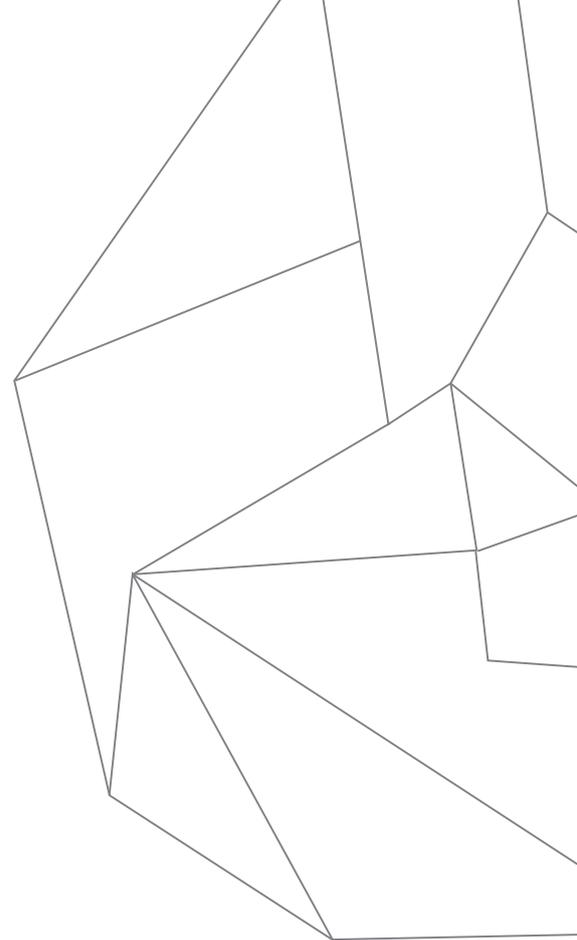




A guided reading research review

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Contents



Section 1: Introduction	1
Section 2: Overview of guided reading	2
Historical overview	2
What is guided reading?	3
Rationale for guided reading	4
Key elements of guided reading	4
Skills and knowledge targeted in guided reading	6
Role of the teacher	7
Theories of reading and learning underpinning guided reading	8
Section 3: Benefits of guided reading	9
Benefits for the learner	10
Benefits for the teacher	12
Section 4: Challenges with guided reading	13
Flexibility	14
Teacher knowledge and training	15
Teacher talk	16
Time constraints and resource availability	16
Section 5: Link between guided reading and levelled texts	17
Levelled texts	18
Why use levelled texts for guided reading?	18
Grading controls	19
Potential limitations of levelled texts	19
Section 6: The role of assessment in guided reading	20
What is assessment?	20
Reading assessment procedures	21
Reading records	21
Determining instructional level	21
Section 7: Summary	22
References	23

Section 1:

Introduction

Guided reading is a research-informed approach to reading instruction adopted by literacy educators as a key component of well-balanced and comprehensive classroom-based literacy programs in many countries around the world, including Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and United States (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, 2001; Gaynor, Thompson, Thornley & McIlwrick, 1997; Rog, 2003). Guided reading is designed to support the reading development of a wide range of learners, including learners in the early years of schooling, middle years learners, 'struggling readers' and adults with low literacy skills (Clay, 1985; Fawson & Reutzel, 2000; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; 2012; Hornsby, 2000; Massengill, 2004; Morgan et al., 2013).

Based on a thorough review of current literature, this report presents a comprehensive discussion of the guided reading approach. Section 2 begins by providing a detailed overview of guided reading with a focus on the origins of the instructional approach, a description of guided reading, the rationale behind the approach, its key components, the skills and knowledge targeted in guided reading, the role of the teacher, and theories of reading and learning underpinning the approach. Section 3 examines the benefits of guided reading for both learners and teachers. Challenges and potential limitations are identified and discussed in Section 4, in order to provide a balanced perspective of this form of reading instruction. Section 5 explores the link between guided reading and levelled texts, while Section 6 examines the role of assessment in guided reading. The report concludes by presenting a summary of the key issues identified in the report and their implications for publishers and educators, including policy developers, education leaders and teachers.

Section 2:

Overview of guided reading

Historical overview

There is general agreement in the literature reviewed that New Zealand literacy educators played a major role in the early development of guided reading (Fawson & Reutzel, 2000; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). The implementation of guided reading in New Zealand primary classrooms began as early as the 1960s. It was largely informed by Marie Clay's theoretical views of reading and based on her extensive work on supporting the reading development of young 'at risk' readers. Her notable success in addressing the needs of 'at risk' readers through Reading Recovery (Clay, 2001, 2005) led to educators adopting the principles and overarching framework inherent in that program (Fawson & Reutzel, 2000; Ferguson & Wilson, 2009; Holdaway, 1979; Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 1985; Mooney, 1990). Commenting on Clay's role in the implementation of guided reading in New Zealand classrooms, Massengill (2004: 589) states, 'educators saw the value in the instructional framework and began implementing the principles of Reading Recovery in classrooms with small groups. This in turn resulted in guided reading, an instructional framework for all children'.

Strong support for the instructional approach was shown by the Department of Education of New Zealand (now the Ministry of Education of New Zealand) in the early 1970s through its promotion of guided reading in the teaching reference *Suggestions for Teaching Reading in Primary and Secondary Schools* (Department of Education of New Zealand, 1972) and in later curriculum documents and publications (e.g. Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 1985, 1996a). Guided reading has become an integral part of the literacy landscape in classrooms around the world, in large part due to the significant early work undertaken by New Zealand educators and ongoing promotion of guided reading by the Ministry of Education of New Zealand.

While it is generally agreed that guided reading has its roots in New Zealand classrooms, Ford and Opitz (2011) argue that the idea of a teacher providing explicit direction and guidance to learners to support reading development was evident in the 1940s with the development of Betts's 'Directed Reading Activity' (Betts, 1946, cited in Ford & Opitz, 2011: 226). A decade later, building on Betts's idea of teacher-directed instruction, the term 'guided reading' was adopted by educators Lillian Gray and Dora Reese in teaching materials for classroom use designed to support children's reading development (Ford & Opitz, 2011: 227).

What is guided reading?

Guided reading is a teaching approach used by educators to support or scaffold the reading development of learners at all stages along the reading developmental continuum (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 1996a). For example, guided reading provides a teaching context for supporting the reading development of students in the early years of schooling; however, it is also an effective instructional approach in supporting accomplished and independent readers (Iaquinta, 2006). Specifically, guided reading involves the teacher working with a small group of students (between four and six students) with the same reading needs and who are able to independently read texts with a similar level of text difficulty (Burns, 2001; Rog, 2003). Guided reading provides a supportive instructional context to build students' knowledge of the reading process, apply familiar reading strategies, and learn and practise new explicitly taught processing and comprehension strategies while reading manageable texts (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 2003; Opatiz and Ford, 2001) for enjoyment and to access information (Routman, 2000:140).

The teaching focus of a guided reading session reflects the learning needs of the students and is informed by reliable and comprehensive assessment data (Iaquinta, 2006). The ultimate goal of guided reading is to support readers 'to build a network of strategic actions for processing texts' (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012: 272) and become effective and efficient independent silent readers of a full range of sophisticated texts (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001, 2012; Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 2003). On the place of guided reading in a classroom literacy program, Fountas and Pinnell

(2012: 281) emphasise the importance of guided reading being part of a balanced and high-quality literacy program, stating 'guided reading must be only one component of a comprehensive, high quality literacy effort'. Other effective practices to support reading development may include reading to students or reading aloud, shared reading, independent or personal reading, language experience, literature discussions, and reading and writing workshops and conferences (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012; Hornsby, 2000; Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 1996a, 1996b, 2005; Perkins, 2015: 155; Rog, 2003). While guided reading forms one element of a literacy program, it is viewed as a critical component (Ford & Opatiz, 2011; Fountas & Pinnell 1996, 2001; Rog, 2003). In fact, the Ministry of Education of New Zealand (1996a: 86) describes guided reading as the 'heart of the reading programme for early and fluent readers'.

Carefully constructed guided reading groups, therefore, are considered a critical component of guided reading (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 1996a, 2003). Student groupings for guided reading sessions should be fluid, flexible and based on the individual learners in terms of 'their needs as readers or their needs for certain reading experiences' (Morgan et al., 2013: 17). Implementing needs-based groupings that are informed by ongoing and reliable assessment data allows educators to successfully and effectively cater for the ever-changing needs and 'different learning paths of readers' (Iaquinta, 2006: 414; Morgan et al., 2013: 17; Opatiz and Ford, 2001).

Rationale for guided reading

According to Clay (1991), reading is a highly complex and cognitively demanding process that requires the reader to actively problem solve in order to process texts with success. When reading, a proficient reader spontaneously and largely unconsciously draws on multiple sources of information and applies reading strategies from an interconnected system of processing strategies stored in the brain. Successful processing of texts with high levels of comprehension leads to the reader building reading capabilities that ultimately result in reading development (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Elaborating on Clay's views on the reading process and its implications for readers, Wall states:

The reality is that the act of reading is a strategic endeavour requiring readers to think actively and problem solve their way through texts. Decisions must be made constantly, misunderstandings must be clarified, and new knowledge must be contrasted with existing understanding. Readers must have a tool-belt of strategies available and a firm grasp on how to use them when challenges arise. (2014: 136, 137)

Clay (1991, 2005: 74) argues that, with practice, the 'tool-belt of strategies' described by Wall increases with complexity over time, and enables readers to engage meaningfully with more complex texts. Fountas and Pinnell (2001) concur, arguing that readers need to be able to apply and modify strategies depending on the purpose of the text. They suggest that guided reading sessions, involving explicit teaching and modelling of a broad range of strategies to suit familiar and new text types, supports reading development. Fountas and Pinnell (2001: 191) add, 'through guided reading you can demonstrate how a reader constructs meaning from text, makes personal connections with text, and goes beyond text. You can provide specific support for readers as they delve into texts for themselves, meeting challenges by using a range of skills'. Guided reading provides a supportive teaching context for the explicit teaching, modelling, demonstration and application of a range of effective reading behaviours. This builds upon and expands the reader's 'tool-belt of strategies', which is necessary for processing increasingly challenging texts (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012).

Key elements of guided reading

Many guided reading frameworks have been developed to support teachers in planning for guided reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 1996a, 1996b, 2003; Hornsby, 2000).

The common and critical elements of guided reading sessions that are shared by various frameworks include:

1. establishing a teaching objective or focus
2. selecting a suitable guided reading text
3. introducing the text prior to reading
4. reading the text independently
5. discussing the text
6. responding to the text
7. reflecting on student learning (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 1996a: 87, 2003).

Teaching focus

In planning for a guided reading session, the teacher identifies a teaching focus based on the common needs of individual learners. A teaching objective may include the introduction of an unfamiliar text type with a focus on the organisational structure of the text (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 2003) or 'reading strategies needed to meet the kinds of challenges they [the learners] are currently facing' (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 1996a: 88).

Text selection

The second stage of a guided reading session involves the teacher selecting an appropriate text in terms of offering learners appropriate levels of support and challenges and providing new learning opportunities (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006; Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 1996). The 'instructional level' guided reading text selected by the teacher for guided reading purposes is matched to the reading ability of learners (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012: 269; Hanke, 2013: 136; Hill, 1999: 35; Hornsby, 2000) and includes text features that are 'slightly beyond what they [learners] could do on their own, often exposing students to texts and structures they would naturally not choose to read' (Burns, 2001: 5). Hornsby (2000) stresses the importance of providing guided reading texts that provide a balanced combination of support and challenge to enable learners to read the majority of the text independently. Readers should expect to meet challenges in a guided reading text (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 1996b). However, learners should be supported appropriately to address these challenges. Early and emergent readers commonly read a short text, while longer and more complex texts are used with more fluent and competent readers (Gaynor et al., 1997).

In addition to offering more challenging and sophisticated features, the text selected should also be an unknown text (Hornsby, 2000). This allows readers the opportunity to apply familiar reading processing strategies to unfamiliar texts and to 'overcome the challenges in the text and read it independently with success' (Hornsby, 2000: 26). The guided reading text selected by the teacher may be the focus of future guided reading sessions, although used for different purposes (Hornsby, 2000).

Introduction of the text

The third element of a guided reading session involves the teacher facilitating a brief introductory discussion about the text. At this time, the teacher makes explicit the purpose for reading the text, arouses students' interest and activates students' previous knowledge by forming links with their current understandings and prior experiences of the ideas and concepts presented in the new text. Establishing links between students' previous knowledge and new ideas supports the processing of unfamiliar text (Scull, 2010). Moreover, potential challenges in the text are identified and appropriate strategies to overcome these are discussed. Challenging text features may include the type of text (e.g. information report), language patterns, vocabulary, and concepts and ideas. Fountas and Pinnell (1996: 8) argue that a book introduction that introduces learners to potentially challenging aspects before reading a new text acts as a 'debugging process' and supports the meaning-making process. A shared reading focus is also established at this time (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006; Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 1996, 2003). Clay (1991) argues that the level of support offered by a teacher during the book introduction (i.e. brief book introduction versus detailed book introduction) is determined by the teacher's knowledge of the students' needs and the level of challenge the guided reading text presents to the readers. Fountas and Pinnell (2001: 209) share this view, and state 'the length and content of the introduction will depend on the complexity of the text and these particular readers' background, experience with text features, understanding of genre, and reading skills'.

Independent reading

The fourth element of a guided reading session involves independent reading of the text by the students. The length of the passage read by students is determined by the length and complexity of the text. Fluent readers may be asked to read sections of a sophisticated text silently. After reading a section of the text, the teacher may check for understanding. Non-fluent readers may be asked to read the text quietly as the teacher observes them, intervening through explicit teaching or prompting

where appropriate (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006, 2012; Gaynor et al., 1997; Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 1996a, 2003). Readers should be encouraged to apply familiar and targeted processing strategies when encountering challenges in the text (Gaynor et al., 1997). The Ministry of Education of New Zealand (2003: 98) stresses that learners taking turns to read parts of the text aloud, or 'round robin reading', is never appropriate in a guided reading session, as it denies readers the opportunity to process a text and make meaning independently.

Hornsby (2000: 82) identifies three approaches to 'reading the text' in a guided reading session. These include 'very' guided reading, 'partly' guided reading, and a combination the two. He argues that the approach selected by teachers should be based on professional judgement, always reflect students' needs and 'maximise the children's ability to read the text independently, with success'. The 'very' guided reading approach involves students silently reading a personal copy of the text one section at a time. The teacher facilitates discussion before and after reading each section.

For example, before reading a section of the text, a teacher may invite students to make predictions about the content and/or may request students to locate particular information. Post-reading discussions about the text read may involve oral reading; however, oral reading in this instance is purposeful as opposed to 'round robin oral reading' (Hornsby, 2000: 82).

The 'partly' guided reading approach differs from the 'very' guided reading approach in that students are invited to read the text with a soft voice at their own pace (Hornsby, 2000: 85). Fountas and Pinnell (1996: 8) argue that reading quietly allows beginner readers to display reading skills and behaviours such as problem-solving skills and creates a supportive context for the teacher to respond accordingly through 'point of need teaching'. Learners at the emergent stage of reading and beyond, however, are expected to read silently at this time. Re-reading sections of a text orally for purposes such as responding to questions initiated by the teacher and to locate specific information to support predictions forms part of the 'partly' guided reading approach.

The final approach to reading includes features of 'very' and 'partly' guided reading. After the book introduction, the teacher adopts a section-by-section approach to reading the text. However, students will have the option of reading the text at their own pace, if they can cope independently with the anticipated challenges presented in the text.

After-reading discussions

After the students have read the guided reading text, the teacher facilitates focused discussions around the text with the purpose of extending and deepening students' level of understanding of the text (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). This is a critical stage of the guided reading session. The focus for the discussion is determined by the needs of the learners and the readers' stage of reading development (i.e. emergent, early, fluent, competent). According to Hornsby (2000), the guided reading session at this stage may involve the teacher:

1. inviting students to re-read the text quietly or in silence (transitional and self-extending readers may not require the text to be re-read)
2. allowing students to share strategies adopted when encountering a challenging part in the text
3. exploring in detail specific aspects of the text such as plot (particularly relevant for emergent and early readers)
4. discussing with fluent to advanced readers the organisational structure of the text in relation to the text type
5. discussing common and atypical language features and patterns such as exploring the use of literary language with more able readers
6. drawing students' attention to aspects of print such as the use and function of punctuation conventions and page layouts
7. investigating the use of illustrations to support the meaning-making process in the text.

Fountas and Pinnell (2001, 2012) concur, and also suggest creating opportunities for students to synthesise and summarise content, draw links between the text and personal experiences, draw links between other familiar texts, and build vocabulary knowledge in order to continue to build their network of processing strategies.

Responding to the text

The 'responding to the text' stage of a guided reading session involves students working independently on a personal response learning task with links to the guided reading text. Fountas and Pinnell (2001) argue that such tasks allow readers to further develop their understanding of the text from a different perspective. For example, tasks might involve comparing and contrasting texts addressing the same topic or issue, texts written by the same author, and other relevant fiction and non-fiction texts exploring similar themes and concepts.

Final reflections on learning

The final stage of the guided reading session involves the teacher and students revisiting the original purpose of the session, reflecting on the extent to which the learning focus has been achieved, sharing new learnings and discussing how new understandings can be applied in the future (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 2003).

Skills and knowledge targeted in guided reading

As has been established in this review (see 'Rationale for guided reading'), reading is a highly complex and multifaceted cognitive process (Clay, 1991) that demands a system of strategies in order for the reader to meaningfully process increasingly sophisticated texts. Guided reading provides a supportive instructional context for building, applying and expanding skills and knowledge through explicit and targeted teaching and guidance, high-quality prompting, demonstration and modelling (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001, 2012; Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 2003).

The Ministry of Education of New Zealand (2003) discusses reading strategies in terms of:

1. processing strategies
2. comprehension strategies.

Processing strategies include skills such as attending to information in the text that will help readers to decode and make meaning. For example, at the word level beginner readers may search for familiar individual letters or combinations of letters when attempting to decode unknown words (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Moreover, readers may also actively seek out familiar language patterns and look for visual information in the form of illustrations to support the meaning making, drawing on their existing knowledge as part of the process. Forming predictions is another processing strategy used by readers when trying to determine the meaning of a new word or what will follow next in the text. An equally important processing strategy for all readers is self-monitoring. This involves the reader checking their reading attempts to ensure that what they are reading makes sense. Depending on a learner's stage of reading development, self-monitoring may involve a reader checking and confirming predictions or cross-checking by drawing on various sources of information (i.e. meaning, structure and visual information) and then self-correcting (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012; Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 2003).

Comprehension strategies necessary to expand and deepen readers' understanding of a text and to assist them to respond critically to a text include:

- building links between learners' existing knowledge and content reading
- making considered predictions about the text based on information on the text covered prior to reading it
- posing questions prior to reading the text to create a reading focus
- forming mental images about what is happening in the text
- inferring meaning by summarising key ideas, forming connections with other passages in the text and then drawing informed conclusions
- identifying and reflecting critically on the author's purpose, opinion and how the author seeks to influence the reader

- identifying and summarising key ideas, analysing and synthesising new understandings and opinions presented by the author
- evaluating ideas and information, resulting in a reader challenging or refuting an author's opinion or agreeing with the view expressed and leading to altering their personal opinion (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 2003).

Comprehension strategies support readers to 'enhance their understanding of text and develop their critical awareness' (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 2003: 131) and increase in complexity as a reader becomes more proficient. Fountas and Pinnell (2001, 2012) also identify phrasing and fluency as necessary skills for efficient and smooth reading, but acknowledge that increased fluency does not lead to higher levels of comprehension. Phrasing and fluency include features such as 'rhythm, flow, metre, pausing, word stress, phrasing and intonation' (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996: 150, 2001: 355, 2012: 274).

Given the breadth and range of strategies that can be potentially targeted in a guided reading session, it is crucial that teachers have a clear understanding of the needs of their learners in terms of reading. Being aware of learners' needs and explicitly targeting these in guided reading will ensure new learning opportunities are maximised and reading development is appropriately supported.

Role of the teacher

The teacher plays a critical role at all stages of a guided reading session. For example, the Ministry of Education of New Zealand (2003) identifies the teacher's role during the discussion stage of a guided reading session in the following ways:

- Use questioning, prompting or modelling to demonstrate the reading practices of effective and efficient readers.
- Invite responses and insights about the text from readers.
- Facilitate quality discussions that involve readers expressing personal opinions that are respected and valued by all.
- Support learners in examining challenges presented in the text and organisational features of the text.
- Invite students to share strategies for establishing the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary items.
- Build students' comprehension skills and critical thinking abilities.

- Check students' understandings of the text.
- Invite students to support opinions and views expressed with evidence from the text.
- Demonstrate ways of responding critically to a text.
- Provide an engaging and enjoyable learning experience.
- Provide specific considered and constructive feedback that builds on learners' understandings.

The high demand that is placed on the teacher is demonstrated well in these roles. It is evident that the effectiveness of a guided reading session in supporting the reading development of learners is dependent on the skilled teacher's use of appropriate prompts, modelling, and thoughtful questioning. Equally influential is the teacher's ability to facilitate high-quality discussions about the text, where text meanings are negotiated, and critical and analytical thinking is promoted to lead to higher and deeper levels of comprehension. Fountas and Pinnell (2012) also argue that the teacher needs to be skilled in identifying a learner's reading behaviour in terms of the strategies used when reading a text. Being able to identify existing strategies is crucial in supporting a learner's future reading development in terms of determining the learner's needs (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012).

According to Wall (2014), the effectiveness of a guided reading session is largely dependent on teacher behaviour. Wall (2014: 138) argues 'success of guided reading has less to do with student knowledge of skills and more to do with our own behaviours as teachers'. Wall claims that teachers need to recognise when, and when not, to provide support during guided reading and that at times less input by the teacher is far more advantageous than more involvement. She argues:

guided reading sessions are the optimal time for students to demonstrate the strategies they have internalised from previous instruction. The silence of teachers allows, and even requires, students to independently put into practice all that has been taught. Sometimes students' strategies will not be successful, but if we, as teachers, are smart, we will let them struggle, allow them to evaluate the effectiveness of their attempts, and apply different strategies if necessary. (2014: 139)

Wall (2014: 140) adds that teachers need to strive to build in learners a 'problem-solving mind set' and should, where deemed appropriate, avoid 'prompting too early or with too much support'. Concerning the teacher's role in supporting readers to become active problem solvers, Fountas and Pinnell (1996: 162) argue 'it is the quality of assistance given by the teacher that directs the child's attention to efficient, effective ways of learning how to solve problems for themselves'.

Theories of reading and learning underpinning guided reading

Theory of reading

Guided reading is based on the understanding that reading is a highly complex and multifaceted cognitive process (Clay, 1991) that involves the reader drawing on a sophisticated network of processing strategies to make meaning (Clay, 1993; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, 2001). Fountas and Pinnell (2012: 273) have identified 12 'strategic activities' for processing texts that form a complex interrelated network. These are:

1. solving words
2. monitoring and self-correcting
3. searching for specific information and applying information
4. summarising
5. sustaining fluency
6. adjusting strategies to solve challenges in the text
7. predicting
8. forming connections
9. synthesising information
10. inferring meaning
11. analysing
12. thinking critically about the text.

The intended goal of guided reading is to support students to 'build their reading power – to build a network of strategic actions for processing texts' and to ultimately become effective independent readers who are able to think within the text, beyond the text and about the text (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012: 273). Guided reading, then, provides a meaningful context for the development of the skills and knowledge necessary for learners to become successful independent readers, who are able to draw on the necessary complex network of strategies to construct meaning from a range of texts with increasingly levels of complexity (Biddulph, 2003).

Theory of learning

Vygotsky's (1978) socio-constructivist view of learning and cognitive development underpins the guided reading approach. In essence, Vygotsky argued that learning is not an individual endeavour, but takes place in a social context and through meaningful interactions and exchanges with others, led by more able or more knowledgeable others.

Guided reading adheres to Vygotsky's view of learning by creating a meaningful social instructional context. Biddulph (2003: 5) describes guided reading as 'essentially a carefully managed social occurrence'. It is within this social context that learners are supported in constructing deeper levels of meanings and understandings through 'exploratory talk' (Biddulph, 2003: 3). Specifically, Fisher (2008: 20) argues that within guided reading 'children are encouraged to talk, think and read their way to constructing meaning'. Elaborating on this notion of learning through interactions within a guided reading context, Fletcher, Greenwood, Grimley, Parkhill and Davis suggest:

Socio cultural learning theory aligns with the view of learners working together discussing and debating their differing understandings of text and acknowledges the key roles of the teacher and peers in facilitating individual learning ... the teacher will need to step back from the authoritative role, to one where the students can take a lead in the meaning-negotiation processes. (2012: 427)

A teacher of guided reading thus assumes a facilitative role – fostering student–student interactions that are exploratory in nature and ideally lead to gaining more complex levels of meanings (Gavelek & Raphael, 1996).

Vygotsky (1978), however, noted that to facilitate the learning process, learning should occur within the learner's 'zone of proximal development', which he defines in the following way:

... the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (1978: 86)

Guided reading works within a learner's zone of proximal development by the inclusion of texts that offer both support and challenge (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012: 277). Hornsby (2000: 30) shares this view, noting that careful text selection for guided reading purposes is critical: 'You select an unknown or unfamiliar book that provides just the right balance of supports and challenges so that the children can read most of it independently'. Guided reading also allows students to operate within their zone of proximal development through the use of carefully graded, levelled texts. Furthermore, learning is being supported by the teacher, or more knowledgeable 'other', who guides readers through the new learning opportunities. (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001: 191, 192; Smith & Elley, 1997: 78, 79).

Section 3:

Benefits of guided reading

The guided reading approach offers benefits for both the learner and the teacher, when implemented by skilled and confident teachers who have a clear and sound understanding of its key elements, their role (i.e. facilitator and guide), the reading process and stages of reading development, and who have immediate and easy access to appropriate, high-quality, levelled texts (see also Section 5 in this review).

Benefits for the learner

As discussed, the ultimate aim of guided reading is to assist learners over time to become active and effective independent readers of a wide range of increasingly challenging texts (Ferguson & Wilson, 2009; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Guided reading provides a supportive instructional context to achieve this important outcome (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Gaynor et al., 1997). The specific benefits gained through learners' active participation in guided reading are numerous and include:

- increasing levels of motivation by independently reading carefully selected texts with success regularly, and in doing so, fostering positive attitudes towards reading, building confidence levels, and levels of enjoyment (Burns, 2001; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, 2012; Gaynor et al., 1997; Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 1996a, 2003)
- building and applying new knowledge and understandings of a wide range of effective processing and comprehension strategies (Burns, 2001; Fountas & Pinnell, 2012; Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 1996a: 86)
- applying newly acquired skills and knowledge within a meaningful context by using continuous and authentic texts (Gaynor et al., 1997)
- building knowledge of the structural features and organisation of a range of text types and how to approach unknown texts, text types and potentially challenging texts through effective teaching approaches, such as modelling and explicit teaching (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 1996a; Whitehead & De Jonge, 2013–14)
- motivating students to read more widely and more frequently (Gaynor et al., 1997: 4)
- encouraging silent reading (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 1996a)
- teaching students to learn, practise and integrate their reading strategies (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 2003)
- developing comprehension of and critical responses to texts, leading to higher and deeper levels of comprehension (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 2003)
- creating a supportive community of readers through small-group work (Iaquinta, 2006)
- providing readers the opportunity for quality student–student interactions, resulting in higher-level thinking (Fisher, 2008; Gaynor et al., 1997; Rog, 2003)
- using texts at students' instructional level during guided reading to provide 'the right balance of challenge and support' (Rog, 2003: 12) for the learners.

Research studies investigating the impact of the guided reading approach on learners show that learners benefit from participation in guided reading. A US study by Ferguson and Wilson (2009) investigated teachers' implementation of guided reading in four out of 63 primary and upper elementary schools in the Texas area. Benefits identified by teachers from students' participation in guided reading included: improved student knowledge of a range of effective reading strategies to support comprehension of texts and subsequent use of newly acquired strategies when reading texts; improved text comprehension levels and fluency rates; and advancement in reading levels (Ferguson & Wilson, 2009).

Another study, by Whitehead and De Jonge (2013–14), which examined the impact of guided reading, also identified benefits of guided reading for learners. Whitehead and De Jonge undertook a small-scale comparative study in a New Zealand school with Grade 5 students, in response to school data that showed stalled reading achievement levels. The study aimed to support student participants to make connections between the written text and graphic features in science texts (Whitehead & De Jonge, 2013–14). To achieve the study's aim, Grade 5 students in a focus group were involved in ten guided reading sessions.

The teacher guided and facilitated quality student–teacher and student–student interactions at all stages of these guided reading sessions (i.e. before, during and after reading the text). This involved activating students' prior knowledge of the topic, drawing students' attention to the organisational structure of the science text, and drawing comparisons with the structural elements of known texts, such as narrative texts. It also included explicit vocabulary building, discussions about headings and subheadings and making thoughtful predictions about content based on headings in the text. Graphic features and their relationship with the written text (e.g. supporting written text, expanding meaning), use of visual imagery, and strategies on ways to read specific sections of the science texts were also explored in the guided reading sessions (Whitehead & De Jonge, 2013–14). The results of this study suggest guided reading had a favourable impact on student participants' level of engagement with, and understanding of, science texts. Specifically, the focus group students demonstrated improved confidence in approaching science texts, growth in metacognitive ability leading to improved reading comprehension of science texts, increased understanding of the features (e.g. diagrams) of science texts, and increased awareness of the effectiveness of visual imagery (Whitehead & De Jonge, 2013–14). However, while the study showed significant gains made by the focus group participants, the researchers advise the positive results should be considered with caution due to the small-scale nature of the study (Whitehead & De Jonge, 2013–14).

Of relevance to this discussion, Scull (2010) investigated interactions between skilled Reading Recovery teachers and students during Reading Recovery sessions to determine the teaching practices that are effective in building reading skills and strategies. Scull's (2010) research findings indicate that teacher modelling of appropriate reading strategies, teacher guidance through deliberate prompting, considered questioning, and explicit teaching of a range of appropriate processing and comprehension strategies were effective in supporting young readers to process texts with increased levels of understanding. These findings are of significance given that such teaching strategies are used widely by skilled teachers during guided reading sessions. For example, similar to guided reading, prior to reading an unfamiliar text Reading Recovery teachers facilitated discussions around the text that involved building students' vocabulary and concept knowledge and forming connections with the learners' prior knowledge (Scull, 2010). Moreover, at this time teachers engaged students in predictions to activate and apply students' prior knowledge and 'facilitate their [students'] understanding of new ideas encountered in text' (Scull, 2010: 93). Such interactions are also typical during a pre-reading book discussion in a guided reading session.

Further examples of effective instructional practices occurred during post-reading conversations between teachers and students in the Reading Recovery sessions. Similar to guided reading, teachers invited students to express views and support opinions, form connections between 'known and new information, and to review ideas' in order to support the processing of new text (Scull, 2010: 97). Deliberate teacher and student interactions before, during and after reading the text were seen as important in 'comprehension instruction' (Scull, 2010: 101). Specifically, teachers engaged in deliberate interactions to build in students 'a clearer understanding of what reading involves, how it is tackled and what strategies they can usefully employ' (Scull, 2010: 102). Based on valuable insights gained through detailed descriptions of teacher-student interactions, Scull

concluded that conversations around reading by skilled teachers are a 'critical dimension of the essential support teachers provide to develop students' comprehension processes' (Scull, 2010: 99). This research suggests that teaching strategies and approaches used by teachers during guided reading sessions are effective and powerful in supporting learners' reading development.

A small-scale study by Massengill (2004), which over a 12-week period investigated the impact of guided reading on the reading level of four adults with low literacy levels, also found participants benefited from involvement in guided reading. Specifically, all four participants displayed improved reading levels and improved knowledge and use of reading strategies after participation in guided reading. Based on her overall research findings, Massengill concluded 'that all four [participants] made sufficient gains to validate that guided reading may have a positive impact on adult learners' literacy levels' (Massengill, 2004: 599). However, it must be acknowledged that this was a small-scale study conducted over a short time frame and, therefore, the results should be considered tentatively. Furthermore, while the guided reading teaching approach used in the study included key elements of a guided reading session, the guided reading was conducted in a one-on-one instructional context, due to the varying reading levels of the participants (Massengill, 2004) and other extenuating factors, such as timetabling issues.

Finally, a modified guided reading approach that included key elements of guided reading and reflected the language needs of English Language Learners (ELL) was trialled to determine the impact of guided reading on the reading development of middle school ELLs. In their study, Avalos, Plasencia, Chavez and Rasc n (2007: 326) found the reading level of a statistically significant number of student participants increased as a result of participation in three or more weekly 20- to 30-minute sessions over a nine-month period.

Benefits for the teacher

Guided reading also offers benefits for classroom teachers, and these include the following:

- Small-group instruction creates opportunities to explicitly address common needs (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012).
- Opportunities are created for specific 'point of need' teaching as difficulties arise and for individualised instruction (Avalos et al., 2007: 318; Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 1996b: 81).
- The small-group teaching context enables teachers to observe individual reading behaviour while students are reading unfamiliar texts and to form judgements in relation to students' needs (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).
- It allows teachers to create flexible student groupings based on students' needs and stage of reading development (Iaquinta, 2006: 414).
- Reading strategies that reflect individual students' needs are explicitly targeted, supporting the learners to engage meaningfully with more complex texts over time (Avalos et al., 2008; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).
- Teachers are able to assess areas of need, identify which skills need practice and provide appropriate teaching (Gaynor et al., 1997).
- It allows teachers the opportunity for ongoing close monitoring and assessment of student reading progress (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 2003; Rog, 2003).
- It offers students at all ability levels targeted instruction on materials they can read independently (Morgan et al., 2013).
- Guided reading allows teachers to acknowledge and respect the skills learners already display and, therefore, valuable instructional time is not invested in teaching skills learners have already attained (Morgan et al., 2013).

Research exploring the guided reading approach suggests that guided reading offers a supportive teaching and learning context. For example, Swain (2010), while critical of aspects of the guided reading approach, concedes that the teaching and learning context offered by guided reading is a favourable and strong feature of this instructional approach. According to Swain, the small-group instructional context led by an expert 'other' or a teacher provides an ideal context for fostering a critical approach to reading and viewing texts because 'in order for pupils to adopt critical perspectives independently, they first need opportunities to explore this with an experienced reader, so they can understand the principles involved ... guided reading might be the most effective vehicle for achieving this' (Swain, 2010: 135). The conclusion reached by Swain confirms the potential value of guided reading as part of a comprehensive reading program in classrooms.

Section 4:

Challenges with guided reading

While the guided reading approach to reading instruction offers many benefits to learners and teachers, research exploring this teaching approach has identified some potential problems and challenges. The concerns identified have serious implications for literacy policy developers, school leadership, classroom teachers and educational publishers promoting guided reading as an effective tool for instruction.

Flexibility

The Ministry of Education of New Zealand, a well-recognised and long-standing supporter of the guided reading approach, suggests that 'choice of text depends on the teacher's assessment of group capabilities and interests' (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 1996b: 81), and this could be perceived as restrictive and a possible limitation of the guided reading approach. While Burns (2001: 137) argues that texts selected for guided reading purposes should be at the reader's instructional level, she also suggests that 'guided reading should expand to include content textbooks'. Specifically, Burns (2001) argues that content texts, typically include sophisticated language features, complex sentence and organisational structures, and high lexical density. They are cognitively demanding as they are not at learners' instructional levels and they provide opportunities for teaching content and effective reading strategies within a supportive guided reading framework.

Optiz and Ford (2001: 48) concur proposing the inclusion of a broad range of appropriate reading materials (e.g. levelled texts, content books, non-fiction texts and newspapers) for guided reading purposes is necessary if learners are to become 'accomplished readers'. That said, Optiz and Ford (2001:47) advise text selection should be informed by teaching purpose, student needs and interests, and text accessibility. The notion of greater flexibility in guided reading is supported by Villaume and Brabham who argue teaching foci, student groupings, text selection, teaching approaches and decisions about how students will read the text (e.g. read aloud, silently together) should be determined by student assessment data and needs, and not governed by 'right answers'. Given the complex nature of reading and the range of learning and reading needs of learners, Villaume and Brabham argue the teacher's approach to teaching reading needs to be flexible and adaptable. For example, they suggest the use of a range of texts (e.g. children's literature, content texts) rather than limiting the reading experience to appropriately levelled texts. Moreover, they argue that teachers need to adopt a more flexible approach when grouping students:

sometimes we create groups of students who are reading at the same instructional level; sometimes we form groups of students who will benefit from a particular strategy focus; sometimes we group students heterogeneously to provide extended opportunities for sharing similar interests, collaborating and peer modelling. (Villaume & Brabham, 2001: 262)

A certain level of flexibility also needs to be shown with regard to instructional approaches, adapting these to meet the learning needs of learners, which may involve shifting from focused and targeted teaching to more 'spontaneous and responsive' teaching (Villaume & Brabham, 2001: 263). Villaume and Brabham suggest this same level of flexibility should also be extended to independent reading time during guided reading

sessions to include reading silently, reading aloud and quiet reading, and that this should be informed by the readers' needs rather than perceived ideal practice. Implementing a more flexible approach ensures 'we [educators] resist adopting a set of correct procedures that limits our expanding understandings and the potential of guided reading' (Villaume & Brabham, 2001: 263).

Expanding on the issue of student groupings in guided reading, Hanke (2013) investigated the perceptions of four- to seven-year-old students towards regular guided reading sessions in two schools in England. Interviews with teacher participants suggested that teachers experienced frustration with the non-negotiable nature of student groupings, in that students had to be grouped according to like needs. This sentiment was echoed by student participants, whose perceptions towards guided reading sessions were captured in their drawings. Hanke found students valued mixed-ability student groupings in guided reading sessions.

Mere (2006) echoes Villaume and Brabham's concerns, based on her own experience as a literacy coach working with classroom teachers over many years. Mere suggests there is an overemphasis by teachers on the organisation of guided reading and on ensuring all students are involved in guided reading daily, rather than the focus being on the benefits and goals of guided reading sessions. She states, 'for some reason the focus seems to have shifted away from looking closely at children and making decisions accordingly' (Mere, 2006: 5). Mere expresses concern that teachers are aware 'students don't always fit neatly into groups and yet, from a range of sources, we [teachers] feel pressure to have every child in a group ... we [teachers] have received the message that if we are not meeting with each of our students in a guided reading group we must not be doing any teaching' (Mere, 2006: 5). Mere claims the learning needs of students differ and change – some students benefit from small-group instruction, while others require focused teaching in a one-on-one teaching context. It is on this basis that Mere argues for a shift towards a more balanced approach to reading instruction that includes guided reading. However, she suggests that guided reading should not be the primary focus of the reading program, and encourages teachers to seek out other opportunities, such as shared reading and reading aloud, to explicitly target the common and individual learning and reading needs of learners traditionally targeted in guided reading. That said, the Ministry of Education of New Zealand recommends that guided reading form part of a comprehensive literacy program that includes a range of teaching approaches such as shared reading, reading to children and independent reading (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 1996b, 2003).

Teacher knowledge and training

High-quality implementation of guided reading demands sound knowledge of the instructional approach, the reading process, stages of reading development and quality texts. Fountas and Pinnell (2012: 282) argue that 'achieving a high level of expertise in guided reading is not easy. It takes time and usually support of a coach or staff developer' (2012: 282). Furthermore, they argue, research by Bryk, Kerbow, Pinnell, Rodgers, Hung and Scharer (2007, cited in Fountas & Pinnell, 2012: 282), which investigated teacher perceptions of the components of guided reading, showed that some features of guided reading were perceived by teachers as more difficult and required more time for teachers to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary for effective implementation. To illustrate, the research findings showed the task of selecting a guided reading text was perceived by teachers as presenting minimal challenges. In contrast, targeted teaching in response to students' immediate needs, and which thus involved 'point of need teaching' and facilitating quality interactions and discussions around the text after independent reading, were considered to be the most challenging components of guided reading for teacher participants.

This finding has serious implications for teachers and curriculum leaders, as other research findings show a link between teacher knowledge of guided reading and the extent of the impact of guided reading on the reading development of learners. Studies have also found that lack of clear and in-depth knowledge concerning the implementation of guided reading has resulted in teachers feeling uncertain and lacking confidence in its implementation in the classroom. Such lack of knowledge and low confidence levels have impacted negatively on the effective implementation of guided reading by literacy educators in classrooms.

For example, the study investigating the guided reading approach at schools in Texas (Ferguson & Wilson, 2009), considered earlier in this review (see 'Benefits for the learner' in Section 3), found a distinct link between teacher knowledge of guided reading, teacher confidence levels and the level of impact of guided reading on learners' reading development. Teacher participants who had received training in guided reading, displayed sound knowledge supported by sound implementation, and who implemented the approach with confidence, were found to be more likely to support their learners' reading development when compared with educators who had limited knowledge of guided reading and lacked confidence. The survey results showed the benefits of the guided reading approach were identified by those teachers who had sound knowledge of the guided reading leading to effective implementation. This key finding led the researchers to draw the following conclusion concerning the importance of teacher training to build teacher knowledge and confidence levels:

If we want teachers to implement guided reading in ways conducive to the growth of student reading capabilities, they need deeper understanding of what guided reading means as well as the procedural framework involved ... Teachers need to have administrative support, coaching and mentoring of practice until they feel comfortable and confident with its use. The more secure a teacher feels using guided reading to meet the varied needs of her [or his] students, the greater the potential for students to experience growth as readers. (Ferguson & Wilson, 2009: 303)

Similar conclusions were reached based on the findings of a small-scale study that investigated the implementation of guided reading by Grade One and Two teachers in three Cape Town primary schools in South Africa (Kruizinga & Nathanson, 2010). The researchers found that teacher participants struggled with the implementation of the guided reading approach. Specifically, Kruizinga and Nathanson identified three factors that were contributing to the inconsistent and 'ad hoc' implementation of guided reading in the classrooms they observed. Contributing factors included:

1. lack of clear and detailed guidelines in national literacy policies on guided reading and its implementation
2. lack of professional development provided to classroom teachers to build sound knowledge and understandings
3. lack of quality guided reading resources such as levelled texts.

Based on their tentative research findings, Kruizinga and Nathanson (2010: 67) argue that without systemic and practical support for teachers through professional development and training, and the availability of high-quality guided reading materials such as levelled texts, 'it is unlikely that guided reading will be implemented with any success in the South African classrooms'. While the findings presented in this small-scale study need to be viewed tentatively, the conclusions drawn are consistent with Fountas and Pinnell's views concerning the need for expert knowledge for effective implementation of guided reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Similar views are shared by Hanke (2013), who argues the little research undertaken to date exploring teachers' implementation of guided reading since its introduction to schools in the United Kingdom in 1999 through government policy (National Literacy Plan, Primary National Strategy) suggests a lack of clear guidance and, therefore, understanding by teachers about guided reading. Hanke (2013: 137) argues that this lack of proper guidance has led to 'continuing difficulties with the official advice itself and its interpretation and implementation' of the guided reading approach.

Wall (2014) recognises the value of guided reading, but argues that guided reading may become a learning context in which teachers focus predominantly on reading skills in isolation and, in doing so, do not allow sufficient time for students to read continuous text. She adds there also exists the danger of teachers becoming complacent and not explicitly addressing learners' needs in guided reading sessions, and instead focusing on the same skills with multiple groups (Wall, 2014).

Lack of sound knowledge and clarity about guided reading may be seen as contributing to such classroom practices and highlights the need for sound teacher knowledge and training of guided reading to ensure effective implementation. Ferguson and Wilson (2009: 303) argue 'if we want teachers to implement guided reading in ways conducive to the growth of student reading capabilities, they need a deeper understanding of what guided reading means as well as the procedural framework involved'.

Teacher talk

Swain (2010) suggests the guided reading approach offers a framework for building critical literacy skills among readers. However, he expresses concern over the 'inherent power structures' in the teaching approach, which he believes cast doubt on the effectiveness of guided reading in 'facilitating independent critical thought' (Swain, 2010: 131). In addressing this area of concern, Swain (2010: 136) proposes 'adopting an increasingly flexible approach to the guided reading session structure ... exploring the potential impact of text in a more open ended discussion'. A number of studies investigating guided reading sessions with a focus on student–teacher interactions indicate Swain's concerns are well founded.

Several studies exploring teachers' implementation of the guided reading approach in classrooms have identified teachers dominating discussions during guided reading sessions as an area of major concern. Fletcher et al. (2012) undertook a small-scale study in New Zealand that investigated the behaviour of Year 7 and 8 teachers, perceived to be 'effective teachers of reading' by principals (Fletcher et al., 2012: 433), during guided reading sessions with a focus on student–teacher interactions and student–student interactions. The study found that despite inherent differences in pedagogical practices, the teachers habitually limited opportunities for peer interactions by dominating and leading discussions. As a result, 'the critical activities of students reading texts and developing student-led dialogue and debate with their peers in guided reading sessions appeared to have been side lined by most of these teachers' (Fletcher et al., 2012: 445). A similar finding was made by Fisher (2008) in her small-scale study

that examined guided reading in action with fluent readers in three classrooms in three different primary schools in the United Kingdom. The study found that the goal of guided reading to create 'opportunity for meaningful dialogue, or the explicit teaching of inferential, evaluative comprehension strategies' (Fisher, 2008: 21) was not evident in the guided reading sessions observed. Rather, the observational data showed the three teacher participants engaged students in reading aloud for three-quarters of the guided reading session and, therefore, failed to capitalise on the learning opportunities offered by guided reading (Fisher, 2008). Teachers' lack of sound understanding of the theoretical principles underpinning guided reading, effective guided reading strategies and the teacher's role in guided reading, may account for the mostly 'reading aloud' observed in these sessions (Fisher, 2008).

Similar findings were reached by Skidmore, Perez-Parent and Arnfield (2003), who investigated teacher–student interactions during guided reading sessions involving six Year 6 students (one to 11 year olds). Like the previous two studies, Skidmore et al. (2003) found that teachers largely dominated the discussion surrounding the guided reading text, thereby limiting opportunities for students to play a role in shaping interactions around the text.

Time constraints and resource availability

A study by Ferguson and Wilson (2009) investigated primary teachers' implementation of guided reading. Teacher survey results found that teacher participants who did not implement guided reading on a regular basis identified insufficient time, competing curriculum demands and pressure to adhere to rigid school curriculum expectations as factors impacting on their ability to implement guided reading. Other teachers cited lack of resources, such as quality instructional texts, as contributing to limited guided reading in the classrooms (Ferguson & Wilson, 2009). Based on their research findings, Ferguson and Wilson concluded that teachers require quality time to implement guided reading as it is a worthwhile educational investment in the long run. They suggest 'it is more efficient to use a quality teaching framework that is responsive to students' needs such as guided reading that will save instructional time in the long run, by reducing the need for continued remediation' (Ferguson & Wilson, 2009: 303). Ferguson and Wilson suggest that issues surrounding time constraints and conflicting curriculum demands could be adequately addressed by integrating content areas into well-planned guided reading sessions (Ferguson & Wilson, 2009).

Section 5:

Link between guided reading and levelled texts

Careful selection of texts by teachers for guided reading purposes is a critical element of a guided reading session. Text selection should be informed by students' reading needs, interests and abilities (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 1996) and appropriate in terms of age and grade level (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Moreover, the guided reading texts selected need to provide the correct balance of both support and challenge – challenge 'that will facilitate new learning' (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 1996a: 88) for the learners (Gaynor et al., 1997). That said, the Ministry of Education of New Zealand (2003: 127) argues that 'supports and challenges exist only in relation to the reader; what one finds a challenge, another may find a support'.

A text's level of difficulty is determined by a range of factors, such as:

- a learner's previous knowledge
 - a text's vocabulary and sentence structure complexity
 - overall organisational structure of the text
 - the role of visual information in supporting and extending meaning
 - text length
 - conceptual density
 - theme complexity
- (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 2003; Rog, 2003).

These factors have serious implications for teachers when selecting a text. Teachers need to have an understanding of their learners in terms of 'the diverse experiences and understandings that each student will bring to the reading, so that the text will be manageable and at an appropriate level of challenge for each of them [students]' (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 1996a).

Fountas and Pinnell (2001: 223) share a similar view, arguing that texts selected for guided reading 'must engage readers and at the same time provide opportunities to extend their reading ability'. They suggest that if a text is too challenging for a reader, then comprehension will be lost. In contrast, a text that does not offer sufficient challenges to a reader will fail to offer learning opportunities. It is on this basis that Fountas and Pinnell (2001: 225) argue 'to provide effective guided reading lessons, teachers must select texts that present only a few challenges in terms of word solving, concepts and ideas, and language'.

Levelled texts

Levelled texts are instructional reading materials (Pitcher & Fang, 2007) that are arranged along a continuum or gradient of levels according to difficulty, from simple to more complex and challenging texts (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Hill, 2001; Villaume & Brabham, 2002). Texts that share similar characteristics or features are viewed as offering approximately the same level of challenge and support to the reader and, therefore, share the same level of difficulty (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Concerning the levels along the continuum or gradient, Fountas and Pinnell (2005: 8, 9) state 'the level is an approximation of its [the text's] difficulty ... a given level is always seen in relation to the levels below and above it. As you move up the gradient, the texts are harder; as you move down, the texts are easier'. The level of difficulty of a text or 'manageability of a text' refers to an 'individual's ability to read the words, access the language, use the organisational features to get information, and construct meaning from the text' (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001: 225–6). According to Fountas and Pinnell (2001), a number of factors determine the manageability of a text for a reader. These include the features of the book and print, the vocabulary used, the complexity of sentences, overall structural organisation of the text, use of literary language and complexity of ideas, themes and concepts. Pitcher and Fang (2007) concur, arguing that when establishing a text's level of difficulty, a teacher should take into account the reader's age, reading interests, existing processing strategies, vocabulary, sentence structures, topics, amount of visual support and the context. However, they also emphasise the importance of teachers being aware of their students as 'readers', which involves knowing individual students' 'interests, cognitive aptitudes, relevant background knowledge, instructional and life histories and socio-cultural identities' (Pitcher & Fang, 2007: 51).

Why use levelled texts for guided reading?

Levelled texts are books specifically designed to support reading instruction and development at all stages of reading development (Pitcher & Fang, 2007). Specifically, levelled texts are suitable instructional materials for both students who are at the early stage of their reading development and more fluent, independent readers who require support to develop skills and strategies to engage meaningfully with more sophisticated texts (Fountas & Pinnell, 2005, 2006). Fountas and Pinnell argue that levelled texts become progressively more challenging moving up the gradient and place increasing demands on the reader. Through careful selection of 'instructional-level' texts, which provide a balance between support and challenge, students are supported over time to develop the strategies necessary to process more complex texts with success (Fawson & Reutzel, 2000; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, 2005; Rog, 2003) and in doing so extend their 'reading powers' (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012: 276). Fountas and Pinnell argue, 'If the book is too difficult, then the processing will not be proficient, no matter how much teaching you do' (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012: 276).

Grading controls

High-quality, commercially produced levelled texts recommended for guided reading purposes, such as the PM series of readers published by Cengage Learning, are meticulously levelled (Ciuffetelli, 2008). A range of predetermined grading controls is combined to create a gently ascending gradient. PM grading controls include:

- sentence structure and complexity
 - sentence length
 - cumulative word control
 - age-appropriate concepts
 - layout and typography (e.g. font, size of type, spacing, line and page breaks)
 - text length
 - conjunctions
 - contractions
 - literary language
 - illustrations
- (for a detailed discussion of PM grading controls refer to the 'PM Research Project', Ciuffetelli, 2008).

Fountas and Pinnell (2012: 277) identify ten characteristics related to text difficulty, including text forms and structure, content, themes and ideas, language and literacy features, sentence complexity, vocabulary (meaning of words), words (length and complexity), illustrations, and book and print features.

Potential limitations of levelled texts

Levelled texts are considered valuable materials for reading instruction in a guided reading context. However, studies investigating the trustworthiness and reliability of levelled texts have identified flaws in some text levelling systems. To illustrate, Pitcher and Fang (2007) undertook a small-scale study that involved a detailed linguistic analysis of sample texts from a levelled reading series published in the United States. Pitcher and Fang's comprehensive analyses of 20 texts at levels 5, 10, 15 and 20 found that texts at each level shared common characteristics, but also 'distinct variations within each level' (Pitcher & Fang 2007: 48) that impacted on the level of difficulty of the text. Moreover, their study found inconsistencies in the quality of the levelled texts 'within and between levels' (Pitcher & Fang, 2007: 50), and they concluded that teachers should be cautious when choosing levelled texts, arguing that 'the particular level of a text selected may not always answer the instructional needs of the target child' (Pitcher & Fang, 2007: 50). Fountas and Pinnell also advise educators to take care when selecting levelled texts for guided reading purposes. They argue that some levelled texts lack quality, are based on a poor and inconsistent levelling system, and are formulaic in nature (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Mere (2005: 61) concurs with the need for scepticism, suggesting that while levelled texts may be useful tools for reading instruction, not all levelled texts provide an engaging experience for the reader or are high-quality texts. While Meres appreciates the value of engaging and high-quality levelled texts for guided reading purposes, she also advocates for the use of non-levelled texts that include features and characteristics that support readers in their learning (Mere, 2005: 64, 134).

Section 6:

The role of assessment in guided reading

What is assessment?

Assessment is the ongoing and systematic process of gathering evidence using a wide range of valid and reliable assessment measures in order to make well-formed judgements about student progress. The information gathered provides teachers with useful insights into each learner's current skills, knowledge and understanding to create a detailed profile of student capabilities. Profile information is used to identify students' strengths and weaknesses, inform future planning and make decisions concerning specific teaching foci and appropriate teaching resources (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Gaynor et al., 1997; Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 1996a, 2003; Smith & Elley, 1997).

Reading assessment procedures

Reliable procedures to assess reading development include:

- informal student observations and discussions
- anecdotal records
- informal reading inventories
- word recognition tests (e.g. Burt Word Reading Test)
- reading comprehension assessments
- Clay's Diagnostic Survey (Clay, 1985; 1993; 2013)
- vocabulary knowledge tests
- reading logs to monitor level of reading engagement
- attitudinal surveys (Smith & Elley, 1997)
- retellings
- formal teacher–student conferences
- self-assessments
- reading records (Gaynor et al., 1997; Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 1996a, 1996b, 2003).

Through the use of a full range of reading assessment procedures, teachers can develop an accurate and comprehensive profile of their students' attitudes, interests, strategies, knowledge and skills, understandings, processing strategies, information sources used, reading development and progress over time, understanding of texts and text structures, content knowledge' (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 1996: 60). The data gathered allows teachers to make informed decisions concerning future teaching foci in guided reading sessions, flexible student groupings (Ford & Optiz, 2001; 2011) and choice of appropriate guided reading materials that both challenge and support the readers (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 1996) and, in doing so, maximise new learning opportunities for students.

Reading records

Originally developed in the 1970s by Marie Clay (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 2003; Smith & Elley, 1997) and commonly used as an assessment procedure, reading records are a tool for systemically observing, recording, analysing and scoring a learner's reading behaviour (Gaynor et al., 1997; Smith & Elley, 1997). Reading records provide teachers with valuable and reliable information on a learner's reading behaviour (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Mere, 2005; Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 1996a) and are a particularly useful tool for determining the reading behaviours of early years students and students who have been identified as at risk 'at any level' (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 2003: 59). Specifically, reading records provide information that assists teachers to:

- gain an insight into the student's developing reading strategies such as self-correction rates and sources of information the reader is, and is not, attending to while reading
- provide information about the level of difficulty of an unfamiliar and familiar text by calculating an error score
- make decisions concerning student groupings based on like needs and future teaching foci
- determine the effectiveness of teaching strategies implemented by the teacher
- maintain an ongoing record of each student's reading development and reading history
- identify, explicitly target and address students' areas of need
- build the teacher's knowledge of the reading process
- identify students who are experiencing reading difficulties and who may be 'at risk' (Clay, 1991, 2005; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, 2012; Gaynor et al., 1997; Mere, 2006; Smith & Elley, 1997; Wall, 2014).

Concerning the role that reading records play in planning for guided reading, Fountas and Pinnell state 'they [running records] are the most important tool in guided reading' (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996: 78). However, they are not a suitable assessment procedure for students identified as 'fluent and competent readers' (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 1996a: 66).

Determining instructional level

Clay (2005) argues that research findings indicate reading development is supported and learning opportunities maximised when readers have access to texts 'at their personal instructional level' (Clay, 2005: 57). An instructional level text is considered to be a text that a learner reads with between 90 and 94 per cent word accuracy. Clay (2005) suggests a reading record that reveals a score of 90 to 94 per cent accuracy provides evidence of errors. An analysis of errors made by the reader during oral reading and recorded by the teacher can provide information on how the reader is 'monitoring their own reading ... in the young reader we can hear and record how the child is problem solving or processing information' (Clay, 2005: 57). Clay claims this information assists teachers to develop a profile on the learner's reading behaviours and assists in careful planning for future guided reading sessions. A score between 80 and 89 per cent suggests the text is too challenging or 'hard' for the reader. In contrast, a score within the range of 95 to 100 per cent accuracy indicates an 'easy' text. Texts used for guided reading purposes should be at a reader's instructional level.

Section 7:

Summary

This research paper has provided a comprehensive overview of guided reading. The paper has argued that guided reading is an effective instructional approach for supporting the reading development of learners at different stages of their reading development. While benefits for both students and teachers have been identified, potential problems were also reported, which have undermined the guided reading approach and resulted in either limited implementation or the serious misinterpretation of guided reading by teachers in classrooms. To ensure that students and teachers benefit fully from effective implementation of guided reading and potential problems are addressed, a number of critical factors must be considered.

First, teachers must have a clear understanding of each individual learner's stage of reading development and reading needs, determined through evidence gathered using a range of reliable and valid reading assessment measures. Knowledge of students' reading needs and abilities assists teachers to select appropriate instructional texts and establish teaching foci for guided reading sessions that reflect students' needs and thus support new learning. Second, another crucial factor in ensuring the effectiveness of guided reading is in-depth teacher knowledge and understanding of all aspects of the guided reading approach and, more importantly, what this theoretical knowledge looks like in practical terms. Specifically, teachers need to have knowledge of effective teaching approaches and be skilled users of strategies such as modelling, questioning, prompting, explicit teaching, and knowing when and how to apply these strategies to support reading development. Teachers also need to be skilled at 'facilitating high-quality interactions that provide opportunities for learners to problem solve, negotiate meanings and engage in analytical and critical thinking leading to deeper levels of comprehension and extending learners' reading power' (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012: 279). Finally, effective implementation of guided reading is dependent on time, resource availability and text knowledge. Teachers require quality time to implement guided reading, access to high-standard instructional reading materials for guided reading purposes, and a sound understanding of factors impacting on the text difficulty and features of high-quality instructional texts.

In light of the factors identified as being crucial in the effective implementation of guided reading, Fountas and Pinnell (2012) argue strongly for the need for ongoing professional development and training for classroom teachers on guided reading delivered by highly skilled and experienced guided reading tutors and literacy coaches, high-quality levelled texts that are engaging, visually appealing and based on a meticulous grading system (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012) and, lastly, professional development for school leadership that is designed to educate leaders on the value and benefits of guided reading.

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