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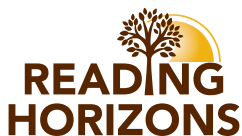


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Examining Guided Reading Practices in Kindergarten Classrooms

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Abstract

This study investigated how 15 kindergarten teachers from one school district implemented small-group Guided Reading (GR). Analysis of video recordings indicates substantial differences in how GR was conducted, with none of the teachers fully implementing GR as conceptualized by Fountas and Pinnell (2012). Consistency across teachers was limited to reading a new book and using a picture walk as part of the book introduction. Differences were observed in how the books were read (choral, round robin, or independent reading) and in instructional activities before and after reading the new book, with word solving being the most prevalent focus of instruction. Findings suggest that while districts may promote a GR approach, teachers may be doing very different things. These findings are considered in light of current debates around early reading instruction and the importance of evidence-based decision making with regard to instructional improvements.

Keywords: *guided reading, kindergarten, reading instruction, early literacy, meaning- and code-focused instruction*

Small-group reading instruction holds many benefits for young readers in early elementary classrooms (Wilson et al., 2012). In comparison to whole-class instruction, small groupings of students allows for differentiated instruction targeted at children's specific needs (Kosanovich et al., 2007; Tyner, 2003). Small-group reading instruction provides opportunities for explicit instruction that keeps children motivated and highly engaged through the use of word work activities surrounding the reading of text that matches the reading level of the group participants (Williams et al., 2009). Guided practice and immediate responses to students' needs allow for just-in-time support and high-quality student-teacher interactions (Wasik, 2008).

Much small-group reading instruction in the United States purports to follow a Guided Reading (GR) model as part of a balanced approach to literacy instruction (Denton et al., 2014). The term *guided reading* dates back more than 60 years and was

originally used to describe a more generic instructional technique for reading *with* children—differentiating it from reading *to* children or children reading on their own. Over the past 25 years, the term *guided reading* has largely come to be associated with a specific way of defining small-group instruction, as detailed by Fountas and Pinnell in 1996 and expanded upon in later years (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012, 2017). In this article, we use the term Guided Reading (with capitals) and the abbreviation GR to refer to this more specific instructional context.

Guided Reading is described as “an instructional context for supporting each reader’s development of effective strategies for processing novel texts at increasingly challenging levels of difficulty” (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017, p. 25). It has been widely adopted in elementary classrooms across the United States and garnered much praise as an important best practice for early reading instruction (e.g., Davis et al., 2019; Denton et al., 2014; Fawson & Reutzel, 2000; Iaquina, 2006). While it continues to be widely used, there is now a growing call to push away from this model, stating that the approach can “cause problems for children when they are learning to read” (Hanford, 2019, “Picture Power” para. 12). Neuman and Ness (2021), for example, describe GR, and balanced literacy more generally, as teaching students ineffective methods not based on scientific evidence. Indeed, Seidenberg (2021) recently called for a moratorium on purchasing Guided Reading systems from Fountas and Pinnell. In order to determine whether to push away from, continue with, or build on GR, there is a need to first establish how GR is enacted in classrooms and how this enactment relates to theories of reading development and student achievement.

Given its popularity, relatively little research has documented how GR is carried out in classrooms and how GR instruction relates to literacy development (Denton et al., 2014) in the primary grades, including kindergarten—the focus of this study. Whereas kindergarten was once a setting focused on nurturing social, emotional, and cognitive development (Miller & Smith, 2011), the emphasis has largely shifted to the instruction of academic content through teacher-guided activities (Bassok et al., 2016). Kindergarten is now considered the new first grade (Bassok et al., 2016), with increased focus on reading instruction. This includes an increased prevalence of small-group reading instruction.

In this study we asked: What are kindergarten teachers really doing when they say they are doing GR? Specifically, we sought to describe how 15 teachers in one school district, which explicitly included the Fountas and Pinnell (2012) framework for GR in its description of a balanced approach to literacy instruction, implemented the core elements of GR in their kindergarten classrooms. The goal was to illuminate similarities and differences in practices across teachers and how these practices align with the Fountas and Pinnell (1996, 2012) conceptualization of GR.

Conceptualization and Operationalization of GR

GR emphasizes the critical role of the teacher in knowing how to prompt and guide students as they are reading to promote independence, such that moment-by-moment teaching decisions are leveraged to focus on the strengths and needs of learners in a small-group setting (Davis et al., 2019; Fountas & Pinnell, 2017). Described by Fountas and Pinnell as a compromise between highly scripted and highly flexible approaches, GR provides a context for responsive teaching within a systematic structure designed to pro-

mote what Clay (1991) referred to as a self-extending learning system. Fountas and Pinnell (2017, p. 28) have operationalized GR, detailing a six-part lesson structure that includes the following elements: (1) introducing the text, (2) reading the text, (3) discussing the text, (4) teaching points, (5) letter-word work, and (6) writing about reading (optional).

GR lessons involve grouping students by reading level and providing instruction surrounding a leveled text that involves some degree of challenge. Before reading a new text, teachers acclimatize the students through a book introduction. While not standardized, book introductions are intended to briefly describe characteristics of the text, novel vocabulary or language structures, potential areas for strategic problem solving, and possible challenges in the text. A page-by-page picture walk may be useful for very early, but not more experienced, readers (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017), as students should be encouraged to do their own thinking. These introductions may emphasize both meaning- and code-focused elements.

During reading, students independently read the book quietly or silently while the teacher observes and supports as needed based on student performance. The teacher listens in to each student reading and may assist with problem solving or reinforce attempts at independent problem solving. After reading, students share their thinking about the text through an extended and rich discussion that may include a return to the text for explicit teaching points related to the observed reading. For example, teachers might use this time to engage students in a close reading of the text for a specified purpose, reread the text to develop fluency, or confirm or teach word-solving or meaning-building strategies (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017).

At the end of the lesson, a few minutes is devoted to word work to develop flexibility and fluency in word solving (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017). The word work does not specifically address the words in the text that has just been read, but rather is designed to build familiarity with word features likely to be encountered at that level and students' development of strategies for solving words quickly and accurately. As with teaching points, word work varies according to the level of the text being read and is responsive to the needs of the students. Examples of word work noted by Fountas and Pinnell (2017) include sorting letters, making words with magnetic letters, sorting words according to features, or working with base words and affixes (p. 15). Optionally, students are engaged in writing about what they have read; with beginning readers this might take the form of shared or interactive writing.

Empirical Studies of GR Effects and Implementation

In spite of the popularity of GR, relatively few studies have addressed its effects on reading outcomes, with those that do reporting positive associations. Nayak and Sylva (2013) found that their guided reading intervention conducted with children ages 9–10 learning English led to significant improvement in both reading comprehension and reading accuracy, when compared to a no treatment control group. Hall et al. (2005) found that the guided reading approach that was specially designed to teach awareness of text structure to second graders resulted in better comprehension of expository text than an approach designed to emphasize content knowledge. In Young's (2019) study, second graders in treatment classrooms evidenced significantly greater gains across the year than

did students in comparison classrooms, with all students experiencing guided reading instruction making substantial gains in their reading skills across the year.

Similarly, few studies of GR implementation exist. Those that do generally compare GR and other approaches, but do not describe in detail how GR is conceptualized or enacted by classroom teachers. Descriptions of GR in the research literature tend to be vague and general, typically portraying it as small-group instruction involving leveled texts; terms such as *word work*, *book introductions*, *writing*, *fluency*, and *vocabulary* are used to describe GR across studies, yet explicit definitions or descriptions of these practices are rarely provided (Kamps et al., 2007; Tobin & Calhoun, 2009; Walpole et al., 2017). Some studies report considerable modifications in how GR was enacted (Hall et al., 2005; Nayak & Sylva, 2013), resulting in substantial deviations from the Fountas and Pinnell (1996, 2012) conceptualization. Two intervention studies (Denton et al., 2014; Young, 2019) provided rather detailed descriptions of enacted GR lessons and made a concerted effort to adhere to the framework established by Fountas and Pinnell (1996, 2017). In each of these, GR served as a treatment condition. In their intervention study of at-risk first graders, Denton et al. (2014) compared GR to both an explicit instruction condition and typical school instruction. Young (2019) examined the effects of two approaches to GR instruction on the reading outcomes of six classrooms of second graders in a school that included GR as one part of the district's balanced literacy approach.

Two studies of teachers' perceived knowledge of GR protocols and their actual practices point to a potential disconnect between theory and classroom enactment. Ford and Opitz (2008) and Håland et al. (2021) utilized teacher surveys to better understand implementation by classroom teachers; Håland et al. also used video observations to document how GR was enacted in classrooms. Ford and Opitz conducted a national survey of 1,500 K–2 teachers to better understand implementation of GR in kindergarten, first-, and second-grade classrooms. Ninety-one percent of the teachers responding to their survey reported being fairly or very knowledgeable about GR. Yet results from the survey raised concerns about teachers' understanding of the purposes of GR, static grouping practices, the balance of narrative and informational text being used, and inconsistent use of texts matched to students' instructional levels. These contradictory findings indicate a potential mismatch between teachers' perceived understanding and implementation of GR.

Håland and colleagues (2021) reported similar findings in their two-part study of GR practices in Norwegian second-grade classrooms. Study 1 involved a survey whereby teachers described their implementation of GR, and Study 2 presented case studies of two teachers who were video recorded during 1 week of GR instruction. In both cases, the link between recommended and actual practice was not strong, in that teachers implemented some, but not all, critical practices for developing literacy as described by Fountas and Pinnell. Teachers reported regularly discussing word meanings, pictures, and the text, with the observations of practice confirming these reports. Echoing Young (2019), Håland et al. noted the importance of better supporting teachers with planning, particularly around word work; using strategies more frequently; and consistently assessing student growth.

Indeed, Fountas and Pinnell (2017) expressed concern that the systematic structure of GR may make it appear simpler than it is and cautioned that the approach is not just another name for the small-group instruction of the past. Indeed, providing

on-the-spot instruction can be challenging and require high levels of pedagogical content knowledge (Kennedy, 2016). Their concerns echoed some of those expressed by Ford and Opitz (2008), whose survey documented confusion among primary grade teachers about the purpose and implementation of GR. With regard to empirical studies of GR, Young (2019) noted the level of ambiguity in how the term is understood and called for the instructional procedures used in research to be well documented. Given the wide popularity of the approach, descriptive studies demonstrating how GR is implemented in early elementary classrooms are needed to further explore how this approach may benefit early reading instruction.

Study Rationale and Research Questions

It is important to more closely examine GR given the stated confusions, misconceptions, and inconsistencies about implementation (Ford & Opitz, 2008; Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). While we agree with Denton et al. (2014) that there is a need for more studies on the effectiveness of GR using experimental or quasi-experimental designs, we must also understand more precisely what teachers are actually doing when they say they are using GR and to what extent their instruction aligns with the conceptualization of Fountas and Pinnell (1996, 2017). Reviewing the limited extant research on GR indicates tremendous variety in implementation, which leads to questioning whether GR is actually being enacted. This raises the concern that GR has become a catch-all term for small-group reading instruction in the early elementary years.

We see a pressing need, therefore, for descriptive work that will provide a window into what teachers and students are actually doing during small-group reading instruction that is characterized as GR. Because the expectation that kindergarten students will be well on their way to becoming effective readers by the end of the year is a relatively new phenomenon, it seems particularly important to take a careful look at the ways in which GR is being implemented in kindergarten classrooms. In this study, we analyzed classroom video to document and describe how GR was implemented across 15 kindergarten classrooms in a single school district. Our research questions were as follows:

1. What elements of GR as conceptualized by Fountas and Pinnell are 15 kindergarten teachers enacting during small-group reading instruction?
2. Which instructional activities/foci are 15 teachers enacting before, during, and after reading the text? How are these enacted in practice?

Method

To address our research questions, we developed a coding scheme to document the presence or absence of the six GR elements during small-group instruction. A second round of coding documented the types of instruction (instructional activities/foci) that occurred before, during, and after the reading of the text. This coding included the six elements of GR as well as other foci/activities that are typically featured in small-group reading instruction. The results of the coding scheme were then tabulated, aggregated, and presented graphically for comparison's sake. Additionally, a micro-analysis of two word-work sessions is provided to showcase how such instruction is enacted at different

points in the GR lessons.

The analyzed data presented here were drawn from the first year of a larger study in which teachers were video recorded conducting a GR lesson. Teachers were permitted to self-select the group of students, text/focus of the lesson, and so on, with the goal of collecting a baseline sample of teachers' typical instructional practices. Teacher demographic data were drawn from a questionnaire completed at the beginning of the larger study. School- and district-level demographics were obtained through publicly accessible websites. The larger study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at East Carolina University, and all participants provided informed consent prior to onset of data collection.

Sample

A total of 18 female kindergarten teachers volunteered to allow video-based observations of their small-group reading instruction. Three of these teachers were excluded from the study due to issues with the video capture. Of the remaining 15, 12 self-identified as White and three as Black/African American. Ten teachers reported a bachelor's as their highest level of education attained, and four reported a master's degree (one teacher did not respond). All degrees were in the field of education, with the majority in elementary education. All 15 were fully licensed to teach kindergarten in the state. Three teachers reported teaching kindergarten for more than 10 years. Six of the teachers were in either their first or second year of teaching kindergarten. The remaining teachers reported between 3 and 10 years of teaching kindergarten.

The 15 teachers taught in eight Title 1 elementary schools in a single school district, with free or reduced-price lunch rates ranging from 54.7% to 92.7%. Proficiency in reading, measured by the percentage of students meeting or exceeding grade-level proficiency on the English language arts/reading assessment at the end of Grade 3, ranged from 38.8% to 66.8%. Class sizes for teachers in the study ranged from 17 to 22, with an average of 19.5. Nearly half of the students in these classrooms were White (48%), with 31% Black/African American, 17% Hispanic, and 4% all others combined. Four percent of the students were identified as English learners.

Videos and Coding

Data for the study were obtained through the systematic coding of videos of GR lessons taught by the 15 teachers; videos were collected within a 4-week window at the end of the school year. Teachers were permitted to self-select the date of video recording, with the request that the instruction represent their typical GR practices. One video per teacher was analyzed for the present study.

A two-pronged approach was used for coding the videos. First, we created a checklist of six GR lesson elements, as described by Fountas and Pinnell (2012): introducing the text, reading the text, discussing the text, teaching points, word work, and extending understanding (optional). Because we had no mechanism for determining how the teacher selected the text used in the lesson, we did not include "selection of a text" as one of the elements. Lesson elements were coded as present or absent, without consideration of the quality or duration of the instructional interactions as quality and duration

should be evaluated based on student need and situated within a broader longitudinal context.

Second, all videos were coded for specific instructional foci/activities before, during, and after the reading of the text using an observation tool we developed: the Characteristics of Small Group Reading Instruction (CSGRI; Anderson et al., 2020). The CSGRI was developed to describe instructional activities/foci within the six lesson elements of GR and to reflect additional aspects of instruction that might be included in a kindergarten lesson. The CSGRI is divided into three parts: (1) Before Reading, (2) During Reading, and (3) After Reading—as this is how Fountas and Pinnell detail GR sessions. Anticipating that not all lessons would be strictly aligned with the Fountas and Pinnell (1996, 2012) conceptualization of GR, these three parts also included instructional activities described in other practitioner-focused resources to ensure all behaviors were captured and described (Invernizzi et al., 2021; McNerney et al., 2006; Morris, 2015; Scanlon et al., 2017). The Before Reading portion of the coding scheme focused on whether teachers included the following instructional practices: rereading and/or discussing previously read texts, instruction pertaining to foundational skills (e.g., phonological awareness, letter names, letter sounds), modeling word-solving strategies, providing opportunities for children to use word-solving strategies, introducing a new text, discussing genre, discussing concepts of print, identifying text features, making connections to students' prior knowledge, engaging in a picture walk, teaching new vocabulary, teaching or practicing high-frequency words, and pointing out language structures. During Reading instructional practices included having students read the text individually, listening in as students read, assessing students, providing individualized instruction, supporting concepts of print, supporting word solving, and supporting meaning construction. After Reading practices included discussing the story, engaging in word work, reviewing vocabulary, reviewing word-solving strategies, and writing. Again, coding indicated the presence or absence of the behavior but did not address the overall quantity or quality of the behaviors. Additionally, the level of text read by the students was recorded on the coding sheet, with teachers using texts ranging from level B to level E. The complete coding manual is available upon request.

Agreement

The second author trained the third author in the coding scheme using videos not analyzed in the present study. Videos were double-coded until an acceptable degree of agreement was achieved (>90%). The sample of 15 videos to be analyzed was then numbered, and using a random number generator, 20% were selected to be coded for agreement at evenly spaced intervals to avoid coder drift. Approximately every fourth video was double-coded for agreement (total possible - disagreements/total possible), with the second author's codes serving as the master codes in places of disagreement. Disagreements were discussed, and clarification of definitions and examples were added to the coding manual as appropriate. The average agreement across all double-coded videos was 90% (range 77%–94%).

Analysis

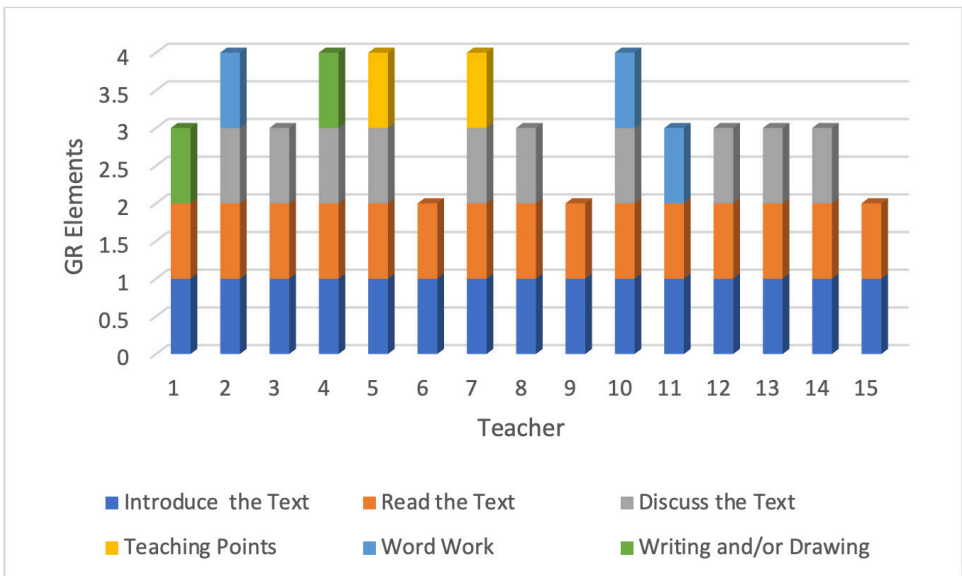
Codes were recorded in an Excel worksheet to allow for tallying and visual analysis. Research Questions 1 and 2 were addressed through tallying codes and creating den-

sity measures. Graphical representations were developed to examine the relations among instructional foci, text level, and instructional practices of GR. Visual analyses of these representations informed our findings. To further elucidate our quantitative measures, a micro-analysis of two teachers’ word-solving strategy instruction is provided to address how teachers enacted these practices. This moment-by-moment analysis details how two teachers incorporated different word-solving strategies before and during the reading of the text during small-group reading instruction, specifically addressing the needs of the students present and connections to the text being read.

Findings

In order to determine the degree to which teachers were enacting GR as conceptualized by Fountas and Pinnell (2012), the codes that described the elements of GR were tallied for each teacher. Figure 1 depicts the elements of a GR lesson, in the order in which they are recommended by Fountas and Pinnell. On average, teachers included 3.13 (range 1–4) elements in their lessons; none of the 15 teachers completed all six elements of GR. All teachers introduced a new book and engaged students in reading the book in some fashion. However, only five teachers (33.3%) had their students read through the entire book independently in compliance with GR. Ten teachers (66.6%) engaged students in some form of discussion of the text after they finished reading, two teachers (13.3%) revisited the text after reading to provide specific teaching points, three teachers (20.0%) completed some form of isolated word work, and three teachers (20.0%) engaged children in a writing activity that was connected to the text.

Figure 1.
Sums of Guided Reading Elements by Teacher



The length of GR lessons differed across teachers, ranging from 10 to nearly 43 minutes (see Table 1). On average, lessons were 21.5 minutes in length, including before and after reading activities. Teachers spent approximately 40% of the lesson reading the text, using either a choral and/or round robin format ($n = 10$) or independent reading format ($n = 5$). Teachers spent an average of 8.37 minutes engaging children prior to reading and an average of 4.65 minutes after reading the text. Eleven teachers spent more time engaged in before or during reading activities than after reading activities. Teachers working with more novice readers (level B) spent more time on before reading than after reading activities than teachers working with more developed readers (level E), who spent more time on after reading than before reading activities.

While there was some variation in length of lesson, teachers were relatively consistent with how they allocated their time to before, during, and after reading. Approximately 40% of the time was spent conducting before reading activities (range 20%–65%), which is roughly equal to time spent reading the book (during reading). Approximately 20% of the lesson was spent engaging in after reading activities (range 3%–38%).

Table 1.

Length of Lessons Across 15 Teachers

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
% of time reading	20%	65%	40%	15
Length of lesson	10.22	42.97	21.65	7.66
Before reading	2.58	17.75	8.37	3.71
During reading	3.83	20.22	8.64	4.79
After reading	0.39	16.47	4.65	3.74

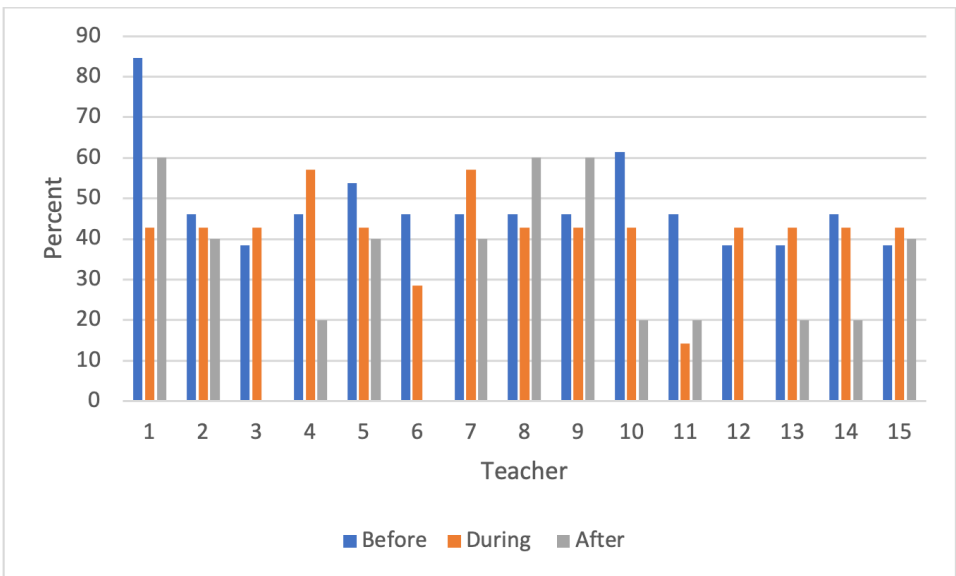
In order to describe the instructional foci/activities of the small-group reading lessons as addressed in Research Question 2, the data from the CSGRI were analyzed with four composite codes (Word Solving, Vocabulary, Meaning, and Foundational Skills). Such instructional foci are not unique or exclusive to GR, but rather may be observed in any small-group reading lesson, hence their analysis provides a portrait of what is happening in these small groups. *Word Solving* is the composite of five codes (word-solving modeling or practice at the beginning of the lesson, word-solving strategies during the book introduction, support for word solving while students were reading, and word-solving instruction or review after reading). *Vocabulary* is the composite of three codes (vocabulary and extending vocabulary during the book introduction and vocabulary after reading). *Meaning* comprises three codes (meaning construction during the book introduction, supporting meaning construction during reading, and discussion after reading). *Foundational Skills* is the composite of five codes (foundational skills instruction at the beginning of the lesson or during the book introduction, high-frequency word teaching or practice during the book introduction, and foundational skills after reading). Of these four instructional foci, three teachers included all four in their GR lesson. Fourteen teachers addressed word solving in some manner, seven explicitly addressed

vocabulary, 12 had some additional focus on meaning construction, and 11 focused on foundational skills at some point in the lesson.

Examining the coding by before, during, and after reading indicates the greatest variety of instruction took place before reading, with teachers averaging 6.3 of the 13 (48%) coded activities (see Figure 2). Teachers decreased the variety of instructional activities across the lesson, averaging 2.9 of seven (42%) codes during reading and 1.5 of five (29%) codes after reading the text.

Figure 2.

Examining Teachers' Before, During, and After Reading Behaviors



Note. Teachers were assigned numbers 1–15 for coding purposes only. 1 = Teacher 1. “Percent” indicates the percentage of coded elements included by the teacher (13 before codes, 7 during codes, 5 after codes).

Before Reading

While the Fountas and Pinnell lesson structure begins with introducing a new book, eight of the 15 kindergarten teachers in our sample included one or more instructional activities prior to introducing the new book. Specifically, two teachers engaged students in rereading familiar books, seven teachers included a focus on foundational skills development, and one teacher reviewed and modeled word solving strategies. Of the seven who focused on foundational skills, six used this time to review high-frequency words that had been previously taught, with one of these six also teaching two new high-frequency words during this time. The seventh teacher engaged students in two activities focused on phonemic analysis and connecting sounds to letters.

Before reading engagements ranged in length from 2 minutes 15 seconds to 8 minutes 55 seconds. Each included a picture walk, which ranged in length from 27 seconds to 6 minutes 22 seconds, with teachers employing one of three general approaches. Five teachers used a page-by-page approach, sometimes talking extensively about the pictures and what was happening on each page. Four teachers directed the students to take a picture walk independently, then followed this with either a page-by-page discussion (two teachers) or a discussion of just a few pages. The remaining six teachers encouraged students to take a picture walk independently and did not revisit the pictures before reading.

Beyond the fact that all before reading engagements included some form of a picture walk, the amount and type of support provided differed considerably across teachers. Of the 15 teachers, nine explicitly drew students' attention to the title of the book and three discussed and/or modeled pointing to each of the words on the page. Three teachers made specific reference to the genre of the text they were about to read, six provided a brief summary statement or overview of the book, four encouraged connections to prior knowledge, five provided definitions for specific vocabulary in the text, and three extended students' knowledge of vocabulary by connecting to related words that were not in the text. Eight teachers provided meaning-based support that did not fall into any of these categories (e.g., making predictions, talking about the setting and characters).

Some teachers also used the time before reading to support students' ability to successfully read the words in the text. One teacher practiced specific high-frequency words that would be encountered in the text, and five teachers included a focus on word solving, either reviewing previously taught strategies for figuring out unfamiliar words or modeling the use of a new strategy that could be used in the book they were about to read.

During Reading

As with the before reading portion of the lesson, the approach teachers took to the during reading portion varied considerably. While Fountas and Pinnell recommend that all children read the book all the way through, softly or silently to themselves, with the teacher observing, listening in, and providing support as needed, only five of the 15 teachers took this approach. The remaining 10 are categorized as choral/round robin reading (CRR) for analysis purposes. Round robin and choral reading approaches generally took the longest time (mean = 22.96, range 12.92–42.96), while independent readings tended to be shorter in duration (mean = 19.04, range 10.22–26.65). With the exception of two teachers using a CRR approach, all teachers provided some support around word solving, assisting students in the use of various strategies for figuring out unknown words (see Table 2). Five teachers provided support around general reading behaviors or concepts of print; four of these teachers used a CRR approach, with one having students read independently. Seven of the 10 teachers using the CRR approach provided some level of support for meaning construction during reading. None of the teachers who used an independent reading approach were observed to offer support for meaning construction while students were reading. All teachers who used an independent reading style provided one-on-one support for individual students, while eight of the 10 CRR teachers provided one-on-one support.

Table 2.

During Reading Behaviors by Reading Style

	One-on-one support	COP and general reading	Word solving	Meaning construction
Independent (<i>n</i> = 5)	5 (100%)	1 (20%)	5 (100%)	0 (0%)
CRR (<i>n</i> = 10)	8 (80%)	4 (40%)	8 (80%)	7 (70%)

Note. CCR = choral and round robin reading; COP = concepts of print.

After Reading

On average, teachers spent the least amount of time providing instruction after reading and provided the fewest instructional activities/foci at this stage as well. The most prevalent activity was to discuss the story, with 10 of the 15 teachers doing so. Relatively few teachers provided vocabulary support (*n* = 3), support for word solving (*n* = 2), word-level work (*n* = 3), or writing (*n* = 3). Only one teacher provided support for individual students. The amount of support was not related to the level of the text, as teachers working with students reading level B texts used one activity, while teachers working with students reading level E (the highest level in the study) incorporated 1.4 activities on average (range 0–3).

Micro-analysis

In this section, we examine two teachers' word-solving engagements with students, addressing a before reading engagement that was preplanned and a spontaneous engagement during the reading of the text. Both engagements focused on word solving yet did so through different high-quality means.

Before reading. Before reading activities may be preplanned to specifically target student needs or avoid potential confusions or issues while reading independently. Such preteaching may facilitate independence through the instruction of strategies that allow students to puzzle through words with relative independence (Scanlon et al., 2017). In this example, the teacher had students conduct an independent picture walk first and then directed students' attention back to a particular page in the book to practice a word-solving strategy before reading the text.

Teacher: I want you to open your book to page seven. I want you to look at the first sentence and point to the word *high*.

(Shows page, waits for students to find the word, and then points to it in her own book.)

Teacher: Now look at the second sentence. And look at the word *higher*. Do you see that ending, -er? If you cover up the ending with your finger, cover up the -er.

(Teacher covers up the -er in her book so students can see.)

Teacher: And it's high, right? Do you remember the secret story for -er, those terrible drivers?

Students: /eeeeerrrrrr/ *(Students emulate screeching car brakes while making /er/ sound.)*

Teacher: So you know when you see -er, you're going to hear what sound?

Students: /eeeeerrrrrr/.

Teacher: Okay. So *high-er*. That's how you use that strategy.... Look for chunks you know. You knew the word *high*, right, then you saw -er on the end. *Higher*.

In this instance the teacher models the behavior prior to having students read the text independently. She directs their attention to a word in the text, *higher*, and then further magnifies their attention to a specific part of the word by covering up the suffix, -er. She reads the word, *high*, to remind students they are familiar with this word, a common word-solving strategy typically referred to as "look for the parts you know" (Scanlon et al., 2017). She then reminds them of a previous instructional engagement when she explained the sound of -er by linking it to the sound of screeching car brakes. Here, she makes a real-world connection to help students recall the sound -er makes in print. The students clearly enjoyed making this connection as evidenced by their enthusiastic brake noises. This instruction achieved two goals. First, students were reminded to look for the parts of words they already know (*high*). Second, students were taught about the sound of a common suffix (-er), which can facilitate their ability to solve other unfamiliar words with the same common suffix. Such modeling primes students to engage in word-solving attempts independently, potentially building a self-teaching mechanism (Share, 1995). This preplanned instruction clearly focused on facilitating independence in alignment with GR practices and exemplifies high-quality instruction.

During reading. In contrast, our second teacher provided spontaneous word-solving instruction when she noticed a student's miscue when reading the word *bakes*. The teacher skillfully draws students' attention to the print by writing the words on a white board to highlight their similar features.

Teacher: Sara thought it might be makes, and that makes sense, doesn't it? Little Red Hen Makes a Cake. *Makes* and *bakes* rhyme.

(Writes words on white board for students to see.)

Teacher: When you look at *makes* and *bakes*, all of this is the same.

(Draws a box around 'ake.')

Teacher: Which one do you see in that title? Do you see /m/akes or do you see /b/akes?

(Emphasizes pronunciation of onset of makes and bakes.)

Students: Bakes!

Student 1: Because M does not match the B.

Teacher: Because the M makes what sound?

Student 1: /mmmmmm/.

Teacher: And the B makes what sound?

Student 1: /b/.

Teacher: Very good. How did you know that word was *cake* and not *pie*?

Student 2: Mommy E makes the A say its name.

Teacher: Okay, mommy E makes the A say its name. How else did you know? What's the beginning sound?

Student 2: C

Teacher: C is the letter, not the sound. What sound does the C make?

Student 2: /k/.

Teacher: Yes, C makes the /k/ sound. So it can't be pie, right? Because pie has the /p/ sound.

The teacher notes the error with the initial sound in the word *bakes* as the child reads the word as *makes*. She reproduces the print on a white board such that she may further focus students' attention on the beginning and ending sounds of the words by drawing boxes around the rime (*ake*). She then draws students' attention to the sounds contained in the onset of each word (/b/ and /m/) and helps students match the sounds to the printed letters. She furthers this instruction to address an additional word on the page (*cake*) to allow students to extend their practice with matching letters and sounds for word solving. Asking students how they know they have correctly identified a word allows them to state the utilized word solving, thus providing strong evidence for what the students know and can do in relation to word solving. Interestingly, Student 2 names a strategy previously taught (silent-e generalization) before stating the recently prompted strategy of looking at the first letter of the word. The teacher confirms the student's observation of the word and skillfully moves the student's attention to the strategy at hand (initial letter-sound correspondence) to encourage her to notice the part of the word that distinguishes *makes* from *bakes*.

Discussion and Implications

GR has become a common practice across U.S. classrooms, yet few studies have sought to identify how this complex instructional interaction takes place. Our study attempted to fill such a gap, with the intention of illuminating the practices teachers enact during kindergarten small-group GR instruction. Additionally, the study examined teacher behaviors according to the focus of instruction (meaning, code, foundational skills, vocabulary) and the timing of instruction (before, during, and after reading). Our analyses revealed four key findings: None of the observed teachers completed all elements of GR as conceptualized by Fountas and Pinnell. Word solving was the most common instructional focus of small-group instruction. Many teachers included choral or round robin rather than independent reading of the text, contrary to guidance that indicates a need to facilitate student independence. And the greatest variability in instruction occurred before reading the text. Below, we discuss these key findings in greater detail.

Although all teachers in the study taught in the same school district, and GR was a prescribed component of daily literacy instruction across the elementary grades, what was actually happening during this small-group time looked decidedly different from one classroom to the next. There were surface-level similarities, such that a casual observation might suggest that GR was indeed happening in each classroom. In reality, however, the structure and content of most of the lessons bore little resemblance to what Fountas and Pinnell (2012) would characterize as GR. While many of the enacted practices are research based, it is not merely the presence or absence of individual practices that matters, but rather the constellation of enacted practices within a GR session.

According to Bryk et al. (2007, as cited in Fountas & Pinnell, 2012), some aspects of instruction during GR are more challenging than others, with appropriate text selection being easiest, followed in difficulty by a meaning-focused book introduction; prompting for and supporting the use of appropriate strategies during reading; rich, meaning-focused discussion of the text after reading; and explicit teaching points. Fountas and Pinnell (2012) acknowledge the challenges inherent in the moment-to-moment decision making that characterizes expert instruction, noting that engaging students in rich discussion and determining teaching points based on observations made during reading are particularly challenging. Our results align with the purported level of difficulty described by Bryk and colleagues, as teachers were more likely to provide more extensive support before reading than during or after reading. Our teachers went beyond the before reading activities advocated by Fountas and Pinnell, however, with many also incorporating foundational skills instruction and/or attention to word solving. While not aligned with the Fountas and Pinnell conceptualization, more explicit attention to foundational skills during small-group instruction has much support. As noted by Duke and Varlas (2019), children reading with teacher support and coaching is a good use of small-group instructional time, but it is not the only possibility. Small-group time can also be used effectively for more explicit phonics and/or comprehension strategy instruction. Others (e.g., Al Otaiba et al., 2011; Scanlon et al., 2008) advocate for an integration of explicit code-focused instruction and meaning-focused instruction, determined by student needs, during small-group instruction in kindergarten.

Many before reading activities may be planned out in advance, such as explicit phonics instruction or a focus on high-frequency words, which allows teachers to prepare

materials and engagements designed to target specific skills or areas of need. In contrast, the moment-to-moment types of instruction happening during reading by definition occur spontaneously, necessitating on-the-fly adaptations that may exceed teachers' knowledge. Similarly, teaching points selected for after the lesson should be, at least in part, responsive to student reading behaviors observed during reading, while a rich discussion of the text requires the ability to facilitate dialogue with students. Teachers may not be prepared to address student confusions or areas of need in the moment unless they possess extensive pedagogical content knowledge (Kennedy, 2016).

Facilitating Independence

GR is designed to scaffold students' abilities to read independently, with teachers providing on-the-spot, just-in-time instruction targeted at students' needs. Our findings indicate that while teachers may have been enacting some GR activities, the enactment was not clearly aligned with GR guidance and may not have facilitated independence given the amount of provided support. Below we discuss the use of picture walks and reading styles in relation to facilitating independence, a foundational goal in GR.

Picture Walks

GR supports the use of picture walks for orienting students to the text to facilitate independent reading but encourages teachers to allow students to engage in their own thinking while reading the text. Although teachers did include this important aspect of GR, the quality of enactment may be of some concern as too much support may hinder students' abilities to process text independently. Page-by-page picture walks or extensive prereading discussions may provide more support than intended by GR guidance and not allow students to puzzle through reading challenges with independence as was observed in the analyzed sample. Level B–E texts are relatively short, hence providing a 6-minute picture walk is likely more supportive than Fountas and Pinnell intended as the observed teacher left little work for students to accomplish independently when actually reading the text. Fountas and Pinnell also note teachers should decrease the level of support as students become more proficient. In our study, teachers spent considerable energy and time orienting students to the text, with many engaging in page-by-page picture walks prior to reading. Indeed, teachers provided more instruction before reading of the text than during and after reading combined (before: mean = 6.3 of a possible 13; during: mean = 2.9 of a possible 7; after: mean = 1.5 of a possible 5). While picture walks are an important piece of GR, the underlying purpose of facilitating independence may be undermined by those that provide more support than intended by Fountas and Pinnell.

Reading Styles

During reading instruction converged with and diverged from GR guidance, with some teachers having students read independently and others implementing choral or round robin reading. GR promotes the use of independent reading whereby each child independently reads the text in a whisper, with the teacher leaning in at times to listen closely and provide on-the-spot support. Choral or round robin reading does not promote independence, as is suggested by GR, and may be overly supportive in a restrictive fashion (Ash et al., 2008; Harris & Hodges, 1995). Teachers who used choral or round robin reading limited students' abilities to independently puzzle through the text and enact

strategies for word solving and meaning construction, and provided less support for word solving than teachers who used independent reading in alignment with GR guidance. Teachers who asked students to read independently interacted with individual children more often than those using choral or round robin reading (100% compared to 80%), perhaps providing more targeted on-the-spot instruction. Interestingly, teachers who enacted round robin or choral reading incorporated more strategies for meaning construction and support for concepts of print and general reading behaviors than teachers who had students read independently. Round robin reading, however, is not regarded as a feature of rigorous early reading instruction, with multiple researchers calling for the abandonment of this practice (e.g. Allington, 1980; Ash et al., 2008), while choral reading is more typically used as an approach to fluency development (e.g., Stahl & Heubach, 2005).

Building Reading Skills

GR emphasizes supporting students with meaning construction and word solving as both are critical reading skills. Our sample of kindergarten teachers tended to place greater emphasis on word solving than on comprehension during small-group reading instruction, seemingly privileging the role of word recognition.

Supporting Meaning Construction

With the exception of the book introduction, teachers provided relatively little support for meaning construction. Fountas and Pinnell indicate the time after reading should focus on further developing meaning construction through discussing the story. Relatively little support for meaning construction was provided after reading, with teachers providing relatively few instructional activities and spending less time after reading the book than before or during reading. Only 10 of the 15 teachers focused on meaning construction after reading, and they spent relatively little time doing so as teachers spent 4 to 5 minutes on average engaging in after reading activities. The texts read during these small-group sessions ranged from level B to level E, likely indicating relatively low degrees of challenge in the plot structure and meaning. Nonetheless, as the purpose of reading is to develop comprehension according to GR, some degree of after reading discussion should occur during all GR sessions. Additionally, this time may be utilized to write about or act out the story, tasks rarely utilized by the teachers in this study. Such activities can be preplanned and may engage students in furthering their understanding of the text. Indeed, Graham and Hebert's (2011) review indicates the importance of writing in relation to developing strong reading comprehension. Similarly, relatively few teachers provided additional support for vocabulary, word solving, and word-level work after reading the text, representing missed opportunities for further developing critical skills and knowledge for promoting reading comprehension and achievement. Such engagements align with GR guidance, hence their omission represents a digression from GR instruction.

Supporting Word Solving

In contrast to Håland and colleagues (2021), our sample of teachers provided multiple engagements addressing word solving, with the bulk of the word-solving instruction taking place during the reading of the text. Teachers who had students read

independently were slightly more likely to provide word-solving support or instruction in comparison to their peers using a round robin or choral approach. Fountas and Pinnell advocate for word work to occur before, during, and after reading, with the bulk occurring after reading. Interestingly, only a small handful of teachers included word work in their after reading instruction.

Our micro-analysis revealed how two teachers provided support for word-solving during instruction. Such on-the-fly attention to word-solving skills and phonics instruction directly addresses students' needs at the moment a miscue is produced in alignment with GR guidance. This targeted instruction not only helps students focus on using the print for reading, but also addresses letter-sound correspondence during the reading of actual text. This authentic reading engagement allows students to see their teacher model a word-solving strategy in an authentic engagement, which likely enables students to better understand how to incorporate such strategies into their own word-solving attempts (Scanlon et al., 2017). GR encourages such on-the-spot instruction to immediately support students as they independently engage with reading text such that students learn through authentic engagement. In both the before and during examples included in the micro-analysis, it is clear that these teachers focus on the development of phonics skills outside the context of reading connected text and then provide opportunities and guidance for students to apply the skills they are learning during their GR time.

Of interest is the relative paucity of after reading instruction focusing on word work in a manner that aligns with the guidance of Fountas and Pinnell across our sample. Such word work may be preplanned or respond to student behaviors during reading, hence there are multiple means for consistently providing word work instruction after reading a text. Such instruction can also prime students for future reading experiences, such as instruction focusing on the strategies that may be useful for reading the text planned for the subsequent lesson. Planning in this manner may allow for more systematic instruction, which is highly regarded in relation to building word-solving skills (Scanlon et al., 2017).

Limitations and Future Directions

Our findings shed light on how a small group of teachers enacted GR in a single school district at a single moment in time, hence the results may not be generalizable to a larger population. While the teachers did report the captured videos accurately represented their typical instruction, it is still reasonable to expect some variation across lessons given different groups of students, texts, and so on. We were not able to evaluate teachers' text selection in this study, which is considered to be a more simple element of GR to enact, nor were we able to evaluate teachers' lesson plans to determine the intended degree of alignment with GR. Additionally, our measure, the CSGRI, is a researcher-developed tool that has not been widely tested across multiple samples. While developed from the extant literature, the reliability and validity as a coding measure have yet to be tested extensively. As our findings indicate, enormous variability across teachers exists, with no clear threshold to distinguish GR from small-group reading instruction. Finally, our study coded merely for the presence or absence of a particular behavior and did not code specifically for the quality. This is an important feature as the quality of enactment may be of great importance in relation to students' reading development. Future work should seek to identify the presence and quality of features of GR in relation to student outcomes.

Conclusion

Guided Reading has strong roots in the U.S. educational system, with many elementary schools claiming to use this approach to small-group instruction as part of their balanced literacy program. Similar to the observations of Håland et al. (2021) in second-grade classrooms, our observations of kindergarten teachers reveal great diversity of practices such that it is difficult to discern similarities common to GR across teachers. This diversity is both problematic and, potentially, promising. On the one hand, diversity may indicate teachers are not enacting GR as conceptualized by Fountas and Pinnell, but rather are engaging in more generic small-group reading instruction. On the other hand, the diversity may indicate that teachers are responding to the needs of the students in their small groups, such that certain practices are privileged based on the need at the time. Whether small-group instruction should follow the GR framework promoted and expanded upon by Fountas and Pinnell (1996, 2012, 2017) requires additional research. To do so requires a thorough understanding of the practices actually being enacted in classrooms, as what teachers say they are doing and what they are actually doing are not entirely aligned. With that knowledge in hand, we can more closely map practices and student outcomes and begin to make informed decisions about which instructional practices to maintain, which to replace, and which to refine so as to enhance their effectiveness.

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