# . Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell Reflect on Guided Reading

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, balanced-literacy gurus Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell celebrate the extraordinary spread of guided reading – and offer suggestions on how it can be optimally effective. Here are some of the key elements of guided reading that educators around the world have embraced:

* Building a classroom culture that makes it possible for the teacher to work with small groups while the rest of the class is engaged in other productive literacy activities;
* Differentiating instruction by working with students in leveled reading groups, using books at children’s instructional level and providing the support they need to build their reading power;
* Purchasing leveled books and having a common book room that gives teachers access to a wide variety of levels and topics, including tubs of books organized not by level but by author and subject;
* Stocking classroom libraries that allow students to choose from a wide inventory of texts for independent reading;
* Assessing students’ reading proficiency at the beginning of each year in individual conferences and using running records throughout the year to monitor reading levels;
* Attending to all three elements of proficient reading: decoding, comprehension, and fluency.

And here are the basic elements of the canonical guided reading lesson:

* Selection of a text that is just right to support new learning for the group;
* Introduction of the text to scaffold the reading but leaving some problem-solving for the group;
* Students read the text softly or silently with the teacher prompting or reinforcing strategic actions;
* Discussion of the text to boost students’ comprehension;
* Teaching points grounded in the text and directed toward expanding students’ comprehension strategies;
* Word work to help students become flexible and efficient at figuring out unknown words;
* Extending understanding of the text through writing and/or drawing (optional).

Guided reading is “*only one* component of a comprehensive, high-quality literacy effort,” say Fountas and Pinnell. “Powerful teaching within the lesson requires much more” –

* Whole-class interactive read-alouds (not leveled books);
* Small-group and whole-class literature discussion (not leveled books);
* Readers’ workshop with whole-group mini-lessons (not leveled books);
* Independent reading and individual conferences (self-selected, not leveled texts);
* The use of mentor texts for writing workshop.
* Students also need to be exposed to age-appropriate, grade-appropriate texts.

How well does this total package do? A 2008 study of four years of a balanced-literacy initiative showed impressive improvements in student learning: 16% the first year, 28% the second, and 32% the third (Biancarosa, Hough, Dexter, and Bryk). Literacy coaches played a key role in improving teachers’ skills and bringing about these results.

Turning back to guided reading, Fountas and Pinnell describe what they have learned in the decades since it was first introduced:

• *A deeper understanding of the process of reading* – It’s become clear that there are three levels involved in proficient reading:

* Thinking within the text: Solving words, monitoring and correcting, searching for and using information, summarizing information in a way that the reader can remember it, adjusting reading for different purposes and genres; and sustaining fluency. “Some in the educational community seem to have become obsessed with speed,” say Fountas and Pinnell. “However, measuring fluency only as words per minute is a simplistic view and a procedure that may do harm. In our work, we emphasize pausing, phrasing, word stress, and intonation far more than rate.”
* Thinking beyond the text: Inferring, synthesizing, making connections, and predicting.
* Thinking about the text: Analyzing and critiquing.

“The amazing thing is that all of this complex cognitive activity is accomplished simultaneously and at lightning speed,” say Fountas and Pinnell. “Proficient readers are largely unconscious of it.”

• *Using assessments systematically and dynamically throughout the year* – “Good assessment is the foundation for effective teaching,” they say. And it’s more than just finding students’ levels – otherwise guided reading groups can become replicas of the previous era’s

tracked, static reading groups. “The ‘noticing’ teacher tunes in to the individual reader and observes how the reader works through a text and thinks about how the reading sounds,” say Fountas and Pinnell. Ongoing assessments are the key to grouping and re-grouping students for guided reading and moving them up the A-Z Fountas-Pinnell ladder of reading proficiency. “Some students may not develop the same reading behaviors in the same order and at the same pace as others,” they continue. “The key to effective teaching is your ability to make different decisions for different students at different points in time, honoring the complexity of development.”

• *Understanding leveled texts and their demands on readers* – The challenge for all guided reading teachers is pushing students to higher text levels without pushing them too far. “If the book is too difficult, then the processing will not be proficient, no matter how much teaching you do,” say Fountas and Pinnell. Text levels are not the only criterion for selecting books, they say, and levels shouldn’t be overused: “The text gradient and leveled books are a teacher’s tool, not a child’s label… We have never recommended that the school library or classrooms libraries be leveled or that levels be reported to parents. We want students to learn to select books the way experienced readers do – according to their own interests, by trying a bit of the book, by noticing the topic or the author…. This is a life skill… Just because a book has a level does not mean it is a high-quality selection. Some leveled books are formulaic or not accurately leveled. Teachers need to look carefully at books in the purchasing process to assure they are well written and illustrated.” They list the ten criteria used to assign A-Z levels to books: genres/forms, text structure, content, themes/ideas, language/literary features, sentence complexity, vocabulary, word length/complexity, illustrations, and book/print features.

• *The role of facilitation in expanding reading power* – Guided reading is much more than convening small groups, using leveled books, and following a lesson framework, say Fountas and Pinnell: “In guided reading lessons the goal is to teach the reader, not the text. The skilled teacher of guided reading makes decisions throughout the lesson that are responsive to the learners. Each element supports readers in a different way, with the goal of helping them think and act for themselves.” Here are some of examples of “facilitative talk”:

* *Try that again and think what would make sense.*
* *Does that make sense and look right?*
* *Put your words together so it sounds like talking.*
* *Look for a part you know.*

And here are examples of teacher language that supports analytical thinking about texts:

* *What did you notice about how the writer told the story?*
* *What did you notice about the way the writer used words?*
* *What did the writer do to interest you in the story?*
* *What is the problem and how is it solved?*
* *What do you notice the writer doing? Have you noticed another writer doing the same thing?*
* *How did the writer make the information interesting?*
* *What parts of the story are probably fact and what parts are imagined?*
* *What do you know about the type of book that helps you know what to expect?*
* *What were three of the most important ideas in this informational text?*
* *What does the author want you to know about this topic?*
* *Why do you think the author organized ideas this way?*

Some teachers have students answer questions like these in their notebooks.

• *Using self-reflection to grow in teaching guided reading* – “High-quality, highly effective implementation of guided reading involves a process of self-reflection,” say Fountas and Pinnell. “Each time you work with a small group of students, you can learn a little more and hone your teaching skills.” It’s helpful for teachers to have a colleague with whom to discuss the finer points of lessons. A key question is, “What have I taught the readers to do today that they will be able to do with other texts?”

“Guided Reading: The Romance and the Reality” by Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell in *The Reading Teacher*, December 2012/January 2013 (Vol. 66, #4, p. 268-284),

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/TRTR.01123/abstract>