

Guided Reading 101

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This tool kit is a survival guide for teachers who are new to guided reading. It contains everything you need to get started with guided reading in a way that will make a positive impact on your students' reading achievement, including research articles, classroom resources, checklists, assessment tools, and management guides. You will encounter these resources throughout this course in the **Your Turn** topic. They are provided here as a quick, convenient guide to get you started with guided reading today!

Guided Reading Basics

What Is Guided Reading?

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What Is Guided Reading?

By Gay Su Pinnell

Guided reading is an instructional approach that involves a teacher working with a small group of students who demonstrate similar reading behaviors and can all read similar levels of texts. The text is easy enough for students to read with your skillful support. The text offers challenges and opportunities for problem solving, but is easy enough for students to read with some fluency. You choose selections that help students expand their strategies.

What is the purpose of guided reading?

You select books that students can read with about 90 percent accuracy. Students can understand and enjoy the story because it's accessible to them through their own strategies, supported by your introduction. They focus on meaning but use problem-solving strategies to figure out words they don't know, deal with difficult sentence structure, and understand concepts or ideas they have never before encountered in print.

Why is guided reading important?

Guided reading gives students the chance to apply the strategies they already know to new text. You provide support, but the ultimate goal is independent reading.

When are children ready for guided reading?

Developing readers have already gained important understanding about how print works. These students know how to monitor their own reading. They have the ability to check on themselves or search for possibilities and alternatives if they encounter a problem when reading. For these readers, the guided reading experience is a powerful way to support the development of reading strategies.

The ultimate goal of guided reading is reading a variety of texts with ease and deep understanding. Silent reading means rapid processing of texts with most attention on meaning, which is achieved as readers move past beginning levels (H, I, J). At all levels, students read orally with fluency and phrasing.

Matching Books to Readers

The teacher selects a text for a small group of students who are similar in their reading behaviors at a particular point in time. In general, the text is about right for students in the group. It is not too easy, yet not too hard, and offers a variety of challenges to help readers become flexible problem solvers. You should choose Guided Reading Program books for students that:

- match their knowledge base.
- help them take the next step in learning to read.
- are interesting to them.
- offer just enough challenge to support problem solving while still supporting fluency and meaning.

Supporting Students' Reading

In working with students in guided reading, you constantly balance the difficulty of the text with support for students reading the text. You introduce the story to the group, support individuals through brief interactions while they read, and guide them to talk together afterwards about the words and ideas in the text. In this way, you refine text selection and help individual readers move forward in developing a reading process.

Good readers employ a wide range of word-solving strategies, including analysis of sound-letter relationships and word parts. They must figure out words that are embedded in different kinds of texts. Reading a variety of books enables them to go beyond reading individual words to interpreting language and its subtle meanings.

For more specific teaching suggestions, see individual cards for each book title.

Procedure for Guided Reading

- The teacher works with a small group of students with similar needs.
- The teacher provides introductions to the text that support children's later attempts at problem solving.
- Each student reads the whole text or a unified part of the text.
- Readers figure out new words while reading for meaning.
- The teacher prompts, encourages, and confirms students' attempts at problem solving.
- The teacher and student engage in meaningful conversation about what they are reading.
- The teacher and student revisit the text to demonstrate and use a range of comprehension strategies.



The Research Foundation for Guided Reading

Research Foundation	Guided Reading Implementation
<p>Phonemic Awareness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phonemic awareness instruction helps children to read, spell, and comprehend text (Put Reading First). • “Phonemic awareness instruction does not need to consume long periods of time to be effective. In these analyses, programs lasting less than 20 hours were more effective than longer programs” (Nation Reading Panel, 2000). • “In addition to teaching phonemic awareness skills with letters, it is important for teachers to help children make the connection between the skill taught and their application to reading and writing tasks” (National Reading, 2000). 	<p>In Guided Reading, phonemic awareness instruction helps children know how to check on their reading. Teachers offer explicit instruction in matching same sounds, blending, and attending to rhyme in text.</p> <p>Children learn to notice mismatches between sound and meaning, using letter-sound information to make sense of words.</p> <p>Teachers prompt children to make their reading “sound right” and “look right.”</p>
<p>Phonics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The more words a reader recognizes, the easier the reading task. Therefore, phonics instruction aids in the development of word recognition by providing children with an important and useful way to figure out unfamiliar words while reading” (Blevins, 1998). • Reading words accurately and automatically enables children to focus on the meaning of text (Put Reading First). • “Effective phonics programs provide ample opportunities for children to apply what they are learning about letters and sounds to the reading of words, sentences, and stories” (Put Reading First). 	<p>In Guided Reading, teachers select texts that offer students opportunities to use phonics skills.</p> <p>As they introduce texts, support reading, and revisit the text after reading, teachers bring children’s attention to features of words and strategies for decoding words (common sound-spelling patterns, consonant blends, diphthongs, phonograms, etc.)</p> <p>Teachers explicitly demonstrate how to take words apart and apply phonics principles to new words that children meet in continuous text. Teachers prompt children to use phonics skills to take words apart while reading.</p>

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The Research Foundation for Guided Reading (*cont'd*)

Research Foundation	Guided Reading Implementation
<p>Fluency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Fluency develops as a result of many opportunities to practice reading with a high degree of success. Therefore, your students should practice orally rereading text that is reasonably easy for them—that is, text containing mostly words that they know or can decode easily” (Put Reading First). • “If text is read in a laborious and inefficient manner, it will be difficult for the child to remember what has been read and to relate the ideas expressed in the text to his or her background knowledge” (National Reading Panel, 2000). • “Fluency is not a state of development at which readers can read all words quickly and easily. Fluency changes, depending on what readers are reading, their familiarity with the words, and the amount of their practice with reading text” (Put Reading First). • “It is important to provide students with instruction and practice in fluency as they read connected text” (Put Reading First). • Repeated and monitored oral reading improves reading fluency and overall reading achievement (Put Reading First). 	<p>In Guided Reading, texts are selected to be within students’ control so that they know most of the words and can read fluently (with teaching).</p> <p>The teacher introduces the text to support comprehension and connections to language. Teachers draw students’ attention to elements of words that will help them recognize or solve them rapidly.</p> <p>Teachers provide explicit demonstrations and instructions in reading fluency. Teachers demonstrate oral readings of text as a model for children, and prompt for fluency when children are reading aloud.</p> <p>Children engage in repeated oral readings to improve fluency.</p>

The Research Foundation for Guided Reading (*cont'd*)

Research Foundation	Guided Reading Implementation
<p>Vocabulary</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Vocabulary acquisition by children is achieved both directly and indirectly. It has been observed that ‘[e]xtended instruction that promotes active engagement with vocabulary improves word learning’ and that teaching specific words in advance of reading, as well as exposure to words in several contexts, contributes to the acquisition of vocabulary” (Put Reading First). • “Children learn many new words by reading extensively on their own. The more children read on their own, the more words they encounter and the more word meanings they learn” (Put Reading First). • The National Reading Panel Report for 2000 observes that “...the larger the reader’s vocabulary (either oral or print), the easier it is to make sense of the text.” • “The more oral language experiences children have, the more word meanings they learn” (Put Reading First). 	<p>In Guided Reading, the teacher introduces the text to support comprehension with specific attention to concepts and words.</p> <p>The teacher then provides pre-planned word work which helps students attend to word parts and word meaning (affixes, word structure, homophones, synonyms, etc.)</p> <p>As a follow-up to reading, the teacher teaches processing strategies, which may include both word recognition and how to determine word meanings. Special attention is paid to the recognition of context as an aid to determine word meaning.</p> <p>Students and teacher together discuss the meaning of the text, including further discussion of word meanings as needed.</p> <p>Children extend the meaning of the text through writing, which necessarily includes attention to vocabulary.</p> <p>In Guided Reading, texts are selected to be “just right”- a level of text at which students know most of the words but there are a few new words to provide opportunities for learning.</p> <p>In Guided Reading, each reading lesson includes two specific discussion suggestions for an expansion upon story themes and ideas. These discussions are aimed at providing opportunities for students to practice vocabulary, exchange opinions, and articulate their own responses to the reading.</p> <p>In addition, students have the opportunity to read the text both silently and orally with teacher support, in order to develop familiarity and fluency.</p>

The Research Foundation for Guided Reading (*cont'd*)

Research Foundation	Guided Reading Implementation
<p>Comprehension</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The data suggest that text comprehension is enhanced when readers actively relate the ideas represented in print to their own knowledge and experiences and construct mental representations in memory” (National Reading Panel, 2000). • “Readers must know what most of the words mean before they can understand what they are reading” (Put Reading First). • “Conversations about books help children to learn new words and concepts and to relate them to their prior knowledge and experience” (Put Reading First). • “In general, the evidence suggests that teaching a combination of reading comprehension techniques is the most effective. When students use them appropriately, they assist in recall, question answering, question generation, and summarization of texts. When used in combination, these techniques can improve results in standardized comprehension tests” (National Reading Panel, 2000). 	<p>In Guided Reading, books are selected from a collection organized into a gradient of difficulty. Within each level teachers can select texts that readers can process successfully with supportive teaching.</p> <p>Emphasis is placed on finding books that are “just right.” “Just right” means that the reader must be able to process or read the text well by doing the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) using knowledge of what makes sense; 2) knowing or solving most of the words quickly with a high level of accuracy; and 3) reading at a good rate with phrasing and intonation (that is putting words together in groups so that the reading sounds like language). <p>In Guided Reading, selections are available in a wide variety of genres, including concept books (at lower levels), fantasy, realistic and historical fiction, biography, science, and social studies nonfiction, and other genres.</p> <p>At higher levels of difficulty, longer “chapter books” are included to build readers’ stamina and confidence.</p> <p>In Guided Reading, the teacher explains words and concepts and assures that students activate their own prior knowledge as a precursor to reading each selection. Additionally each text is introduced with background information on the subject matter or author, as well as a suggested Internet site for further exploration.</p>

The Research Foundation for Guided Reading (*cont'd*)

Research Foundation	Guided Reading Implementation
<p>Comprehension</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Text comprehension can be improved by instruction that helps readers use specific comprehension strategies” (Put Reading First). • “Comprehension strategies are not ends in themselves; they are a means of helping your students understand what they are reading. Help your students learn to use comprehension strategies in natural learning situations—for example, as they read in the content areas” (Put Reading First). • “Teachers not only must have a firm grasp of the content presented in text, but also must have substantial knowledge of the strategies themselves, or which strategies are most effective for different students and types of content and of how best to teach and model strategy use” (National Reading Panel, 2000). 	<p>In Guided Reading, the integration of phonics and word study with examination and discussion of each text leads naturally to a writing exercise that is an extension of the reading.</p> <p>At each level, comprehension strategies serve to give readers a tool for approaching the selection. Follow-up discussion and writing extensions are closely linked to reinforcing comprehension of the selection.</p> <p>Students expand strategies by applying them with teacher support to texts that are more difficult than those they could read independently.</p> <p>In Guided Reading, the teacher demonstrates and teaches a range of effective strategies for comprehending text. Strategies are used in response to the demands of specific selections.</p> <p>At beginning levels, recommended strategies relate to print and text features that promote access to the story, as well as to basic comprehension skills of predicting, comparing and contrasting, and relating to personal experiences.</p> <p>At advanced levels, students are asked to analyze stories in more depth by, for example, evaluating the author’s purpose, understanding theme and story development, summarizing texts, and reading for information. Also at these levels, readers are encouraged to observe structural features such as plots within plots, literacy devices such as flashbacks, stylistic</p>

The Research Foundation for Guided Reading (*cont'd*)

Research Foundation	Guided Reading Implementation
<p>Comprehension, <i>cont'd</i></p>	<p>details such as unusual ways of organizing paragraphs, and graphic material such as sidebar information, diagrams, and charts.</p>
<p>Writing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A balanced literacy program incorporates a wide range of oral language, reading, and writing activities (Lyon and Moats, 1997; Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998). 	<p>In Guided Reading, teachers help students extend their understanding and vocabulary through both oral language and writing. Students present their written ideas in four basic categories—persuasive, expository, narrative and descriptive—as well as poetry.</p> <p>Additionally, the teacher often engages students in follow-up activities that use print in different ways—incorporating ideas into graphic aids such as posters, diagrams, charts, or lists. This follow-up is an ideal way to help children develop skills of summarizing, extending meaning, analyzing aspects of text, interpreting text, and discovering the structure of text—all essential skills that are also tested on proficiency tests.</p>
<p>Motivation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The importance of motivation in the effectiveness of any reading program cannot be overestimated. It is critical that future pedagogical research take into account the approaches that teachers prefer and those that have proven to be most effective in successful classroom instruction (National Reading Panel, 2000). 	<p>In Guided Reading, teachers select books that will be interesting to children, from a broad range of genres, styles, and levels of difficulty. Texts are introduced in a way that is specifically aimed at engaging interest, encouraging curiosity about a topic, and motivating students to pursue reading as a way of satisfying their need to know.</p>

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The Essential Elements of Guided Reading

	Before the reading	During the reading	After the reading
Teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> selects an appropriate text, one that will be supportive but with a few problems to solve prepares an introduction to the story briefly introduces the story, keeping in mind the meaning, language, and visual information in the text, and the knowledge, experience, and skills of the reader leaves some questions to be answered through reading 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "listens in" observes the reader's behaviors for evidence of strategy use confirms student's problem-solving attempts and successes interacts with individuals to assist with problem-solving difficulty (when appropriate) makes notes about the strategy use of individual readers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> talks about the story with the children invites personal response returns to the text for one or two teaching opportunities such as finding evidence or discussing problem solving assesses children's understanding of what they read sometimes engages the children in extending the story through such activities as drama, writing, art, or more reading
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> engage in a conversation about the story raise questions build expectations notice information in the text 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> read the whole text or a unified part to themselves (softly or silently) request help in problem solving when needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> talk about the story check predictions and react personally to the story or information revisit the text at points of problem-solving as guided by the teacher may reread the story to a partner or independently sometimes engage in activities that involve extending and responding to the text (such as drama or journal writing)

Major Benefits of Guided Reading

All Grades	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporates current research and understandings about literacy and teaching.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helps the teacher effectively monitor and support students' literacy development.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through the supported learning environment of small group work, students' enjoyment and confidence in reading grows.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows for a range of learning needs in any class and at all grade levels.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fosters development of students' comprehension, reading strategies, and critical response to a variety of texts.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides support for literacy activities including independent reading and writing, and oral language development.
Intermediate Grades	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reviews and reinforces basic reading, word study, and comprehension skills and strategies.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses on higher-level skills for critical thinking, exploring language, and synthesizing information.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporates a variety of genres, including nonfiction, to help students develop skills needed in math, science, and social studies.

Managing and Monitoring the Rest of the Class During Guided Reading: Three Literacy Educators Share Their Stories

Lois Lanning

Pomperang Regional School District 15. C7

How intermediate grade teachers should group children for reading instruction is an issue that numerous educators are attempting to effectively address. If we begin with a conviction that a comprehensive literacy approach best meets the needs of learners, the need for a variety of grouping practices cannot be rationally opposed. Support for a comprehensive approach to literacy instruction, an approach that entails a wide-range of competencies, is built on a solid foundation of research (Blair-Larsen & Williams, 1999). Grade 3-5 teachers who ascribe to this view of literacy must maintain a complex balancing act as they design instructional activities, implement various grouping practices for specific reasons, and continuously reevaluate student performance. This article addresses the ways in which teachers orchestrate this balancing act so that children who are not participating in guided reading groups are engaged in productive learning experiences.

When planning lessons teachers continuously try to integrate the skills and processes of all aspects of the language arts within authentic, real-life, contexts. They systematically work to provide a balance of teacher-directed, explicit instruction and student-centered discovery learning. The overarching goal in all the teachers' planning and instruction is to foster

independent learners who enjoy reading and writing. Because learning is dynamic and children develop their skills at different rates, whole group, small group, pairs and individualized instruction all have a place in a comprehensive literacy program. Berghoff and Egawa (1991) analyzed the merits of various grouping configurations from several different perspectives and concluded, "The organization of the classroom is a teaching tool. It works to optimize children's opportunities to be in control of their learning..."(p.540). Recently, reading publications and intermediate grade classroom teachers have been focusing on the organization of guided reading groups as part of a comprehensive literacy program. (Fountas & Pinnell, 1998; Opitz & Ford, 2001). Guided reading is small group instruction designed to address specific needs of the readers in the group.

Many teachers, however, are anxious about including guided reading as part of their language arts instruction. There are many reasons teachers may be intimidated by the thought of implementing guided reading but probably one of the most common reasons is concern about class management. Management is considered the cornerstone of an effective classroom so when faced with the possibility of undertaking guided reading groups, teachers often ask important questions such as, "How can I ensure

the other twenty students are productively engaged and productively monitored while I'm running a guided reading lesson? What makes for meaningful tasks for the other children? What about those students who have difficulty working independently?"

There are many ways to manage and monitor the rest of the class while conducting guided reading lessons. Of course, much will depend on the nature of the students in the class and their learning needs, so there is never "one" right way to determine appropriate work for the other students. Activities designed for intermediate grade students that are working independent of the teacher are very different than activities a primary grade teacher would plan. Students in grades 3-5 have a broader understanding of reading and writing and therefore activities can be more complex and extended over longer periods of time. Brian Cambourne (2001) stresses that determining the types of activities is very important for several reasons:

1. The activities are the main strategy that teachers have available to "free them up" so they can devote their energy and attention to students involved in guided reading.
2. The activities determine how meaningful the learning from collaborative or independent work will be.
3. If students cannot or do not engage deeply with these activities, teachers intuitively know very little learning will occur.
4. The activities can promote learners in becoming interdependent with respect to each other and independent with respect to the teacher.

Many of these points are reiterated by an alarming concern Mike Schmoker (2001) discovered after touring over fifty classrooms in several schools in several states. His visits revealed that the activities

students were participating in during reading time had little to do with legitimate literacy learning.

Students were not reading, they weren't writing about what they had read, they weren't learning the alphabet or its corresponding sounds; they weren't learning words or sentences or how to read short texts. They were coloring...cutting or building things out of paper (Schmoker, 2001, p. 44).

Designing appropriate activities takes time. It also assumes the teacher has a deep understanding of literacy, knows where each student in the classroom is in his/her literacy development, and recognizes that preparing students for activities is as important as the search for effective activities. The following stories by three literacy educators from one school help to capture some of the concerns, successes, and reflections of talented professionals as they discuss ideas about how to productively manage what the rest of the class is doing during guided reading. First, Barbara Mikush, K-5 reading consultant, shares some questions she often receives from teachers in her building, her responses to them and her insights about common guided reading issues. Next, two classroom teachers, Jane White, grade three, and Bev Poulin, grade five, reveal some of their experiences with selecting and implementing activities for students who are not at the reading table with the teacher.

Barbara Mikush **K-5 Reading Consultant**

Classroom management is clearly the key to effective literacy instruction. With guided reading being an integral part of a comprehensive literacy program, much attention needs to be given to the dynamics of classroom management. The key is to enable students to produce quality products while working with one another, but independently of the teacher. In order to accomplish this, independent work assignments need

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Professional Article ■ *Managing and Monitoring the Rest of the Class During Guided Reading*

to have clear objectives that students can verbalize if asked. How do we foster this independence in our students? We need to assign literacy activities that are familiar to students. Literacy activities need to be meaningful and authentic, in other words, they should represent the reading and writing tasks students will be expected to demonstrate in every day situations. Many worksheets do not constitute authentic reading and writing activities, as they require minimal skill acquisition to complete.

In order to ensure successful classroom management, I recommended that teachers implement guided reading slowly and gradually. In the first weeks of the implementation process, the goal may be to meet with one guided reading group, the most fragile readers. Why meet with one group initially? I like to think of it as building “endurance” for the length of time in which the “other students” can work independently. During each consecutive week in the implementation process, the teacher may add an additional guided reading group.

What if the students who are not at the guided reading table have difficulty staying on task for the length of time that it takes the teacher to complete two or three guided reading groups? Rather than do all of the groups in one block of time, the teacher might split the schedule so it entails meeting with two groups, followed by whole class instruction and concluding with a final guided reading group for the day. The chemistry and grade level of the class will be the determining factors in how the teacher will manage a schedule that is conducive to guided reading.

With rich curricula, it makes sense to teach multiple curriculum concepts through guided reading. By incorporating content area concepts into guided reading lessons, teachers can develop integrated units that provide more opportunities to create meaningful literacy extensions for the rest of the class to complete on their own. I will conclude with a quote from a

friend and a former colleague of mine, Peter Tognalli, “We can’t ask teachers to work any harder: we can only ask them to work differently.” These words seem to help explain the mindset a teacher should have when considering how he/she will manage the rest of the class during guided reading.

Jane White

Third Grade Teacher Long Meadow Elementary School

Several days before school was to begin two years ago, I was informed that two new students would be placed in my third grade classroom. Both were reading at the first grade level and would join another student who was also reading first grade materials. These students became part of my already diverse classroom. I wondered if I would ever be able to teach reading that would support each student at his/her instructional level and address the needs of all students in my classroom. I soon realized that I needed to tailor my reading instruction to meet these varying needs. I began to research and read anything I could find on guided reading and became very interested in Fountas and Pinnell’s guided reading model. I came to a better understanding of what it means to truly teach reading as I learned more about the reading process.

I found that in order for the classroom activities to run smoothly and effectively, students needed clear expectations, directions, and a sufficient amount of modeling. To ensure that I could direct my attention to the small, guided reading groups, meaningful and engaging tasks were introduced and modeled. Long term projects, writing assignments and preparation for our weekly Literature Circle discussion groups afforded me the opportunity to meet with guided reading groups three to five times per week. Groups were scheduled in thirty-minute blocks throughout the morning Reading/Language Arts period.

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District in-service opportunities support me as I continue to strive to teach reading in the most effective manner. I know that every day is a new learning opportunity as I continue to seek to deliver the best possible reading instruction to all students.

Bev Poulin
Grade Five Teacher
Long Meadow Elementary School

I thought I was already teaching guided reading when I read stories with my entire class and monitored their comprehension through a series of questions on all different levels. I was modeling for them. I was making them think more by using higher skill level questions. I was helping them relate to the text. I introduced different skills and then had them practice applying these skills using pencil and paper tasks or other activities related to the novels they were reading (i.e., cause and effect). As I read about the concept of guided reading, however, I realized there was much more for me to learn.

Classroom management, surprisingly, was not my biggest concern when I started thinking about how I would implement guided reading in my classroom. It probably should have been when you consider the fact that I had never before systematically used small group reading instruction in my classroom. Initially, I guess my biggest concern was how I could keep up with all of the materials that my students would be reading so that I could give relevant instruction and relate to their responses.

Our fifth grade team decided to devote three days a week to guided reading using leveled libraries. Leveled libraries consist of text sorted into various levels of difficulty. The rest of the students in the class would participate in a variety of literacy activities with other specific novels while I was working with a particular guided reading group. At

first I wanted to match the focus strategy from students' guided reading lessons to the activities related to the novel they would be reading at their seats. I created packets each week for each of the books. It took me hours, and I realized I could not do this three days a week. I'd burn out in no time. On the advice of a colleague, I turned to our basal reading program as a resource for activities. The literacy activities students can choose include art, music, drama, oral presentations, and the creation of manuals, posters, and games that are very engaging. The children thoroughly enjoy the variety and the fact that they have choice. You do not have to be wary of some of these activities as they are not all authentic or relevant to the students' needs, but many are worthwhile and foster cooperation and collaboration. The children have the option to work in pairs or as a group of five. They take turns in assuming leadership roles. There are many wrap-up projects included in the basal that are also meaningful.

Sometimes the kids are so engaged in a book activity that I feel I am intruding when I am ready to call the next guided reading group. Sometimes I actually feel like an outsider when I'm watching them discussing, agreeing, and disagreeing, leading and following each other without cues from me. They are so involved and excited about what they are doing! If the sound level gets a bit out of control, I talk with the class about a "working hum" versus noise.

Another issue I needed to consider was the make-up of the groups that are working independently of the teacher. If students are unable to work collaboratively, I need to make a decision about whether I need to spend more time on modeling group process skills or on changing the group membership. To avoid disagreements, I sometimes have to allow smaller groups or pairs of students within a group to work together on an activity. At first I noted more disagreement among the members of the highest group, but this was expected. They are all high

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achievers who tend to assume leadership roles and too many chiefs and not enough followers requires compromise and taking turns.

I have not had any problems ensuring that children are engaged and monitored. They are very busy and I have a wide variety of written and oral responses from them that allow me to monitor their reading behaviors. The activities found in our new basal program have helped me considerably. Sometimes groups of students all read silently at the same time. This give me an opportunity to take one child at a time, pull him or her aside and do an informal observation of their reading fluency, a quick check of comprehension through a retelling, and other “mini” assessments of their reading performances.

I haven’t had any trouble with children refusing to work independently because the groups have an internal peer pressure that keeps everyone on task. Once or twice, when someone was off task, I witnessed the other children saying, “Come on. We have to finish this.” This is the result of students beginning to assume responsibility for their learning, an indirect but important aspect of our curriculum goals.

Conclusion

There are specific characteristics that contribute to successful management of the rest of the class during guided reading time. These characteristics can be found in Barbara, Jane and Bev’s reflections and bear repeating.

1. Activities are carefully selected. The literacy activities the remainder of the class are involved in are explicitly connected to other parts of the day and/or curriculum. Barbara pointed out that integrated curriculum units facilitate these linkages for students and help prevent teachers from feeling they are on curriculum overload. The activities are engaging, meaningful and authentic versus “busy work” such as coloring or fill-in-the

blank worksheets. “Research does not support such activities and too much learning time is lost when the management plan relies on them,” as Fountas and Pinnell remind us (1996, p. 53). The activities should promote independent and interdependent learning and be constructed so that learning is transferable. Careful and thoughtful teacher planning goes into the design and selection of activities, however, as Bev explains there are many resources currently available that offer a plethora of ideas. Teachers do not have to reinvent the wheel. Rather, time is better spent on understanding how students are progressing in their literacy development, thinking about the “big picture” of the curriculum requirements, and matching these needs to the appropriate activities. Some teacher organize their activities around specific centers, as Jane does, and others organize activities around specific books, as Bev mentioned. There is no one right way; it is quality that counts.

2. Routines and expectations are clear and understood. An organized and predictable environment makes student independence possible. Barbara, Jane, and Bev all highlighted the need to clearly explain and model the behavior that is expected in general and for particular tasks. This is time well spent and if done thoroughly, it will avoid the need for constant teacher distractions during guided reading instruction. Barbara stressed that students must understand the purpose of the activity they are engaged in and the activities should be familiar to them.
3. Teachers mindsets about themselves and students change. It was interesting to talk with and then read the vignettes from the teachers who contributed to this article. Each reflected on how they changed their view of their role in the classroom as they implemented guided reading groups. While talking with Jane, she shared her tremendous satisfaction as she began to work more collaboratively with her

continued on next page...

colleagues. She talked of the invaluable support of the building reading consultant as she continued to learn about literacy instruction. Bev found that she had to let go of feeling she needed to always be in charge. As she came to trust the process of putting students in control of their learning in small groups, she found herself watching, and listening more, and consequently students revealed more of what they know and can do independent of the teacher.

4. Recognize this all takes time. Barbara, Jane, and Bev all mentioned that effectively organizing activities for the rest of the class during guided reading is a slow process. Each encouraged teachers to take small steps and not to try to do everything at once. Each of these dedicated professional took responsibility for their own learning through a variety of resources, books, classroom visitations, colleagues, and in-service programs. Their caring about students, their willingness to take risks and their commitment to be continuous learners is obvious. "Quick-fix" methods will not create students who are successful, independent readers and writers. Teachers like Barbara, Jane, and Bev help foster independent and enthusiastic literacy learners every day.

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Additional information on the educators featured in this article.

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Bev Poulin began her education career 1973. While teaching middle school and high school, she completed her Master's Degree in Education and earned her Language Arts and Reading Consultant certification. After a leave of absence of child rearing, she earned her elementary certification. She is currently teaching fifth grade at Long Meadow Elementary School in Middlebury, Connecticut.

Jane White is currently teaching third grade at Long Meadow Elementary School in Middlebury, Connecticut. After graduating from Western Connecticut State University in 1973, she spent several years teaching at Mitchell School in Woodbury, Connecticut before taking a lengthy leave of absence to raise a family. Jane returned to teaching in 1996 and is pursuing a Master's Degree in Reading at Central Connecticut State University.

16 Reading and Writing Centers

Center	Description	Materials
Listening icon:	Students practice listening to stories. They follow and/or read along. They can turn off the tape and read together, with a partner. Improves fluency and comprehension through rereading.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tape recorder(s) • recorded stories • multiple copies of text for recorded stories • headphones • list of guidelines
Readers Theater icon:	Students practice reading texts aloud to prepare for performances. Builds fluency, oral presentation and performance skills, and self-confidence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • multiple texts • simple props, hats, puppets, masks to use to identify characters • list of guidelines
Drama icon:	Dramatic play is a rich source of language activity. It encourages role-playing, storytelling, and listening and speaking skill development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • puppets and art materials for making simple puppets • assorted costume pieces and props (hats, masks, clipboard, menus, books, empty food boxes, baskets, etc.) • large cardboard boxes for stages, props, puppet theater
Read & Write Room icon:	Students read print displayed around the classroom, including charts, word walls, name lists, group stories on chart paper, illustration labels, schedules, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pointers of different lengths (dowels, rulers, chopsticks) • Word hunt lists • Writing materials
Poem Box Variation: Short Story Box icon:	Students read and reread poems they have heard the teacher read, along with poems read during shared reading.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • photocopies of poems to read and illustrate • large-print poems to read using a pointer • poetry books • book of class poems • poem puzzles: jig-saw poems to assemble and read; poems cut into lines, and placed in envelopes for students to assemble and read • short stories: include fables, familiar folktales, myths, and legends

16 Reading and Writing Centers *(continued)*

Center	Description	Materials
Browsing Boxes	Boxes of specially selected titles for each guided reading group for independent reading. Include books read by the group for rereading, and other easier titles students will be able to read and enjoy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • at least one browsing box for each guided reading group • several copies of books • other easier titles students in each group will be able to read
ABC	Letter and word activities that change weekly. Students complete 2–3 different activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • magnetic letters and board • word plus ending puzzles • word family work sheets • letter and word card games
Art	Provide materials students can use to respond visually to guided reading, shared reading, or other reading-related activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • paints • collage materials • recycled cardboard tubes • magazines with pictures • art paper • stencils • letter and picture stamps and ink pads • scissors, glue, tape • clay or play dough
Writing	Store writing materials and student journals in the writing center. Include some art center materials. Students use materials from the center at their own desks to write in response to reading, to their own experiences, to classroom events, to prompts in the Center, etc. They can also use the materials to retell and creating their own stories and poems.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recipe box of cards with writing prompts, student journal • storage boxes • small blank books • pencils, pens, crayons, markers • rulers, scissors, tape, stapler, glue • assorted art materials (See Art Center Materials) • date stamp (See Teacher Resource “Writing Center Supplies”)
Reading Journals	Students write in personal journals about the books they read. They list book titles and their response to the books in writing and/or pictures. Journals reflect student growth in both reading and writing skills.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • blank book with lined pages for each student • writing materials

16 Reading and Writing Centers *(continued)*

Center	Description	Materials
Computer	Computer reading games and word processing programs help develop language skills and computer skills. Students can write their own stories, send and receive email, research topics of interest and print their work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • computer • level-appropriate software • Internet access for email, research, and literacy games • printer and printer paper
Buddy Reading	Reading with partners encourages listening and speaking skills and fluency. Options include: reading in unison, reading whole stories to each other, reading alternate pages, one partner reads the narrative and one character's dialogue, and the other reads one or more characters' dialogue,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • multiple copies of the same book for partners to share
Independent Reading	Students engage in free-choice independent reading with books from the classroom library.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • classroom library (see Teacher Resource "The Classroom Library")
Pocket Charts	Students use individual words, sentence strips, and picture cards to reconstruct familiar poems or stories and create their own poems or short stories. Students cut up teacher-made sentence strips, complete cloze sentence strips, write or copy words onto cards and strips.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pocket chart • word and picture cards • blank word cards • sentence strips for whole-class poem activities • blank sentence strips • pencils, pens, markers • scissors
Literature Circle	Students read independently and then sign up to be part of a literature circle. The goal is for students to share their books and to dig more deeply into them by answering classmates' questions. Discussions can be open-ended or focused on specific aspects, such as characters, setting, theme, author's purpose, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rug or circle of chairs for three to five students • multiple copies of books
Choice	Teacher lists two or three activities students may choose from during choice time. All activities are ones students are familiar with and have engaged in independently. Choices focus on extending language development and literacy across the curriculum. Teacher changes choices weekly.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • work board, portion of the chalkboard, or large paper star with room for strips listing choice activities • older students can continue to work on long-term projects

Oral Retelling

Name: _____ Date: _____

Story or Book: _____

Directions

Have the child retell a story that he/she has just read. Record the information and summarize the story elements used in the retelling.

1. How and where does the story begin? **Beginning/Setting**

2. Who are the main characters? **Characters**

3. What are the most important things that happened in the story?

Sequence of Major Events

4. What is an important problem in the story? **Problem**

5. How is the problem solved? How does the story end? **Resolution**

Rubric for Assessing Children's Retellings

One of the best ways to find out what a child understands about a text is through retellings. Use the observation questions and rubric to help children retell stories and to assess their responses.

Observation Questions:	Level:	Benchmark:
<p>What were the events that happened in the story?</p> <p>What happens first, next, and last in the story?</p>	Advanced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly presents key events and facts in sequence. • Child's retelling has an exceptionally clear beginning, middle, and end.
	Proficient	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presents key events and facts in sequence. • Child's retelling has a clear beginning, middle, and end.
	Basic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presents a sequence of actions and events. • Child's retelling has a beginning, middle, and end, but some of the events are unclear.
	Below Basic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presents unimportant events and facts randomly. • Child's retelling presents unimportant details.

Rubric for Assessing Children's Retellings, *cont'd*

Observation Questions:	Level:	Benchmark:
<p>Who are the main characters in the story?</p> <p>Why do you think they acted as they did?</p>	Advanced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies and gives a strong description of the main characters in the story. Provides reasons for characters' motivations by using examples from text and making inferences.
	Proficient	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies and describes the main characters in the story. Provides reasons for characters' motivations using examples from text.
	Basic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies some of the main characters in the story, but cannot give concrete reasons for their motivations.
	Below Basic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does not identify main characters in the story. Characters presented are insignificant to the story.

Rubric for Assessing Children's Retellings, *cont'd*

Observation Questions:	Level:	Benchmark:
<p>Where does the story take place?</p> <p>When does it take place?</p>	Advanced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gives a strong and accurate description of the setting of the story. • Identifies the time and place in which the story is set.
	Proficient	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gives an accurate description of the setting of the story. • Identifies the time and place in which the story is set.
	Basic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gives a partial description of the setting of the story. • Roughly identifies the time or place in which the story is set.
	Below Basic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not describe the setting of the story. • Does not identify the time or place in which the story is set.

Rubric for Assessing Children's Retellings, *cont'd*

Observation Questions:	Level:	Benchmark:
<p>What was the main challenge or problem in the story?</p>	Advanced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifies the main challenge or problem in story. • Gives examples from the text, supplies missing information, and makes inferences to elaborate on details of the main challenge or problem.
	Proficient	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifies the main challenge or problem in the story. • Gives examples from the text to describe the main challenge or problem in detail.
	Basic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vaguely identifies the main challenge or problem in the story, but examples used to describe it are sketchy.
	Below Basic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not identify the main challenge or problem in the story. • Describes events or actions that are insignificant.

Rubric for Assessing Children's Retellings, *cont'd*

Observation Questions:	Level:	Benchmark:
<p>How did the story end?</p> <p>What was the outcome of the story?</p>	Advanced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides a detailed description of the events at the end of the story. Description includes reasons from text or from inferences that support the resolution.
	Proficient	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides a description of the events at the end of the story. Description includes reasons from text that support the resolution.
	Basic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides a rough description of the events at the end of the story, but details supporting the resolution are vague.
	Below Basic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does not provide a description of the events at the end of the story. Describes insignificant events in the story.

Observation Checklist

Observation is probably the most common type of informal assessment that takes place in your classroom. By observing you will notice:

- which students understand new concepts.
 - which students need extra support.
 - which students contribute to a conversation or activity.
 - how students interact with classmates.
-

How Can I Observe Students Effectively?

Although you probably observe your students informally throughout the school day, planning your observations can be very useful. Here are some guidelines:

- **Decide** what kinds of behaviors you want to observe.
- **Focus** your observation on a few students at a time.
- **Record** your observations as soon as possible, while your recollections are fresh. Use sticky notes or a pad to record what you observe. These can easily be transferred later to more permanent records.
- **Observe** students at different times of the day and on different days, to account for individual peak performance times.
- **Observe** students in varied settings, such as individual, partnered, or group activities.
- **Observe** students at the beginning of a unit of work to gather baseline information about their understanding of key concepts, during the unit to collect information for adjusting your approach as the lessons progress, and at the end of the unit to assess conceptual growth.

Name

Date

SELF CHECK

Stop, Ask, Fix: Student Checklist

- ASK, When reading a difficult text . . .
- I periodically stop and ask, "Does this make sense?"
- I express difference between my own knowledge and beliefs and ideas expressed in text.
- I express awareness or lack of awareness of what the content means.
- I express doubt about understanding when I am unsure or when meaning is unclear.
- I ask, "Where did I lose track?"
- I identify the place where I began to lose comprehension.
- I use fix-up strategies when I experience problems.
- I reread.
- I read on and try to clear up the confusion.
- I substitute words I know (and that fit the context) to replace words I don't understand to see if that works.
- I make mind pictures to "see" in my head what the text means.
- I connect what I am reading to what I have read previously in this text, and what I have read and knew before I read this text. I may ask an author-and-me question because my personal knowledge may help me figure out the meaning.
- I ask myself questions (Why did the character do this? Why did the author put this in?)
- How is this important? Am I supposed to "think and search" or infer?).
- I use these other strategies:

- I ask for help if I have made attempts to understand but can't get it. I ask a peer and then I ask my teacher or another adult.

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Beth Berghoff
Kathryn Egawa

Read ^{the} first part also

No more "rocks": Grouping to give students control of their learning

Berghoff and Egawa are graduate students in language education at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana. Both are interested in supporting teachers in rethinking their practice.

as a teaching strategy might seem to suggest that its merits outweigh its negative consequences. Recently, however, a growing body of research indicates that ability grouping does not increase student achievement, and may, in fact, have detrimental effects on the self-concept and potential achievement of students in lower groups (Morgan, 1989). This research, combined with what we were experiencing, provoked us to rethink literacy instruction.

When we taught the "low" reading group it never felt right. The sixth graders with the third-grade reading books were never eager to read. The first graders who couldn't break the code wiggled and squirmed as they sounded their way through the preprimer stories. We were as relieved as the children when the "low" reading group was finished. They named themselves the Super Heroes or the Cardinals, but everyone knew all classes had three groups: the Eagles, the Bluebirds, and the Rocks (a low group nickname actually used in the teachers' lounge). And everyone knew who belonged to each group.

To us the disadvantage of being in the low group was painfully obvious. Yet many educational systems adhere to the philosophical stance that students are more efficiently and effectively educated when they are ability grouped. The prevalence of ability grouping

A new understanding of literacy

As elementary school teachers, we have come to understand our task to be something much more complex than teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic. Our students need more than knowledge. They need an understanding of how to organize and connect knowledge. They need to experience making their knowledge part of the class conversations. Every child needs to be an active participant, negotiating within the class culture:

It is not just that the child must make knowledge his own, but that he must make it his own in a community of those who share his sense of belonging to a culture. It is this that leads me to emphasize not only discovery and invention but the importance of negotiating and sharing—in a word, of joint culture creating as an object of schooling and as an appropriate step en route to becoming a member of the adult society in which one lives out one's life (Bruner, 1986, p. 127).

We see learning as a social endeavor. Reading and writing are social things to do.

They can be learned easily when they enable the child to participate in the creation of a learning community. This happens naturally outside school:

children who can do things help children who can't. Younger children expect to get assistance from older children and to assist even younger ones in their turn. Some of the most successful instruction occurs in school when children help each other...When children of different ages—and more mature students of differing degrees of ability—work together, everybody learns (Smith, 1986, p. 184).

It can happen just as naturally inside school, but only if there are opportunities for children to work together. School can be a place where children learn to control knowledge rather than be controlled by it.

The grouping practices described in this article have worked for us in our elementary classrooms. We offer them with assurance of their value, but we caution that they work because they are connected with our understandings of literacy, learning, and community. They are not simply logistical mechanisms that can be plugged into any classroom. They are thoughtful choices of organizational patterns that support learning and the creating of meaning in the way we theorize it can best be accomplished. The importance of what we share here is not the grouping possibilities alone, but the underlying beliefs and assumptions which led us to their use.

Having three reading groups makes sense only if a teacher believes in the assumptions underlying ability grouping: that all learning should progress in a linear manner, that a teacher has the sole responsibility for supporting each student in the class, and that the stigma attached to being grouped is negligible. The grouping practices that follow grow out of a different set of assumptions. We hold the beliefs that learners need to have choices that allow them to make connections and develop their own courses for learning, that learners in a community should support one another, and that every student brings a unique and equally valuable contribution to the dynamics of the learning community.

Whole group learning

In third grade, we studied "communities." Each of the children was asked to interview a member of the community to find out about his or her job and how that job supported the community. Greg told the whole class about his interview, showing his neighbor's firefighter's badge. The children seated around Greg took turns telling about their own trips to fire stations. Then Chris told about a visit she had made to the Stay-Alive House. She told about smoke filling the pretend bedroom and her practice escape down the stairs. The children began to ask Chris where the house was and who could go. She had sparked their interest.

"Could we go?"

As is so often the case in whole group sharing, new questions and problems are generated. It was a natural place to involve the whole group in the inquiry process. How could we find out more about the Stay-Alive House? We could write to the fire department or Chris's parents. Children volunteered to start the information gathering. Letters were

written and sent. Soon, the fire department responded with an invitation to the Stay-Alive House which we accepted. It was a marvelous experience that led naturally into more reading, writing, and thinking.

As teachers, we believe that children come to school knowing how to think, how to be a part of a social group, and how to use language to express personal meanings. Their

knowledge, however, is specific to contexts and communities outside the school (Taylor, 1989). A classroom of students needs to share experiences that provide common language and an opportunity to construct meaning together. Each learner also needs opportunities to connect his or her outside life to life in the school. During whole group sessions, we concentrate on these shared experiences and connecting activities. We use whole group sessions as a forum for demonstrating possible ways of relating in smaller work groups. We support the students in learning to appreciate the differences among themselves by working toward shared understandings and language. The students learn to question each other, to discuss the merits of each other's thoughts and ideas, and to generate new questions and problems.

Some reading instruction can take place during whole group sessions: Read-aloud stories, choral reading, strategy instruction, group story writing, poems, newspapers, and sharing literature extensions or children's writings. As noted on the chart, we also use whole group sessions to work out our rules and consequences. We make decisions about field trips and visitors. Each of these conversations gives us opportunities to put our ideas into language and to hear the ideas of others. Often our discussions serve as springboards into more personal or small group inquiry.

Small groups

Small groups have taught us the power of student-controlled learning. Rather than showing a lack of initiative, our students are deeply involved in learning. As Wells (1986) points out, most learners are accustomed to participating in teacher-dominated activities. When a teacher maintains the majority of control in a learning community, the students get the message:

- 1) that the only valid learning is that which takes place when they are engaged in teacher-prescribed tasks;
- 2) that personal experience, particularly that gained outside the classroom, is unlikely to be relevant for learning at school; and
- 3) that taking the initiative is unwise ... thinking things out for oneself frequently leads to unacceptable answers—it is better...to follow only the steps laid down by

the teacher (Wells, 1986, pp. 93-94).

Putting students in control of their learning in small groups challenges all these constructed understandings children have of school. It requires the teacher to trust the process of collaborative learning. It means watching and listening more than ever before, and reflecting on what happens.

As part of our community study, students were invited to build a clay model of our school and the buildings nearby. Scott, Dylan, and Maurice volunteered to be a group. In an ability-grouped classroom this threesome would have been in a low reading group. They avoided reading and writing whenever possible and were easily frustrated by written language.

It was not surprising that none of the three could spell the name of the school, or the nearby grocery store, or the street. What was surprising was how they decided to meet after school and copy words from the buildings and signs. In the morning, they had sheets of words to label their model buildings and plans for a map with street signs. Their flurry of energy for the project caused their classmates to ask what they were working on and what the words were for. The boys asked if they could write a response to the questions on the blackboard, which turned out to be the perfect medium for their learning. Over the next several days, they composed messages about their project to the class. One of the boys would write while the other two formulated the words, reread the script, and pointed out needed conventions and corrections. Other students would stop by occasionally and make suggestions as well.

This episode illustrates the potential for involvement when students own the learning process. Working in small groups increases each learner's experience in language and ne-

gotiation. Individuals think and share their ideas. Groups have to decide on a plan that satisfies all the members and then actualize it. Members make lists and plans, give each other assignments, and decide on timelines. They begin to recognize when they need the teacher's intervention and when they are making good progress. Most importantly, they learn to use each other to deepen their understanding of who they are, what they know, and what they are capable of doing.

Pairs

Lyle, Lyle, Crocodile (Waber, 1965) was one of the stories read to the children during the community study. It is a humorous story about a crocodile participating in a human community. Tina was intrigued by the story. She talked Jared, a weaker reader, into reading it with her by promising to help him with the hard words. Her teaming up with Jared was not just a goodwill gesture, though. She knew he was artistic, and she was planning to ask for his help with illustrations for a book. The story of Lyle had sparked an idea and she wanted Jared to help her develop it.

Like Tina and Jared, many learners choose a partner because they have a common interest or one has a valuable expertise. Pairs usually work more quietly than small groups, but pairing still allows the language exchange that learners need. Especially during sustained reading and writing times, pairs can use strategies for organizing knowledge with language to construct understandings and responses (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988).

Independent

Keisha wrote in her journal: "We went to First Source Bank and we got to ride up and down the elevator. And we each got a ruler and a pencil and a balloon. We got to see where they had their meetings. It was so fun!"

She was recording what seemed important to her. Individuals need time to record and reflect on events along with opportunities to choose and immerse themselves in the ex-

periences books can provide. Learning to focus one's energies takes practice. As teachers, we can encourage each child to spend some time each day doing independent learning by offering diverse invitations. There may be possibilities generated by small groups: research questions, reports, script writing, data collection, or science observations. There may be invitations related to the whole group sessions: rereading the poems shared that day, hearing a suggested book at a listening center, working with mathematics manipulatives, or creating a response project.

Many of our students have been intensely focused on personal investigations. They have read for weeks on a single topic like birds, knights and weapons, or outer space. These children need more individual time. Flexible grouping provides a space for their personal interests. It sends a message that the student's choice is important and that the child's initiative for learning will be supported.

5

Conclude by
rdg. this.

Conclusion

Ability grouping is currently being criticized for "buying the achievement of a few at the expense of many" (Oakes, 1986, p. 17). We concur, with the caution that there are no simple solutions. The inequities created by ability grouping have led us to rethink the schooling process. It is time to reconceptualize literacy as "the ability to outgrow ourselves" (Harste, 1989). Literacy is a life-learning process which children are engaged in regardless of their differing abilities or backgrounds. School must be a forum where children can express and negotiate meanings, where each child is engaged and supported in growing toward an understanding of his or her power to participate in the community. Then the knowledge gained can be functional and meaningful.

The organization of the classroom is a teaching tool. It works to optimize children's opportunities to be in control of their learning and to be participants in culture creation. We have offered four possible alternatives to ability grouping which have worked for us in balancing the opportunities for all children. The organization we have described works because we collaborate with our students in its operation. Their interests and needs shape group memberships, size, and purpose. Like everything in our classrooms, grouping is a

negotiated matter. Although we teachers are older and more experienced members of the classroom culture and are certainly charged with creating a supportive and rich learning environment, we see ourselves as participants in the negotiations and construction of a literate community.

A new understanding of literacy

As elementary school teachers, we have come to understand our task to be something much more complex than teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic. Our students need more than knowledge. They need an understanding of how to organize and connect knowledge. They need to experience making their knowledge part of the class conversations. Every child needs to be an active participant, negotiating within the class culture:

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We see learning as a social endeavor.
Reading and writing are social things to do.

They can be learned easily when they enable the child to participate in the creation of a learning community. This happens naturally outside school:

children who can do things help children who can't. Younger children expect to get assistance from older children and to assist even younger ones in their turn. Some of the most successful instruction occurs in school when children help each other. When children of different ages—and more mature students of differing degrees of ability—work together, everybody learns (Smith, 1986, p. 184).

It can happen just as naturally inside school, but only if there are opportunities for children to work together. School can be a place where children learn to control knowledge rather than be controlled by it.

The grouping practices described in this article have worked for us in our elementary classrooms. We offer them with assurance of their value, but we caution that they work because they are connected with our understandings of literacy, learning, and community. They are not simply logistical mechanisms that can be plugged into any classroom. They are thoughtful choices of organizational patterns that support learning and the creating of meaning in the way we theorize it can best be accomplished. The importance of what we share here is not the grouping possibilities alone, but the underlying beliefs and assumptions which led us to their use.

Having three reading groups makes sense only if a teacher believes in the assumptions underlying ability grouping: that all learning should progress in a linear manner, that a teacher has the sole responsibility for supporting each student in the class, and that the stigma attached to being grouped is negligible. The grouping practices that follow grow out of a different set of assumptions. We hold the beliefs that learners need to have choices that allow them to make connections and develop their own courses for learning, that learners in a community should support one another, and that every student brings a unique and equally valuable contribution to the dynamics of the learning community.

When
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The Reading Teacher

April 1999

Empowering the Reader in Every Child

Scholastic
Instructor

The case for flexible grouping when teaching reading

By Michael Opitz | March 2005

Flexible grouping allows students to work in differently mixed groups depending on the goal of the learning task at hand, then to break apart once the task is completed. Here are a number of flexible grouping options and ways to assemble children, to facilitate the teaching of reading.

Im convinced! Good fortune is sometimes disguised as misfortune. Take, for example, an experience I had a few years ago that led me to examine flexible grouping for reading instruction.

Prior to my arrival as a reading specialist in an elementary school, the staff had decided to teach children with additional learning needs within their classrooms rather than in a separate setting. As part of this plan, specialists came into the classrooms and worked with the teachers and students using a newly adopted literature based basal reading program. Teachers were to have all students read the anthology designated for their grade level instead of having them read the texts that corresponded to youngsters' actual reading performance.

I questioned how teachers would be able to meet students' needs this way. My attempt to find an answer led me to reexamine ability grouping - which I found to be based on faulty assumptions, such as that children can be grouped by ability. For one, researchers have noticed that innate ability is difficult to determine and that children are grouped, instead, according to achievement. The result is that students with different needs may be placed in the same "homogeneous" group because of their total reading scores. For example, children may take a reading test composed of two parts - vocabulary and comprehension. The test will provide a total score, but a closer look will show that the scores are achieved in different ways. Some children will be strong in vocabulary and weak in comprehension, and vice-versa. Thus, depending on the focus of the group - say, vocabulary or comprehension - a child may have difficulty. In other words, some differentiated instruction must occur if all children are to be successful. Most often, one plan does not suffice. Flexible grouping is needed.

Flexible grouping allows students to work in differently mixed groups depending on the goal of the learning task at hand, then to break apart once the task is completed. When I think of flexible grouping, I picture working with sand castles that the tide will wash away. I think of ability grouping as working with concrete to build permanent foundations meant to withstand change. Most often, as mentioned, ability groups reflect children's overall reading achievement. In contrast, flexible grouping fulfills a variety of purposes, from enabling students to use their strongest modalities and promoting group interaction to the teaching of specific skills. After lessons are learned, the group dissolves.

First-grade teacher Susan Anderson explains it this way: "When you have children ranging from mildly mentally handicapped to gifted in one room, it is important for each child to feel as much ownership of the material as possible. When a beginning reader holds, tracks, and reads the same material as a more experienced reader, the message is powerful. We don't all learn to read at the same pace, but there are many reading experiences we can share and from which we can learn. Using flexible grouping enables everyone to feel empowered."

Grouping Options

Here are a number of flexible grouping options, ways to assemble children, to facilitate the teaching of reading:

Random: This is creating groups arbitrarily, which you can do in a variety of ways, such as picking names from a hat. Random grouping is good when forming groups of equal size or when you'd like students to get to know one another.

Social, or cooperative: Consider grouping students according to specific social skills when they need to function in different roles, such as leaders and followers. Students can learn different roles from one another and work together to complete a group task.

Interest: Assign students to a group or have them assign themselves to a group based on interest in a topic, such as a favorite animal. Use this when student interest is the main motivation for learning about a topic.

Task: Group together those children who are successful at completing certain types of activities when you want students to use their strongest modality to show understanding. For example, when having students dramatize a story, ask those who are artistic to paint a theatrical backdrop and those with musical talent to play an instrument.

Knowledge of subject: Group together students with knowledge of a certain subject or hobby when you want them to recognize similarities among one another and to share

information.

Skill/strategy: Group together students who need help with a particular skill or strategy, such as using context clues.

Student choice: Students can group themselves according to a category, such as author or genre. For instance, if your class is studying Beverly Cleary, you can have students list their favorite books by Cleary on an index card and then group by choice. Use this approach when you want to create literature-response groups in which students take the lead

GROUPING OPTIONS	Teaching Strategies					
	Cut-Apart	CRA	Varied Mode	Paired Reading	Genre Study	Text Set
Random	X	X		X		
Social or Cooperative		X	X	X	X	X
Interest			X	X	X	X
Task	X		X	X		
Knowledge of Subject				X	X	X
Skill/Strategy	X		X			X
Student Choice			X	X	X	X

Teaching Strategies

Different grouping options lend themselves to different Teaching Strategies. To implement flexible grouping successfully to teach reading, you will have to use a wide range of Teaching Strategies and know which ones work best with which grouping options.

For a detailed description of helpful strategies, refer to the chart above. The chart illustrates which Teaching Strategies are most effective with which flexible grouping options.

The following examples demonstrate how grouping options and Teaching Strategies work together. As you will see, the literature you are teaching will also play an important role in helping you select grouping options and strategies.

- Students read Laura Numeroff's *Two for Stew*. Paired reading would be a good teaching strategy because the story is a conversation between a customer and a waiter. Random grouping might be a good option because you are concerned primarily with having groups of equal size.
- Students read Robert Snedden's nonfiction *What is a Bird?* Because you will have to provide support for several readers, you may choose the cooperative reading as your teaching strategy. Cooperative grouping would be a useful option because the text appears in six chunks, or passages. Each group can read a different chunk and report essential information to the rest of the class.
- Students read a common text, such as Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars*. Recognizing that the book is too difficult for some students, you may choose the single title, varied-mode teaching strategy and group students by task because this approach will enable them to read the text using their strongest modality.

Flexible Grouping in Action

Flexible grouping can of course, take place throughout the school day to facilitate learning in all subject areas. But as it relates to reading instruction, flexible grouping is utilized when the teacher is reading aloud, providing support to students (guided reading), or facilitating independent reading or shared reading. Generally speaking, I liked to begin and end a lesson with the whole class in order to build a sense of community.

To show you how flexible grouping works in classroom teaching, let's take a good look at how Mary, a third grade teacher, and I combined a flexible grouping method and teaching strategy to develop a lesson plan.

First, as part of a larger unit on folktales, Mary and I chose three objectives: to develop students' reading fluency; to enhance their listening comprehension; and to teach them the characteristics of folktales. The book we selected was *Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain*, by Veria Aardema. We decided to use the cut-apart teaching strategy and the random flexible grouping action.

Before reading: We started with the whole class to help build community. We talked about the elements of folktales, provided background for the story, invited students to preview the book, and introduced key vocabulary. I also printed the entire story on chart paper, using different colors for each different verse and black for repeated verses.

During reading/flexible grouping: The cut-apart strategy allowed students to practice reading a numbered selection of text to themselves. Following this, each student contributed

to the class read-aloud by reading his or her section. We then randomly grouped students into sets of four. Each group was given one page of the chart-paper version to practice reading. Afterward, the chart pages were put on display.

After reading: We had each group read aloud its part in turn, using the charts. The whole class joined in to read the words in black print. In this way, students could see clearly that the text was cumulative.

Together, all three phases -before, during, and after - provided a thorough lesson that helped students become stronger readers.

Reading for All

Perhaps most important, when using flexible grouping in the classroom, know that you are not always teaching for mastery. What you *are* attempting to do is expose all students to the same grade-level content. You are giving all students the opportunity to learn to read by reading with necessary support from others. In a sense, you are teaching the reader rather than the reading.

Teaching Strategies to Use With Flexible Grouping

Linked with the proper flexible grouping options, the following Teaching Strategies provide for children's individual differences. The goal: to help your students experience success and, so become better readers.

Cooperative Reading Activity (CRA). This strategy involves chunking, or dividing informational text into passages. It enables groups of learners to read a passage and report important information to classmates.

Cut-Apart. Dividing a story into enough sections so that every student or small group has a part to read. This strategy enables all students to read a single story successfully, develops fluency through repeated reading, enhances listening comprehension, and provides for purposeful oral reading.

Genre Study. Students read different titles related to the same genre, enabling all learners to contribute to the same theme regardless of achievement levels.

Single Title, Varied Mode. Students read one title in several ways, such as independent reading, collaborative reading, or using recorded versions. This strategy provides the varying levels of support that different children need.

Text Sets. These are sets of books related to a common element or topic. Each student may read a different book related to the topic. Like genre study, this activity enables all children to read about the same topic regardless of their achievement levels.

Paired Reading. Students work with partners to read a text. Paired reading provides students with meaningful oral reading practice and helps develop fluency in a nonthreatening way.

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Leveled Reading Systems

Unraveling the Mystery

By Ruth Manna

With many lettered and numbered leveled reading systems it's hard to know which one to choose and when to use it. Let's cut through the confusion.

What are the differences among leveled reading systems?

Grade Level

Sorting books by grade level is the most basic, understandable system. If you use a basal series to teach reading, you probably use this system. If you're searching for science or social studies books for a unit of study, a grade level search is precise enough.

Guided Reading Level

Developed by Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell, the guided reading level system gives a more precise reading level for books. This more detailed, alphabetic system has several levels within each grade level. For example, grade 2 is equivalent to guided reading levels J through M. This allows you to tailor your reading program more accurately to a wide range of reading abilities. Each book is carefully evaluated prior to being leveled and teacher input is taken into consideration in the leveling process. The Fountas and Pinnell Leveled Books Web site for subscribers includes a database of 18,000 leveled books as well as suggestions for reading instruction, supporting materials and teacher tips.

Lexile Levels

The Lexile framework, an even finer numerical filter, assesses a book's difficulty and helps match reader ability and text difficulty based on the numeric Lexile scale. This system from educational measurement company, MetaMetrics, targets books on the right reading level for the child's ability. This system is based on an algorithm that simultaneously measures vocabulary and sentence length. The Lexile database includes prose only. Poems, plays and songs are rated simply Non-Prose or NP. If a book is best shared as a read-aloud it is in the Adult Directed or AD category. A book is a Nonconforming Text or NC if its vocabulary and sentence length are complex compared to the subject matter. An NC book is one that is suitable for advanced readers who need age-appropriate materials. Beginning Readers or BR are those books at Lexile level zero or below. The Lexile system includes formative assessments as opposed to summative assessments like chapter, unit or state-wide tests. Formative assessments are tests you give as you teach new material. The test results help you amplify your teaching, re-teach and provide additional practice to solidify concepts and skills. There is a free database at Lexile.com.

DRA

Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) is a reading assessment tool intended to identify the independent reading level for students in grades K-8. Using the DRA numerical scale you can measure reading accuracy, fluency and comprehension. Students are said to be near, at or above grade level, below grade level and significantly below grade level. Once you know the student's DRA score, then you can match that score with books in the appropriate level.

Reading Recovery

Reading Recovery is an intensive one-on-one remediation program designed to supplement reading instruction for students in grades K-2 who are slow to read. You can see on the conversion chart that, at most, second grade level readers would use this scale. The conversion chart will help you compare Reading Recovery and guided reading levels. Reading Recovery levels by themselves have limited usefulness.

Now that you understand several commonly-used systems, which leveling system should you use?

The answer is it depends on:

- Students
- Curriculum
- Colleagues
- Parents

Students

A leveling system is not meaningful to young readers and may threaten older readers. I don't mention levels to my second graders although their reading books are all labeled. If I stress a student's level I'll affect his or her self-esteem. At any one time I have students reading on four to six different levels. I teach them to choose just-right books carefully, and to meet their needs, I pre-select books across a range of levels.

Curriculum

Your reading methods and materials may suggest an appropriate leveling system. Because I teach guided reading, I use Fountas and Pinnell guided reading levels. When I download printable books from Reading A-Z I convert their levels to the Fountas and Pinnell system when the two don't match. If I used a Lexile assessment program I would use Lexiles. If I taught reading using a basal series, I'd use grade levels. When I assess students with DRA, I use DRA levels. Our Reading Recovery teacher uses Reading Recovery levels.

Colleagues

To be consistent, my colleagues and I all use guided reading levels. This fosters positive, open communication. We all speak the same language.

Parents

Parents may remember grade leveled reading when they were kids. While I'm aware of each child's precise level, parents may compare their child to other classmates, so I'm deliberately vague. The terms *above grade level*, *on grade level* and *below grade level* inform parents without overwhelming them with information.

How can I make a leveled book list?

Scholastic's Teacher Book Wizard allows teachers to search for books by level, but not all

books are leveled for each leveling system. If you want to create a leveled book list with books that are measured according to different systems, it helps to have a Reading Level Conversion Chart. This chart is only an approximate guide. DRA and guided reading are exactly equivalent and the conversion chart is perfect for them. But a book's Lexile level does not always correspond neatly with its guided reading level. In fact, there can be wide variations. You'll need to use judgment and read the books yourself before giving them to students.

Reading Level Conversion Chart

What can I do if a book is not leveled?

If you can't find a level for a book, compare it to similar, leveled books. Keep in mind you will need to assess whether or not a book is developmentally appropriate for a given student or group. For example, just because a young student can read a book about the Holocaust does not mean the subject is appropriate for that student. Another example is a book written in dialect may be difficult for students to comprehend.

As you compare consider the following:

- Vocabulary, word choice
- Sentence length and complexity
- Length of book
- Subject matter
- Repetition, predictability
- Picture support
- Age appropriateness/Interest level

How much do levels matter?

Students will read beyond their level when they're motivated by a topic like dinosaurs or insects. Let it happen. That's one way readers grow. My second graders read the entire Iditarod Web site because they were excited about the Iditarod sled dog race. On the other hand, sixth graders can be encouraged to read nonfiction picture books which are informative and accessible to older students.

Remember, leveling systems are guides.

Observe your unique students, the subject matter, your colleagues and parents. Be flexible and trust your judgment. A well-informed teacher who understands leveling systems and knows her students will make wise choices about books.

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<http://www.choiceliteracy.com>



Our Living Minute: Integrating Nonfiction Study into Morning Meetings

Andrea Smith

Last summer, Samantha Bennett's text *That Workshop Book: New Systems and Structures for Classrooms That Read, Write, and Think* helped me reconsider my work as a classroom teacher striving each day to live and learn with students. Bennett reminds us that a workshop classroom is founded on structures, systems, rituals, and routines no matter the age of the students or the subject at hand.

When I began writing my learning community goals for this school year, I wanted to expand students' opportunities for reading, writing, and sharing nonfiction resources. I had noticed over time that students and teachers were always willing to share discoveries and recommendations for new fiction and poetry, but nonfiction seemed to be overlooked. In my home reading life I was excited to discover INK (<http://www.inkrethink.blogspot.com/>), a blog dedicated to showcasing the nonfiction work of so many talented writers. Other teaching and "kidlitosphere" blogs helped me discover new nonfiction resources. Reading these sites became a natural part of my reading routine with my coffee cup in hand, surrounded by the morning quiet. I welcomed this time, listening and learning from other interested readers. Happy with my reading life, I asked:

How could I create more nonfiction reading rituals and routines in my classroom?

What could I do day to day throughout the year to make a meaningful impact on my students' reading lives? How could our learning community benefit from shared rituals and routines as a means of nurturing students' awareness and interest in nonfiction resources? I was grateful for the summer days stretching ahead, time to consider big questions that needed to be faced in the fall.

One hot July day my daughter and I were driving from the river after a morning of swimming with our dog. I was listening to "The Writer's Almanac," Garrison Keillor's daily program broadcast on many public radio stations across the country. As expected, Keillor was sharing a poem, a story, and thoughtful ideas for readers and writers to consider. Keillor's soothing voice, wondering which writer or poet he would introduce to listeners, and finding both serious and funny moments were things I'd come to expect from his show. The Writer's Almanac has been a part of my listening life for years, but how could it affect my classroom?

Then it hit me. Listening to The Writer's Almanac, daily blog reading, and exchanging ideas with my favorite teacher friends could be translated into the classroom. That is how my idea for "Our Living Minute" was born.

Children love to share news and celebrations from their lives each day during our Morning Meeting, a special ritual that

launches our day - unifying our community with good news, important headlines, and friendly reminders about upcoming events. So why not include a spot for nonfiction? The idea of "Our Living Minute" began to take shape as a part of our daily gathering:

What It Looks Like

Each day two students share a nonfiction resource - any kind of nonfiction text deemed important in their lives. Suggestions and shared items by students often include the following:

- A nonfiction book
- Nonfiction poetry
- A map
- An info-graphic: photo, diagram, table, graph, etc.
- A website (students show the class the website using the computers in our room)
- A magazine or newspaper article
- Directions for a game, a product, or steps to building something
- Recipes
- Programs from special events like attending a play or a museum visit
- Any other nonfiction item a student thinks would be of interest to others

Each student has one minute to share a nonfiction resource, explain why it was chosen, and describe how the resource is interesting, helpful, or puzzling. Three classmates then have a chance to ask questions about the item. I limit the number of questions to keep the session short and focused. The shared resources then remain in the classroom for a week or more so that others can read or use the selected "Living Minute" items during the day.

As students share their resources, an information sheet is filled out by a peer and added to a binder for future reference. The binder is organized by types of nonfiction resources. Photos and copies of related information are added to the binder. Click here for an example of the letter I sent home to families:

<http://www.choiceliteracy.com/livingminuteparent.pdf>

Click below for a blank information sheet students use to record information:

<http://www.choiceliteracy.com/livingminutestudentnotes.pdf>

Here is a sample of the range of nonfiction texts shared in a typical week:

<http://www.choiceliteracy.com/livingminutesamplelist.pdf>

And finally, below is the template for recording a week's worth of "living minutes":

<http://www.choiceliteracy.com/livingminutereview.pdf>

Parents and students were informed about the ritual, and I also send home a monthly reminder letter with a presentation schedule so students can plan for their "Living Minute" presentations. Monthly reminders keep this ritual fresh in the minds of my students and their families.

"Our Living Minute" takes 5-10 minutes of our Morning Meeting, but its impact has strengthened our learning community and

enriched the reading options of my students and their families. We learn so much about each other, getting glimpses into members' learning lives outside of the classroom. "Our Living Minute," is a purposeful time together, supporting authentic opportunities for sharing ideas, resources, and ourselves.

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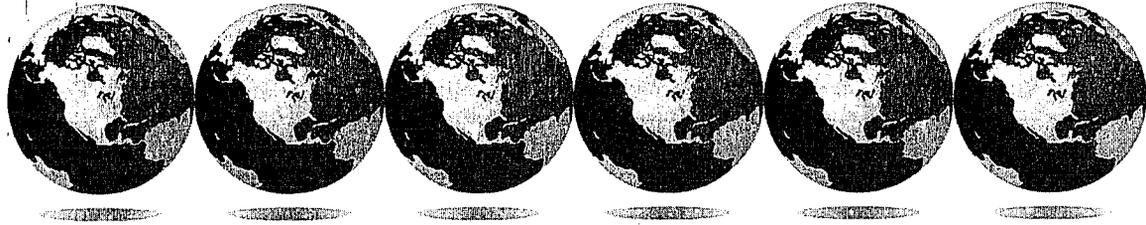
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Our Living Minute

In an effort to increase opportunities for students to share more information about their home reading lives, all children will participate in a new routine called, "Our Living Minute." On scheduled days, 2 students will share a favorite nonfiction items. Those items could include:

- A nonfiction book
- Nonfiction poetry
- A map
- An info-graphic: photo, diagram, table, graph, etc.
- A website that requires nonfiction reading (students will show the class the website using the computers in our room)
- A magazine or newspaper article
- Directions for a game, using a product, or building something
- Recipes
- Programs from special events like a play, museum visit, etc.
- Any other nonfiction item you think would be of interest to others

Each student will have one minute to show their selected nonfiction example, explain why the item was chosen and describe why the item is interesting, helpful, or puzzling. The class will also have a chance to ask questions about the item. The nonfiction item will remain in the classroom for at least one week so that others can read or use the selected Living Minute items. If a book or magazine cannot be left at school, I can make a copy of the cover and will try to get a library copy as substitute.

Please see the attached schedule so your child can plan to share in the coming weeks. Thank you for your support and happy reading!

Andrea Smith



Our Living Minute



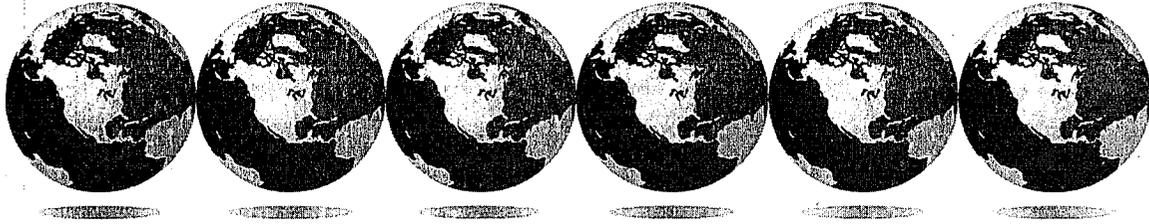
Date: _____ Student: _____

Item	
Title	
Qualities: Helpful? Interesting? Useful? Puzzling?	
Comments	



Pictures are on the other side of the sheet.





Our Living Minute: Examples from our Weekly Review

Student	Shared Resource	Description and Details
Michael	Reference book: <i>World of Animals</i>	I like finding information about my favorite animals.
Haley	Nonfiction book: <i>Owen and Mzee</i> : This is an amazing story that shows how animals cope with problems	I never knew animals would form friendships outside their species.
Taylor	Fern fossil with pictures and information found on the Internet: My grandpa gave me this great fossil he found on the Ohio River.	How could a fern fossil form along the river? When did it grow? What was the habitat like?
Noah	Directions for building a Lego structure: I received a new Lego set for Christmas.	How can I get some help and ideas for this tricky design?
Chase	Capital Area Humane Society webpage: I want to adopt a new cat or kitten. Who can help me?	Assistance with information for selecting and adopting a new cat.
Andrew	<i>101 Super Science Fact Book</i> : This is an interesting book with quick-read pages full of interesting information and a collection of interesting facts.	What can I read on the bus or in the car? Sometimes I like to read short, but interesting pages when I have a short time to read.
Camden	Website quiz that helps you select the right guitar: I want to learn to play the guitar.	The quiz helps you identify your needs and matches you to the right guitar.
Bonnie	Nutritional Labels on Pet Food: Cat vs Kitten food	How is kitten food different or similar to cat food? What does my kitten need and why?
Delia	Recipe for a fruitsicle: I wanted to create a healthy snack I could make myself.	I made this recipe card to share with classmates.
Raquel	Photos, Postcards and Journal Entries: My family and I went to Puerto Rico to see my relatives.	Each day I added a picture of postcard related to my travel journal entry.



Our Living Minute: Weekly Review

	Student	Shared Resource	Description and Details
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			
7.			
8.			
9.			
10.			