouped. After the failure of kidstations, I quickly made changes in seating, developed an improved set of class rules with my students, and had them model positive behaviour. I set specific boundaries for certain students. We spent more time playing some of those relationship building games and related activities. Although, these efforts would have been more than enough of an effort at my previous school to get my students back on track, it was not enough here. Again, I failed to spend enough time where it was really necessary. Consequently, things would improve, but for no more than a day or two. It seemed nothing would quell the daily squabbles and continuous stream of problems. The students in Division 5 still struggled to learn. A few students could not concentrate because they were so upset or preoccupied by something that had happened earlier in the day. The frequency of problems increased, I became overwhelmed, and I again began to deal with issues as they arose, piecemeal.

Although it was almost November, my students did not need kidstations and guided reading right. They needed to know that I cared about them. They needed to be shown how to positively interact with each other while being supported through the process by someone whom they trusted. This needed time, lots of time, and I had not given them enough. By switching the focus too soon to academics, I set us up for failure. Once again, relationship must come first.

I slowed down. I realized that we needed to take more time for everything, from learning how to work together and how to get along, to learning the kidstation activities. We played more together: My students and I went outside to play every day. I found that doing this together was a superb medium by which to show my students, and for them to learn, how to avoid conflicts in the first place and resolve them when they did. Back in the classroom, we role played additional ways to resolve conflicts. We learned about empathy and the consequences of our actions. I read them a powerful book with empathy lessons for children called *Have You Filled A Bucket Today* by Carol McCloud (2006). Students had to spend their days searching for empathetic acts whether outside at recess on the playground, walking home, or in the middle of a mathematics lesson.

For the most part, my students responded positively. I especially made an effort at lunch and other non-instructional times to connect with each one of them and let them know and feel that I was interested in them and their lives. This part was as simple as talking to them about their lunches and going outside to spend time with them while they played at recess. It was important for them to see that I wanted to be with them even when I did not have to.

Approaching November, this slower, easier pace dominated our renewed attempts to complete the kidstation activities independently as well. The students who required extra scaffolding and support, which were the majority, received it. I broke tasks into smaller

components and spent more time on any given lesson. With our renewed, more positive outlook, and having learned how to give constructive feedback, I gave my students opportunities to move around the room and look at their classmates' work after we had once again completed a kidstation activity. We then discussed what they had noticed that made the kidstation products most effective and I wrote these observations on the board. Eventually, we had a set of clear criteria for the kidstation activities that the children could follow, criteria that they helped to create. All of these improvements helped the students to play, learn, and work more effectively and I felt much better about my students and my teaching. However, it did not completely eliminate the distractions that prevented them from being able to work independently in the first place. We were closer than ever, though, and even if I could find only 15 minutes per reading group without being severely interrupted, it was time for our first guided reading session.

Of course, during all of this trial and error, we were still an active literacy filled classroom, albeit a highly structured one. Guided reading is only one component of a balanced literacy programme and even though I had failed to implement it so far, my students were still engaged in the other components of my literacy programme. There were read alouds and shared readings. The students wrote responses to literature they read, heard, and viewed. We had discussions every day across all subject areas.

Struggling with the First Attempt at Guided Reading and Kidstations

It was now November. My students were sitting on the carpet looking up at me. "How many of you have ever read with your teacher in small groups?" Hands went up. "Did you all have the same book when you read?" More positive affirmations. "Let's take a look at our Division 5 Expectations again." I pulled out a large piece of chart paper and clipped it to the whiteboard. It displayed our renewed set of classroom behaviour expectations. "All of these

things need to happen if we want to learn at our best.” I then turned the discussion to guided reading. I had some carefully selected volunteers demonstrate guided reading with me while two more completed a kidstation activity at their desks. With the demonstration over, we all debriefed and I asked, “What do we need so that we can learn from guided reading and kidstation time? What did it sound like during guided reading and kidstation time? What would happen if the kids at their desks were talking loudly? What should you feel like?” As we discussed what they observed, I recorded their responses. We eventually came up with a set of guided reading specific rules.

This attempt was our first at guided reading. My students and I had practised and practised the kidstation activities. They were as ready and prepared as they could be, so with reservations, I decided to conduct our first guided reading session. Those who were unable to read and write had modified versions of the activities and were equally prepared. There were also activities ready for early finishers, although I doubted there would be any. The stage was set.

“Remember, some of us are going to be reading at the back table, so we can’t be disturbed except for two things. What are they?”

“Bathroom or emergency!” Yes, we had defined every possible permutation of what constituted an emergency.

I chose the easiest group to start with: four students who were reading just at grade level. The night before, I had gone over the teacher’s guide and my notes from my literature review on guided reading. I wrote down the key things to remember on a small index card for use during the session: Activate background knowledge; review new or complex vocabulary; focus on a strategy: visualize during reading (this reading strategy was not something new, but a strategy

my students already practised in class); children whisper-read or read silently while I listen to one read; and complete post reading discussion.

The session started as planned. However, after about three minutes, one of the students who was working on a kidstation activity approached our guided reading table.

“Bathroom or emergency?” I asked.

“No, but . . .”

“Then back you go. You know what to do if you get stuck.”

He returned to his desk. But that was just the beginning. The floodgates had been opened. David approached me with the most forlorn look I had ever seen on a human face. I do not exaggerate when I describe a frown that seemed too extreme to be anything but a miracle of movie makeup, maybe even one of those rubberized masks that appear so real. I knew that I was moments away from David completely breaking down. And his breakdowns were disturbing, consisting of normal crying at first, then transforming into a wailing that grew in decibels until all around him would grind to a halt. This outburst was his reaction to the stress caused by his fear of writing. I had to talk him down.

So with David now at my guided reading table, the four readers waiting patiently, but starting to fidget, other students began to cautiously approach with their questions. To the latter group, the fact that I was there talking to David meant that I must be available to answer their questions as well. A queue formed behind David. I could not stop talking to him if I was to avoid having to call the principal once again to take him out of the classroom to calm down. The queue grew. My frustration and disappointment grew. At last David’s stress diminished. I reminded him that he could copy one of my helper sentences from the board to start with. I even wrote the first few words for him.

With the disturbance at the back table, two other students took the opportunity to argue over who was a faster runner. Other students chatted away or cut eraser bits; one worked on a card to give me telling me that I was the best teacher ever. I did not feel like it. And she was supposed to be working on a kidstation activity, not making a card for me, no matter how kind the gesture was.

But it was over. My first guided reading session was over. What should have been no more than perhaps 15 to 20 minutes, had taken double that time.

Subsequent attempts ended in similar fashion. Many of my students were unable to exercise enough self-control to remain focused at the kidstations. They were a social group who could not resist the temptation to chat with nearby peers. Some of the talk was positive, but unfortunately, enough of it was negative and became a major disruption, often requiring me to get up from my guided reading group to intervene in a dispute. Not only that, in spite of all of our practice and energy spent learning how to complete the kidstation activities independently, some students gave up without nearby teacher support.

That is the day that I abandoned traditional guided reading.

Guided Reading Kidstations: A Bad Fit

At first, I solely blamed my inexperience at these grade levels and at teaching inner city children for the total failure of my guided reading lessons. With the benefit of a bit more experience and the time to look back and reflect, I now believe that the make-up of my student population as well as my inexperience created an environment that made it impossible at that early part of the school year to perform traditional guided reading. Our third and most intensive effort spent on relationship building and learning conflict resolution skills that I described above definitely improved the learning environment and my students' abilities to learn. However, no

amount of effort would have been enough to make the students independent and mature enough to have traditional guided reading sessions in our classroom.

I also realize now that the guided reading kidstations approach is flawed and I am surprised that my teacher sense did not ring some alarm bells, or at least tingle a bit. First and foremost, students read with the teacher only once a week in a guided reading session. Reading only once a week with teacher guidance, no matter how lengthy the session, is insufficient. Children need to read every day to someone to improve (Allington, 2002, 2007). Guided reading kidstations are also heavily based on aging American IRA and NCTE standards from 1996, not necessarily a bad thing, but being a teacher in British Columbia, I have an obligation to follow my employer's latest guidelines and adhere, more or less, to our language and literacy standards found in the British Columbia Ministry of Education's English Language Arts Integrated Resource Package (2006). As well, the political language and literacy landscape in Canada is quite different from that found in the United States. Finally, the fact that children from only one group present their kidstation accomplishments each week is inadequate to ensure accountability.

Kidstations Out, Gear In

Back in August, when I was planned my students' guided reading programme among all of the other learning activities for the school year, I was also working on my final graduate course. My supervisor designed this independent study course to fill the last gap I felt was left in my quest to become a language and literacy expert: how to effectively teach writing. I was to pick an established, proven approach to writing and learn how to include it in my instruction. By chance I had happened upon a reading and writing series by educator Adrienne Gear (2006, 2011). As I met my new vice-principal, she told me about a series of books on reading and writing by Gear and explained how our school had adopted them as a source for language and

literacy instruction. At great expense, the school had even bought the trade books on which Gear bases each lesson. She handed me a copy of *Writing Power* (2011) and apologized that she had run out of copies of *Reading Power* (2006). I was instantly impressed and soon went to the local teacher supply store and bought *Reading Power*. Gear's approach was not based on educational faddism nor was it even anything new. What Gear had done was to merge proven strategies from leading writing experts to create a unified approach.

Gear's approach to writing integrates Donald Graves' description of the writing process and Vicki Spandel's *6 Traits*, Ralph Fletcher's *Writer's Workshop*, and Ruth Culham's *6 + 1 Traits* as well as David Pearson's research on reading comprehension and metacognition (Gear, 2011). But the underlying foundation of her writing approach is metacognition, or the act of "having the awareness of the thinking of others" (Gear, 2011, p. 29). In other words, all good writers write with their reader in mind. *Writing Power's* detailed lessons, complete with lists of corresponding and authentic anchor books, assessment and evaluation rubrics, and blackline masters, focus on five cores: connecting, visualizing, inferring, questioning, and transforming (synthesizing). Gear (2011) also includes lessons on the tools effective writers employ: adding details and incorporating similes, anchor lines, authorial voice, senses, powerful vocabulary, first impressions, writing in third person, personification, and dialogue.

Gear's *Reading Power* (2006) fits hand in glove with her *Writing Power* (2011). Although I first encountered *Writing Power* as described above, upon opening *Reading Power* for the first time, I was happy to discover that it was more than just similar to her writing series. It focuses on metacognition and helping students to think while they read. Like *Writing Power*, it also integrates proven research and is based on five core areas: connecting, visualizing, inferring, questioning, and transforming (synthesizing). Gear's reading and writing lessons also

include elements of representing, speaking, and listening.

During those fall months, as my students and I struggled with guided reading and kidstations, I began teaching Gear's lessons as part of my language and literacy programme and many of her activities became kidstation activities. When I gave up on guided reading and the kidstations, Gear's lessons and activities remained. I appreciated the straight forward design of the activities and that they reiterated what I had learned about language and literacy from my graduate studies. Unfortunately, even though I knew that Gear's approach to reading and writing had a more than solid base in the literature, there was a voice in my head that kept telling me that real teachers, good teachers, do not take their lessons from guide books and follow them like mindless automatons. Real teachers, good teachers, take a bit from here, a bit from there, and create their own lessons. Perhaps some of this thinking originated from my undergraduate days in the 1990s where textbooks and teacher guide books were to be avoided at all costs, let alone actually followed in the classroom. No, real teachers, good teachers, did not follow lessons out of a book. Another voice, however, competed for my educational essence. This voice told me that, as a teacher of language and literacy, I should remember the bottom line: If something helps children to become effective readers and writers, use it. That did sound familiar. The two voices competed for weeks, but the competition was eventually won by the latter view when I saw it actually meeting that bottom line. Not only were Gear's reading and writing lessons helping my students to become better readers and writers, my students and I were enjoying it. The teacher guilt was gone.

As our attempts at kidstations and guided reading failed in November, I started teaching more and more of Gear's lessons. Our first reading and writing focus was on making connections. In the same way that I had begun teaching the kidstation activities, I followed a

model of gradually releasing responsibility for learning to my students. But something was different this time. I am not trying to be intentionally dramatic here, but I could feel it. At the time, I believed it was because Gear's lessons built upon each other and were intimately connected. These lessons had a direction and purpose with a common goal at the end whereas the kidstation activities I had selected did not. I had simply picked activities from various sources that sounded like an appropriate task. Each one was a lone element with no connections before or after it.

Looking back, I now realize that Gear's books and units are not as pedagogically sound as I originally found them to be. One weakness in the series is the fragmented approach to learning strategies. Gear's units focus exclusively on one of her five core reading strategies at a time, something I believed previously to be a strength. A class of students may, for example, spend several weeks focusing on visualization alone. Although this singular focus may be simple to implement and structured in a way that students find familiar and safe, children need to learn to use more than one strategy during reading. I have discovered that teaching one strategy at a time often results in students ignoring others as they seek opportunities to use the one strategy. In addition, Gear's designed her lessons to be followed one after the other. As Fountas and Pinnell (2013) caution, prescriptive, lock-step reading programmes tend to neglect individual differences and can inhibit the differentiation of instruction. Consider a group of students who are working on developing visualization strategies according to Gear's lessons. One of the students already effectively uses this strategy, but is forced to complete the visualization lessons nonetheless. The fact that the student neglects asking questions and making inferences during reading – where she needs the most instruction and supported practice – is overlooked. She will have to wait to receive support using those two strategies until the teacher begins Gear's unit on

questioning and inferring.

My Substitute for Guided Reading

It was now mid December and finally, something was working. Although it was not traditional guided reading, and it was far from perfect, my students were receiving guided instruction while they read.

A typical lesson began with a quick review of the reading strategy we had been learning. Each student then received a levelled text from the PM series that I had selected and began to read at their desks. I called one student at a time to read with me at my table at the back of the room. I listened, helped them to use strategies to figure out unknown words, and asked questions that would require them to use the focus strategy to construct meaning. Although I could not read with each child every day, I did manage to do so every second day. Having only 21 students by this time of the year helped in this regard. After finishing their book, and waiting for me to read with them, my students worked on one of Gear's connecting, visualizing, questioning, inferring, or synthesizing response activities.

As I have mentioned, it was a far from perfect approach to guided reading. My students had little to no choice over what they read and I was unable to read with each one every day. However, reading with individual students was working. My classroom of Grade 2/3 students was more or less focused on a language and literacy task while I read with a student at the back of the room. Success at last.

Realizations, Dr. Allington, and Guided Reading Today

The lesson format described above became my guided reading programme for the rest of the year. I did not feel good about it at the time because it did not look like the traditional guided

reading that I had envisioned. Nor was it the guided reading kidstations model that I had been so excited about. I felt like a bit of a failure.

However, having had the time to learn more about effective reading instruction and having had more experience teaching reading to Primary aged children, I am actually relieved about the failure of the guided reading kidstations approach of Guastello and Lenz (2005) failed. In my haste to implement this approach, I had ignored the fact that my students would only receive guided reading instruction once per week. Even though I had read countless articles in the literature stating that children need anywhere from three to five guided reading sessions per week, I failed to make frequency of instruction one of the criteria for selecting a guided reading approach.

The discovery of Allington's research made late in the writing of this Master's degree project changed my guided reading instruction forever. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Richard Allington has spent a good part of his career as a researcher examining what effective language and literacy teachers do in the classroom. I believe that we can use Allington's findings about effective reading instruction to change guided reading completely.

In 2012, some colleagues began visiting a Learning Assistance teacher at another school who had abandoned traditional guided reading sessions in favour of side-by-side, guided reading instruction. Gone are small groups of children reading a common text. Instead, a teacher conducts high quality, daily, side-by-side guided reading instruction, mostly using instructional level texts in which her students can read with an appropriately high rate of accuracy. It is important to note that researchers and reading experts use different accuracy rates to define instructional level. As mentioned in Chapter 2, although Allington states that an accuracy rate of 98% is appropriate for reading most of the time, he supports a lower rate for an instructional

reading rate, although he does not say what the lower rate is (Allington, 2002). Clay (2000) states that an accuracy level of 90% to 94% is appropriate for instruction. Although originally a supporter of using Allington's 98% accuracy rate as a benchmark for most of my students reading, I now realize that this rate is high even for reading independently. Consider that two reading errors in a 100 word passage involving the articles "a" and "the" would qualify a text as too difficult. Today in my classroom, I use 94% as the mark for instructional level text. At this rate, the text presents multiple opportunities for the reader to practice reading strategies, both decoding and meaning making, and is easy enough that he does not struggle.

In the side-by-side version of guided reading, students select their own texts, with teacher guidance. When students select their own texts, they feel that they have some control of their learning. Hopefully, they realize that they share some of the responsibility for their learning as well. Choice also addresses the affective aspects of reading, such as enjoyment and interest. Allington states that allowing students to select their own books is a central feature of effective reading instruction (Allington, 2002, 2006).

During side-by-side, guided reading instruction, a teacher uses a conversational tone to discuss the text with the student: she asks questions, elicits inferences, connections, and visualizations from the student. She helps her student to figure out unknown words by using graphophonemic, syntactic, or semantic based prompts. The teacher guides the student to use strategies such as skipping the word and reading on or breaking it into chunks. The teacher notes the student's ability to self-monitor and self-correct (i.e. metacognitive awareness). Student and teacher perform word work in the context of the text that they are sharing. All of these actions together take approximately two to three minutes, depending on whether the learning support teacher is present in the room to assist with other students.

If accompanied by in-class support from the learning support teacher, side-by-side guided reading is especially powerful for struggling readers who require his additional, specialized tutelage. Allington cites evidence showing how struggling readers benefit from instruction that follows the general classroom reading instruction (Allington, 1993, 2006, 2007; Allington & Cunningham, 2002). These struggling readers learn to read more effectively than those who attend a pull out, learning support session each day that has no connection with the classroom instruction. Allington also believes that in-class learning support benefits the regular education students in the classroom (Allington, 1993, 2006, 2007; Allington & Cunningham, 2002). Finally, although Allington does not cite any evidence to support the claim, I believe that the in-class learning support model has the additional positive effect on a struggling reader's sense of belonging and self-esteem (Allington, 1993). The student who struggles no longer must leave the classroom in the middle of the morning to receive her specialized support.

Unfortunately, as effective I believe this alternative form of guided reading to be, I have not found any studies that examine its effectiveness. Perhaps its absence is due to how straightforward and simple it is. Nonetheless, I am concerned that no matter how many teachers have seen positive results, seen struggling readers become successful, and have classrooms full of independent readers who read for enjoyment, without support in the literature, side-by-side guided reading will lack the academic weight I know it deserves. Students deserve to reap its benefits.

With a few simple changes to my guided reading instruction this year, (2013-2014), I have now seen my children progress as I never would have imagined. They are not only progressing rapidly, increasing in both accuracy rate and comprehension level, but my students absolutely love to read. Every day one of our learning support teachers comes into my

classroom from 11:10 to 11:50 to help me read side-by-side with students. She has become an integral part of our classroom and has helped to make reading enjoyable for all my students. In addition to the aforementioned benefit for struggling readers who no longer must leave the classroom for support, there are other benefits. The learning support teacher also reads with the rest of my students. This structure ensures that all of my children receive one-on-one guided reading each day – and my students love every minute of it. They ask when reading time starts. They read spontaneously to each other. They smile and laugh, sometimes just to themselves.

A visitor walking into my classroom today around 11:10 would see two teachers sitting side-by-side, reading with students. The learning support teacher and I go to students' desks or to wherever they have selected to read in the classroom. Listening in, a visitor would hear us using a conversational tone to talk to students about their text. With an accuracy and comprehension strategy sheet by their sides, the students practice using strategies that they have learned to figure out unknown words and to construct meaning. They ask questions, make inferences and connections, and they visualize. We even help them to use what they have read to synthesize new ideas. During this side-by-side instruction, in addition to guiding and monitoring strategy use, we also take a whiteboard and dry erase marker with us to do word work in the context of words the students are actively reading in their text. On average, each student receives about three to four minutes of this side-by-side instruction per day.

It is obvious that I am extremely enthusiastic about guided reading in my classroom today. The joy that reading brings when it is made accessible is priceless. The benefits to this alternative model of guided reading are almost too good to be true. There is one last benefit that I will mention, and it is a key one. When a teacher's life is made easier by reducing his workload, he is able to give more to his students – not only more instruction, but better

instruction. He also has more energy to spend on developing strong relationships. Rather than feeling drained and mildly impatient as the lunch bell rings, I feel invigorated. I am smiling! I have just spent 40 minutes of quality reading time with my students. I do not rush off to the staff room to get my “adult time.” I talk to my students, individually, to find out what they have for lunch, or ask them how their play date went yesterday, or if their puppy is feeling better.

Success at last.

In the following chapter, I discuss some of the implications for teachers that my experiences with guided reading have revealed. I also reflect upon my journey as teacher and graduate student.

Chapter 4

Recommendations and Implications for Teachers

As teachers, we are in the unique position to change lives. By teaching students to read, they gain power to choose the lives that they will lead as adults. Reading can help people to overcome the limits that are not innate, limits such as the socio-economic class of their parents and whether or not they are read to as toddlers. Simply, we help to maximize the chances that our students will lead successful and happy lives by providing them with the best possible reading instruction. As I described in the previous chapter, I believe that there is a way to improve upon traditional guided reading instruction by incorporating many of Richard Allington's findings. I contend that this model of side-by-side guided reading has the additional benefit of making our lives as teachers a bit easier by making guided reading more manageable. The challenge of finding a book with multiple copies that is interesting to every child in a group of readers who also all happen to be reading at the same level disappears.

The following is a brief description of how to implement side-by-side guided reading in a Primary classroom. I have consolidated much of the information from Chapters 2 and 3 in the manner of a 'How To' guide. In Chapter 2, I reviewed effective reading instruction, what good readers do, and how guided reading incorporates many of the elements present in both. Note that this guide is not a comprehensive manual explaining the essential elements of guided reading, although it does include some additional information about those essential elements. Rather, this guide is for teachers who already conduct guided reading but would like to implement side-by-side guided reading in their classrooms.

Before Beginning Side-By-Side Guided Reading

First of all, assess each student's reading using a running record in conjunction with authentic selections of levelled texts (Fountas & Pinnell, 2013). After reading, have a conversation with the reader to determine her understanding of the text (Clay, 2000; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, 2013). It is important to ask lower level questions as well as open-ended ones that involve higher cognitive processes, such as inferring, synthesizing, and evaluating (Allington, 2002; Allington, 2007; Fountas & Pinnell, 2013; Gear, 2006; Johnson & Keier, 2010). Keeping in mind that effective teaching recognizes the two-way interaction between text and reader (e.g., Rumelhart, 1982), involving both perceptual and cognitive processes, the running record combined with a post-reading conversation provides the basis for effective reading instruction. Avoid simply obtaining an accuracy rate from the assessment to ascertain the appropriate level for instructional texts. Fountas and Pinnell (2013) stress the importance of examining errors to determine the significance and cause behind each one. Look to see if there is a pattern to the errors. What part, or parts, of the cueing systems are involved in the error (Clay, 2000; Fountas & Pinnell 2013; Johnson & Keier, 2010)? Does the error involve the graphophonemic, syntactic, or semantic cueing system? Does it involve more than one cueing system?

Since strategy instruction is identical in both traditional and side-by-side guided reading, teach reading strategies as you would normally. Effective strategy instruction follows the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model (Allington, 2002; Frey & Fisher, 2010; Wood, Bruner, Ross, 1976). Model reading strategies to the whole class and steadily remove support as your students demonstrate increased competency during side-by-side guided reading. Keep in mind that side-by-side guided reading is not for teaching new reading strategies. Side-by-side guided reading provides opportunities for students to practice reading strategies that they have already

learned (Ford & Opitz, 2008). In addition, teaching reading strategies includes not only phonics-based strategies for decoding, but comprehension strategies as well (Avalos et al., 2007; Allington, 2002; Burkins & Croft, 2010; Fawson & Reutzel, 2000; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, 2013; Guastello & Lenz, 2005; Pressley & Gaskins, 2006; Scharer et al., 2005; Swain, 2010; Villaume & Brabham, 2001). Breaking a word into chunks (i.e. structural analysis) and trying different vowel sounds to figure out unknown words are examples of two decoding strategies. Formulating questions during reading and making connections to self/world/texts are two examples of skills to be taught as reading strategies. As is described in the Language Arts curriculum document (British Columbia, 2006), teaching readers to think metacognitively about their reading is another essential component of strategy instruction (Gear, 2006; Johnson & Keier, 2010; Pressley & Gaskins, 2006; Van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). Explicitly model and teach students to think metacognitively while they read through interactive read alouds and related activities. Eventually, list all of the strategies on a piece of paper for students to refer to when they have difficulty identifying a word and to remind them of comprehension strategies to use: list word identification strategies on one side of the paper and comprehension strategies on the other.

I recommend buying a class set of durable pocket folders to hold the three books that the students must have during guided reading. The folders can also contain the strategy sheet as well as any post-reading response sheets. I have class helpers hand out and collect these folders for each lesson. The reading books are too expensive to either become lost or destroyed in a child's desk.

Let Us Begin

My first advice is to begin side-by-side guided reading with a positive attitude. Why do adults choose to read for leisure? They choose to do so because they enjoy it. Reading is enjoyable and learning to read should be as well. With that mindset, a teacher can then move on to consider reading levels and texts.

Consider the level of texts that students read. Experts such as Allington (2002, 2005), Fountas and Pinnell (1996), and Johnson and Keier (2010) stress that children must feel successful in order to want to learn how to read (Allington, 2012; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). As I mentioned in Chapter 2, Allington (2002, 2011, 2012, 2013) believes that an extremely high rate of reading accuracy is necessary for the efficient development of reading skills. As conveyed previously, I believed this information at first, but after reading the study which Allington bases this 98% accuracy rate on (see Ehri et al., 2007), as well as reading more by Clay (2000) and Fountas and Pinnell (1996, 2013), I recommend not exceeding 94% as the instructional accuracy rate. It is important to build your library. Students must have access to a series of professionally levelled texts and varied genres (Duke, Pearson, 2002; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, 2013). This diversity of books ensures that students can select from texts at the correct instructional level and practice making meaning with various types of text. I always supplement these books with a set of trade books that I have carefully levelled to the best of my ability. I recommend keeping this set separate from the professionally levelled set, and bringing it out every second day or so. I explain my reason for this below.

As stated in Chapters 2 and 3, it is important to give students the power of choice. Children must be able to choose books that are interesting and relevant to them. Allington (2002, 2006, 2012) maintains that choice is an essential part of effective reading instruction

because it increases engagement and fosters a sense that the reader is in control of his learning. It is even acceptable for students to choose books that are, what would be considered, too easy if this contributes to their enjoyment of reading (Scharer et al., 2005).

I suggest co-creating a set of side-by-side specific set of behaviour expectations. What should the rest of the students be doing when you are reading with another student? When and how is it appropriate to interrupt the teacher while she is reading side-by-side with another student? I have students model both inappropriate and appropriate behaviours as part of this process since children usually respond positively, and pay attention, to watching their peers. Include guidelines for selecting books in this set of expectations. For example, my students must have three levelled texts in their reading folders at all times which prevents them from constantly getting up to exchange books. Every second day, my students can take a book from my set of levelled trade books. I make sure that these are books that my students are currently interested in. Right now, that means including LEGO and *SpongeBob Square Pants* books, among others. If you allow buddy reading during some side-by-side guided reading sessions, brainstorm and include demonstrations of appropriate and inappropriate buddy reading behaviours

Before beginning side-by-side reading, invite the learning support teacher into the classroom. Invite him or her to provide support during your guided reading period. Evidence supports that a less fragmented reading programme results in higher achievement for struggling readers (Allington, 1993, 2006, 2007; Ehri et al., 2005). As I discussed earlier, Allington (1993) contends that that having the learning support teacher in the room also benefits the rest of the students as well. The latter have opportunities to read with him and the classroom teacher benefits from collaborating with an expert.

Start reading side-by-side with the students. If a teacher is conducting the side-by-side guided reading without the learning support teacher, she must be quick in all aspects of her guidance, meaning that she spends about two minutes with each student on average. But two minutes is enough time! Have the child read aloud and monitor for self-correcting and strategy use (Clay, 2000; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, 2013; Johnson & Keier, 2010). Talk to the student in the same way as if conducting a traditional guided reading session. I recommend going beyond simple retellings, although those can be a good place to start. Pose open-ended questions that provide opportunities for the reader to use higher level, meaning making strategies (Allington, 2002; Allington, 2007; Avalos et al.; Fountas & Pinnell, 2013; Gear, 2006; Johnson & Keier, 2010), elicit connections and inferences, have the children combine what they know with what they have just read to synthesize something new, and ask students to think aloud as they read to reinforce metacognitive thinking, an essential part of effective reading (Pressley & Gaskins, 2006). The student's talk should reflect that he is paying attention to his thinking. Note the strategies he uses and does not use to guide your instruction.

As stated previously, I recommend word work in context (Allington, 2002). Authentic texts and reading for “real reasons” increases students’ motivation to read (Duke & Pearson, 2002, p. 212). I carry a whiteboard, a dry erase marker, and a dry erase pen. When a student struggles with a word, I use this word for phonics instruction. What could be more ideal? The instruction perfectly matches the need, and the children see the value of word work! However, this should not be a substitute for a comprehensive word study programme, such as *Words Their Way*.

Remember to emphasize the joy of reading. My students buddy read every Friday and they adore it. Yes, it becomes noisy, but not in any way that interferes with the students’

reading. Allowing some students to read in the hallway lowers the noise level and makes the event special for students.

I also caution teachers to ensure they spend enough time teaching several research-based reading strategies and supporting students as they practice the strategies in whole and small group settings before students practice them during side-by-side guided reading. Further, readers need to be able to select from a variety of strategies as they read in order to problem-solve and achieve success. If a student has only learned to break unknown words into chunks, she may be at a loss and become frustrated when that one strategy does not help her to figure out new words in her book.

From my experience, I did not find it difficult to implement the above changes and transform reading for my students. Without exaggeration, I can say that my children love to read. While they read, they smile, and they excitedly and spontaneously nudge their neighbours to show them a great part in the book they are reading. As well, my students' reading levels in both decoding and comprehension have skyrocketed. I am having more fun being their teacher, too. But be prepared for such things as the following: Instead of fielding the innumerable, "When's lunch?" questions that begin around 10:50, I now have to answer "When's reading folder time?"

Suggestions for Research

As stated previously, alternatives to the traditional model of guided reading are not well represented in the literature. As I searched through databases looking for literature on guided reading, I found articles on only the traditional model. There is a definite need for research on other forms of guided reading for at least two reasons. First, traditional guided reading can be time consuming and cumbersome to plan and implement. Second, traditional guided reading

misses one of the essential keys of all learning: the power of choice and hence relevance. As adults, we seldom choose to learn something that means nothing to us or our lives. We should not expect learning to be any different with children. They need to use the strategies they are learning in the context of a book they have selected and are reading and enjoying. Word work, for example, makes much more sense and is more relevant to a student when it helps him to figure out a word that has been inhibiting his understanding of a key development in his story.

I would like to see studies documenting the effectiveness of side-by-side guided reading. I believe that it is not only easier for teachers to manage than traditional guided reading, but is also more effective. However, as much as I have seen large improvements in my readers by conducting side-by-side guided reading, there is no evidence in the literature to support its effectiveness. If studies reveal that side-by-side guided reading is more effective than the traditional model, it would be helpful to know by how much and in what ways. For teachers who have well established and effective traditional guided reading programmes underway in their classrooms, they may choose to continue with their current practices if research demonstrates that side-by-side guided reading is only slightly more effective than the traditional model.

My Master's of Education Experience

I have reached the end of my journey as an education graduate student. Fortunately, I can say that I enjoyed the entire experience. But did it make me a better language and literacy teacher? Unequivocally, yes. My teaching of reading, writing, representing, listening, and viewing have all improved significantly since starting my graduate studies. I no longer have the feeling that I described earlier of simply providing strategies at my students hoping that some would take root and make them better users of language.

When I began this journey, I wanted to become a language and literacy expert. I now know that such a desire was very ambitious. As I came closer and closer to beginning my final Master's project, I had narrowed my focus to becoming either a reading or writing expert. That, too, was a rather daunting goal to achieve. By the time I began working on the project, I had further narrowed my topic to becoming an expert at guided reading in the Primary classroom. So, do I now feel that I can call myself an expert teacher of guided reading? Have I reached mastery? Not quite. But, I feel that I am getting there. I feel confident enough to say that I am a very effective teacher of guided reading. I have plenty to offer colleagues in guidance, direction, and advice. But before I can call myself an expert, I need more time and experience engaging in guided reading with my students. I have the tools and I know how to use them; I just need to polish and hone them further. I need to practice teaching the before, during, and after reading strategies that my students will use to construct meaning while they read; to practice performing word work side-by-side; and to practice talking to my students about their reading in ways that help them use their strategies.

Before a graduate student in language and literacy begins her final project or thesis, she is given the opportunity to examine all of the core strands of a balanced Language Arts programme: reading, writing, representing, listening, speaking, and viewing. As described above, this examination helps her to narrow her focus down to a topic she wants to learn even more about, and perhaps even achieve mastery. But this process of going from broad to specific accomplishes more than just helping her find a project or thesis topic. Through this process she also learns how to improve her teaching in all of those core strands. Consequently, I am now more than simply a better reading teacher. I am also a better teacher of all the other strands. Unlike before I began my graduate studies, I now feel totally comfortable teaching writing.

Actually, I am more than comfortable. I am excited about it. The same is true of helping children represent their ideas in forms that complement reading and writing. Oracy used to be an area of my Language Arts programme that I neglected. I do not like to admit this fact, but I used to question why the Department of Education put so much effort into publishing such a detailed listening and speaking component of the curriculum. After taking a career changing course in oracy, I now realize that it is negligent to have a Language Arts programme without explicit and in-depth lessons on speaking and listening. People construct meaning through speaking and listening. Speaking and listening became the cornerstone of my language and literacy instruction at Middle school. My students then, and now, always talk about their reading. They talk before, during, and after they have written something. If we watch an animated cartoon about the significance of the raven to the coastal Aboriginal peoples of British Columbia, my students talk afterwards to help make sense of what they have seen.

It is interesting to note how attitudes change with time and experience. At the beginning of my graduate studies, I had strong opinions about what the content of my studies should be in terms of practical versus theoretical knowledge. I remember thinking, “Give me strategies that I can use in my classroom. No pie in the sky, please.” In other words, please do not give me too much theory behind the strategies: a little bit is necessary, but no more than a little bit. What happened, however, was that I realized without knowing enough of the underlying theory behind the strategies, or the ‘why,’ I would have a difficult time learning how to use the strategies effectively. The theory was the framework necessary to support my learning the strategies. Without knowing why a strategy worked, I would be doing nothing more than memorizing it and hoping that I did not forget a step when the time came to teach it. In addition, I began to question specific models and approaches within language and literacy instruction. Knowing

some of the theory of how children learn to read, for example, gave me the necessary tools to consider these further and find out if they were approaches I wanted to use in my classroom. Fortunately, I received equal helpings of both theory and practical knowledge.

During my coursework, which I enjoyed immensely, I bemoaned the fact that there was not a coursework only option for a Master's degree. I was learning a tremendous amount about language and literacy since every one of my courses, but one, was superb (even that one was enjoyable, however). I felt that I could learn just as much, if not more, about reading instruction from an additional couple of courses as I could from completing a project. I now know this to be untrue. The learning I did during the months of searching the literature, examining it, and then synthesizing all of that knowledge into my project, could not have been accomplished simply through coursework. Courses are constrained by time. Three months goes by faster than seems possible. The other time factor is the instructor's capability to fit all the necessary evaluation into his demanding schedule. He not only has to evaluate the work of several students, but must do so in the allotted amount of time. Although there is a time constraint on a Master's project as well, it is not as limiting. This allows a supervisor to spend more time guiding her student through the process. It allows her student to ask more questions and receive more guidance.

I am very grateful for the guidance and patience of my supervisor. I found taking a full course load during one summer extremely challenging. I literally had no time for anything but my coursework, eating, and sleeping. I did not even have time to watch the news each night. As difficult as that was, I still look back positively on that month of work and study. And as difficult as a full summer course load was, it was not as challenging as I found writing my final project. Strangely, I had no trouble organizing my ideas and coming up with an organized plan. I knew what I wanted to say and how I wanted to say it. The real challenge was fitting in the

time to work on the project and the time to plan for my classroom. I wrote, edited, and rewrote time and time again, never happy with my project's prose. I am still not sure if I am happy with it today. As well, my classroom did not run as smoothly as it usually had. I simply did not have the time to dedicate 100% of my energies to my classroom and teaching, and that bothered me. The result was that I ended up neither enjoying writing my project, nor the five months of teaching while I wrote it.

Would I change anything about my graduate experience? No, I would not. As I mentioned earlier, I enjoyed most of it. I am a significantly better teacher than I was before beginning my studies. I also have more confidence in my instruction. If there is any advice I could give to someone contemplating whether or not to expend the energy and money to earn a Master's degree in language and literacy, it would be, to steal a phrase from the Nike athletic company, "Just do it" (Peters, 2009).

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