

Powerful Small Group Instruction: A Look at Alternative Lesson Structures

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A familiar way to begin:

We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children to read. We already have reams of research, hundreds of successful programs, and thousands of effective schools to show us the way. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far.

McEwan, 1998



We have a situation . . .

- Specific weaknesses in student reading outcomes have been detected;
- Observations of classroom practices have demonstrated a need for alternative lesson structures, particularly for use in small group, differentiated instruction.



Specific weaknesses include:

- More than half of first grade students in Reading First schools are not demonstrating adequate knowledge and understanding of the alphabetic principle;
- Almost half still cannot meet these February benchmarks at the beginning of second grade;
- Students are “losing ground” relative to grade level expectations in word-level reading skills between the beginning of first grade and the beginning of third grade.



Classroom observations suggest a need for alternative lesson structures:

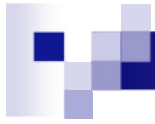
- Alternative lesson structures offer **different instructional** practices and activities designed for use with students in a small group setting, under the direct supervision of the teacher.
- Teachers in Reading First schools need to increase their knowledge of and proficiency with at least two types of lesson structures: **Guided Reading and Skills-Focused Lessons.**



The good news is:

“Quality is never an accident; it is always the result of high intention, sincere effort, intelligent direction, and skillful execution; ***it represents the wise choice of many alternatives.***”

Willa A. Foster



Therefore, today's goals include:

- Describing and reviewing two alternative lesson structures that may be used during the elementary reading block: Guided Reading and Skills-Focused Lessons;
- Clarifying when, and for whom, each lesson structure would provide the most powerful instructional support.




This session will not provide:

- Training on how to implement Guided Reading;
- Complete training on how to implement skills-focused lessons across the five essential components of reading;
- Policy issues related to the Reading First initiative or the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.



Observations in Reading First classrooms suggest . . .

- The dominant lesson structure currently being used to provide differentiated instruction during the reading block is the ‘Guided Reading’ format.



Guided Reading as one possible lesson structure:

- As outlined in the work of Fountas and Pinnell, “Guided Reading is a context in which a teacher supports each reader’s development of effective strategies for processing novel texts at increasingly challenging levels of difficulty.”

(Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, p.3)



A Framework for Guided Reading lessons involve:

- Selecting the Text
- Introducing the Text
- Reading the Text
- Discussing and Revisiting the Text
- Teaching for Processing Strategies
- Extending the Meaning of the Text (optional)
- Word Work (optional)

Fountas & Pinnell, 2001



Understanding Guided Reading

“Many children enter third grade with good decoding strategies. But, in our work with teachers and children, we have learned to distinguish between simply reproducing the words of a text, or “calling words,” and truly “reading” it with understanding.”

Fountas & Pinnell, 2001



According to Fountas and Pinnell:

Guided reading makes it possible to teach at the cutting edge of students' understanding. The teachers' support is **light**. The teacher does not take the problem solving away from the student; instead, the instruction helps students read more productively and more intensively.



Do Skills-Focused Lessons Mean a Return to ‘Skill and Drill?’

It takes a skilled teacher to use instructional strategies effectively to help learners transform disjointed pieces of information into the webs of knowledge that define educational success.

(Kame’enui, Carnine, Dixon, Simmons, Coyne, 2002)



Skills-Focused Lessons:

- Provide the opportunity for more systematic and focused practice on a relatively small number of critical elements at a time;
- Offer *sustained* and interesting “word work” (e.g., Beck, 2006) in order to build fluency and confidence in the application of skills to reading words.



Isabel Beck states in her book, Making Sense of Phonics:

“Very early in the instructional sequence, children should experience decoding some words. It’s like when children take piano lessons and learn to play little pieces when they can read only a few notes. By playing the pieces, they experience what those few notes can do. Similarly, in the early phases of learning to read, children should be provided with the knowledge and skills that enable them actually to decode some words.”



Considering the essential component of phonics:

“Teachers must understand *why* they are doing something; they must understand reading difficulties at a deep level so they can have confidence in what they are doing, in spite of some less-than-smooth lessons.”

Beck, 2006



When considering the best lesson structure to use:

Teachers can consider what children need to know and be able to do to read words.

- They need to know the speech sounds associated with written letters in words.
- They need to know how to put those sounds together to form a pronounceable word.
- They need to have a strong sense of English orthography.
- They need to recognize words rapidly.



More considerations:

Teachers can turn these four statements into questions when considering what lesson structure may be appropriate for their students.




Teachers may ask:

1. Does this student know the speech sounds associated with written letters in words?
2. Does this student know how to put those sounds together to form a pronounceable word?
3. Does this student have a strong sense of English orthography?
4. Does this student to recognize words rapidly?



Let's take a brief look at examples:

- Take five minutes to read an excerpt from the book, Guided Reading-Good First Teaching for All Children by Irene C. Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell.
- As you read, consider the types of readers this lesson format would serve best. What abilities would they 'bring to the table' to be successful with this lesson structure?



Let's look at an example of a skills-focused lesson:

- Take three to five minutes to review an example of a skills-focused lesson in the area of phonics.
- Notice how the lesson is sharply focused on a small number of critical elements at a time, and how the instruction is explicit in nature.



As you prepare for the upcoming school year, keep this in mind:

- Teachers who are effective in teaching early reading skills to all students employ both the kind of explicit and systematic instruction embodied in skills-focused lessons, and the integrative and supported reading experiences that are characteristic of guided reading lessons to meet the needs of all students.



Less effective teachers . . .

- Tend to focus more exclusively on one or the other of the two broad kinds of instruction, and thus are not as able to effectively meet the needs of their students.



Our primary message today:

- We encourage all Reading First teachers to reflect carefully on the individual needs of students, as determined through data analysis.
- We urge teachers to employ the particular type of lesson structure that will be most effective in helping them learn how to read well.



During the upcoming year:

- Reading First Professional Development Coordinators will continue to provide Quarterly trainings for Reading Coaches to assist with the successful implementation of appropriate lesson structures in K-3 classrooms.
- The Florida Center for Reading Research will continue its collaboration with Reading First Professional Development to provide the most current, research-based information to Reading First schools.



Parting Thought:

If you find that a child is simply not learning from the present task and that you are saying nothing but, “No, John, that’s not right,” recognize that you may be teaching the child that he is a failure.
Restructure the task in such a way that he will succeed.

Engelmann, 1997



References:

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- Kame'enui, Edward J., Carnine, Douglas W., Dixon, Robert C., Simmons, Deborah C., & Coyne, Michael D. (2002). Effective Teaching Strategies That Accommodate Diverse Learners, Second Edition. Columbus, Ohio: Merrill Prentice Hall.



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