

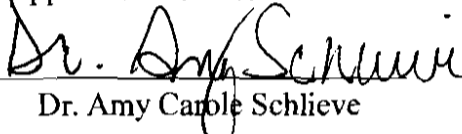
The Use of Ability Grouping and Flexible Grouping within Guided Reading

by

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ABSTRACT

Data was collected from 44 second graders, from 2005-2008. The data reviewed the results of students' reading accuracy and comprehension on the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA). The data collected compared the researcher's implementation of ability grouping within guided reading and flexible grouping within guided reading. At the researcher's school, students were considered to be proficient readers for second grade if they could achieve a level 24 on the DRA. Results indicated that students instructed within flexible guided reading groups achieved greater gains on the DRA than those instructed within ability-based guided reading groups. A higher percentage of students reached a level 24 the year the researcher implemented flexible grouping.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

Teaching reading is at the heart of many elementary curriculums. According to Pinnell and Scharer (2003) many primary-setting frameworks devoted to literacy focus on two-and-a-half to three hours of reading instruction every day. This was true at the researcher's northern Wisconsin school. By the end of second grade, it was expected that students would read with good phrasing and fluency, read words accurately, demonstrate how to summarize, and comprehend text at a 90% or better rate (Kelly Welk, October 13, 2008).

To assess and document students' reading development, students were assessed using the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA). Beaver (2001) explains how the DRA assists teachers in identifying each student's personal reading level through a one-on-one conference with the student. The conferences enable teachers to observe students' reading behaviors, record running records, determine students' reading levels, and redirect instruction. Influenced by Fountas and Pinnell (1996), in this researcher's district, a school-wide goal was implemented in 1998 for students to reach a level 24 on the DRA by the end of second grade (Kelly Welk, October 13, 2008). According to Beaver, throughout the second-grade year, students should be reading at DRA levels 18 through 28. Levels 24 and 28 are considered instructional levels to reach by the end of a child's second-grade year. Students who reach a level 24 are considered proficient readers, which means they are reading grade level material.

To assist students in reaching the proficiency level, guided reading was taught in grades kindergarten through second grade. Working with small groups of children gives students the attention they need to support them progress with their reading abilities.

Caldwell and Ford (2002) suggest that small group settings provide students with opportunities to learn content, become independent learners, and develop skills from face-to-face interactions. Most reading groups at this northern Wisconsin school were paired up with a 1:4 teacher-student ratio. However, this has not been enough. At the end of the students' second-grade year, teachers at the researcher's northern Wisconsin school implemented the DRA and found that a percentage of students were still not reaching the level 24 benchmark (Kelly Welk, October 13, 2008). Students not reaching a level 24 were considered to be reading below grade level. The Sage Committee established that level 24 was the baseline level students were required to reach to be considered proficient for second grade. Those students reading below level 24 were considered to be reading below proficiency.

According to Pinnell and Scharer (2003) after students leave second grade, they will engage in more independent reading and writing and less individualized reading activities with the teacher. "When students enter second grade, they will be working in a way that looks very much like the primary framework; when they leave second grade, they should be working in a way that looks more like the intermediate framework" (p. 241). At the researcher's school, this too was true. In third grade, class sizes become bigger, students participate in more independent work, and the reading block is not centered around guided reading. Students are immersed in text of varying degrees, not specific to their ability assessed by the DRA.

Flexible grouping can help students become better prepared for the move from the primary framework to the intermediate framework. In flexible groups, children are grouped by specific learning goals, and membership in flexible groups changes often.

Additionally, a majority of children will be able to read grade-level texts with the appropriate amount of support, regardless of their “leveled” reading ability. In contrast, ability groups tend to stay static throughout the year, determined only by general ability (Opitz, 1998).

Using flexible grouping during guided reading gives students a transition from strictly leveled texts into texts of various levels of difficulty. “Involving the whole class in a single selection can be very motivating for readers, who see themselves as participating members of an entire class, not an ability group” (Caldwell & Ford, 2002, p. 14). The students are able to approach the texts, still in a small group setting, getting the support they need from their teacher. Students have the opportunity to be grouped with every other student in their class at some point throughout the year. This is different than leveled guided reading groups, where the groups remain homogenous for a majority of the year. Using a variety of different leveled texts in a small group setting will be a preview of what the students will expect in third grade.

The researcher intended to gain information from this study that she could apply to her teaching in the future. First, the researcher wanted to identify which instructional method she used over the past three years led to the highest gains in student achievement. Second, the researcher specifically wanted to identify which instructional teaching method led to more students achieving the proficient reading benchmark.

By finding a way for more students to reach a level 24 on the DRA, the students would be better equipped for future literacy tasks. They would feel comfortable reading in whole-class settings. Also, they would know how to approach texts of varying degrees



of difficulty, including textbooks and passages from books outside of their “leveled” ability (Caldwell & Ford, 2002).

### *Statement of the Problem*

The purpose of this research was to review data in order to determine the correlation between students’ reading proficiency and comprehension and their placement within guided reading groups. The research focused on reviewing data from 2005-2008. The research was a comparative method to determine the growth of students’ reading proficiency and comprehension based on their DRA scores. The research involved the records of 44 students whom the researcher taught at her rural northern Wisconsin school. The research compared growth that two groups of 15 students made from 2005-2007 with the growth that a group of 14 students made from 2007-2008. From 2005-2007 students were grouped homogenously based only on their DRA reading level. During the 2007-2008 school year, students were grouped flexibly depending on a wide range of individual needs. Comparisons informed the researcher whether the students in the flexible groups achieved more, less, or the same amount of growth as the homogeneous leveled groups.

### *Research Questions*

The following list of questions were the focus of the study, in order to acquire the most accurate research regarding flexible grouping versus homogenous grouping within guided reading:

1. What instructional method produced the highest number of students to reach a level 24 or higher on the DRA?
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2. What was the median amount of growth achieved each year, based on the levels of the DRA?
3. What was the median score reached each year by students on the DRA?

### *Definition of Terms*

*Basal readers.* “The central components of commercially developed reading programs. They are often structured as anthologies of grade-leveled texts surrounded by a number of additional supportive materials such as teacher guides and student workbooks” (Ford & Opitz, 2001, p. 33).

*Developmental reading assessment.* A tool which helps educators identify each student’s reading ability and level, document progress, and tailor teaching to drive effective reading instruction. It assesses accuracy, fluency, and comprehension (Beaver, 2001).

*Flexible grouping.* “Allowing students to work in differently mixed groups depending on the goal of the learning task at hand” (Opitz, 1998, p. 10).

*Fluent reading.* “Using smoothly integrated operations to process the meaning, language, and print” (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006, p. 62).

*Guided reading.* “Small group instruction that builds each student’s ability to process increasingly challenging texts with fluency and understanding” (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006, p. 11).

*Phrasing.* “The way readers put words together in groups to represent the meaningful units of language” (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006, p. 69).

*Running Record.* “A tool for coding, scoring, and analyzing a child’s precise reading behaviors” (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, p. 89).

*SAGE*. "Student Achievement Guarantee in Education" A program to help schools lower class sizes to give K-3 students better educational opportunities" (Wisconsin Department of Education, 2008).

*Title I*. This program is intended to support overall improvements of teaching and learning for all students in schools with a student population of 40% or more, lower income (Wisconsin Department of Education, 2008).

#### *Assumptions of the Study*

It was assumed that not all students entered second grade at the same reading ability. Some students needed extra support to reach a proficient level. Not all students received support from home. When the guided reading books were sent home on a nightly basis, not all parents took the time to read with their child. Based on DRA results from previous years, it was assumed that not all students reached a score of 24 on the DRA by the end of their second-grade year. It was also assumed that some students reached a score higher than a 24.

#### *Limitations of the Study*

1. The class sizes in second grade at the researcher's northern Wisconsin school were small. Each year the maximum number of students in a class was 15.
2. The ethnicity at the researcher's northern Wisconsin school was primarily Caucasian/European-American. Therefore, the study did not include a lot of diversity.
3. The school was a SAGE school. A small population of the researcher's students received extra reading support from a Title I teacher.

4. The study was reviewing scores over a three-year period. The researcher's knowledge and presentation of material could have been stronger in the second and third years due to experience.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

Guided reading can play a significant role in the development of a child's reading ability. In fact, guiding reading is at the core of many primary literacy programs. There are many components that comprise each lesson taught within guided reading, including introducing a text, reading the text, discussing the text, extending the understanding of the text, and a skills-based mini-lesson (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). This chapter will highlight the definition of guided reading, instructional methods used in guided reading, and grouping structures used within guided reading. Additionally, this chapter will discuss how the use of flexible grouping is being encouraged by literacy researchers to help promote reading skills, comprehension, and students' self-concept.

### *Definition of Guided Reading*

Guided reading is one type of reading approach which assists children in constructing literacy skills. Fountas and Pinnell (2006) define guided reading as "Small group instruction that builds each student's ability to process increasingly challenging texts with fluency and understanding" (p. 11). Ford and Opitz (2001) refer to guided reading as "Planned, intended, focused instruction. Usually in small-group settings, teachers help students learn more about the reading process" (p. 2). Students participate in socially supported activities, develop independent reading skills, and enjoy meaningful reading experiences. The goal behind guided reading is to offer guidance and strategies to students, so that they can become independent readers. The small group structure gives teachers the opportunity to observe individual readers and support them as they read (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

The first step in preparing a guided reading lesson is choosing an appropriate text. Calkins (2001) suggests that the text used for a guided reading lesson be at a student's instructional level. At an instructional level, the text introduces new vocabulary to students; however, it is not too difficult that the students lack comprehension (Townsend, 2004). "It is critical to study a text beforehand in order to imagine the difficulties it will probably pose for readers" (p. 181). Fountas and Pinnell (2006) suggest considering a text's print layout, spacing, familiarity of content, high frequency words, illustrations, length, new vocabulary, and organization of information. Texts chosen for students are intended to be enjoyed by the students, so the factors listed above must be kept in mind. At the same time, however, the texts should be at the students' instructional level. When texts are at a student's instructional level, the student can comprehend 80% of simple recall questions, can read at a 95% accuracy rate, and needs some assistance from a teacher. At this level, students make the most progress in reading (Townsend, 2004). Pinnell and Scharer (2003) recommend that teachers read and analyze the text, consider the text's demands, and select important behaviors to emphasize based on those demands. Taking time to select appropriate texts is an imperative part of the guided reading process.

Cunningham, Hall, and Sigmon (1999) offer various ways to use guided reading in the classroom. One way is through the use of a big book. During the reading of a big book, the students gather around the teacher as he/she points to each word on the page while reading. The print in big books is enlarged, which allows students to follow along as the teacher reads the words. Seeing the print up close gives students the opportunity to make connections with what they are hearing and to ask questions about the book.

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Students listen to the teacher read the book on the first day of instruction, and they join in on subsequent readings. The approach Cunningham et al. suggest is used with the entire class; however, many times the objective behind guided reading is to instruct small groups of children (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

Guided reading can also be taught with basal readers, literature collections, or trade books. In these cases, the students would have their own copy of the story directly in front of them. When each child has their own copy of the story, “The teacher selects and introduces a new text and children read the whole text to themselves” (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, p. 27). Here, some teacher support is needed, but mostly the reader problem-solves the text independently. Fountas and Pinnell (2006) state, “Through a variety of models you will want to introduce the whole text when students can read it in one session” (p. 377). A common format in guided reading is to introduce a text, read it and discuss it one day, reread it the next day, and finally, complete extension activities based on the text. Fountas and Pinnell suggest extension activities such as writing about the text, drawing illustrations to complement the storyline, working with vocabulary words, or engaging in meaningful book discussions.

#### *Instructional Methods Used In Guided Reading*

Once students are placed into a guided reading group and paired with an appropriate text, there are many concepts, strategies, and materials to cover throughout the year. Cunningham et al. (1999) suggest that guided reading lessons be broken up into three phases: before-reading, during-reading, and after-reading. In the before-reading phase, students look at the pictures in the story to help them predict what the story is going to be about. Teachers can also discuss any new vocabulary that the students will

encounter. Fountas and Pinnell (2006) suggest that readers make personal connections to the text during this phase. Teachers should involve readers in conversations that get them thinking about the text. In the second phase, during-reading, students independently read the text to themselves while teachers observe effective reading behaviors. Teachers will listen to students read for a brief time, prompt problem-solving cues, and confirm whether or not the reader is engaging in effective reading behaviors. In the after-reading phase, Cunningham et al. suggest discussing the text, following up predictions, acting out the story, or completing some form of a graphic organizer. Depending on the text and the group, the instructional method used in each phase will vary. The teacher assists students to expand their prior knowledge, make connections to personal experiences, and develop vocabulary. Each of these concepts varies from learner to learner. Fountas and Pinnell agree that no two guided reading lessons will ever be the same. “Although the framework is structured and supportive, the conversations you have with children will vary according to their responses” (p. 374). However, in all lessons, there are numerous opportunities to teach text comprehension.

Text comprehension is the one of the ultimate goals in guided reading, and there are specific strategies to help students reach comprehension. Beaver (2001) states that students comprehend text when they can retell what they have read, respond to prompted questions, and evaluate the story. Fountas and Pinnell (2006) define comprehension as “The thinking readers do before, during, and after reading” (p. 16). Comprehension is a network of *in-the-head* processes used to actively make meaning of what has been read.

Text comprehension can also be taught through meaningful book discussions. Pinnell and Scharer (2003) suggest asking children open-ended questions. “The intent



behind such open invitations is to establish the expectation that children's thoughts and feelings about what they read are important and should be shared with the group" (p. 95). Pinnell and Scharer (2003) have discovered that children's conversations regarding text comprehension often encompass insights that adults do not even consider. Their fresh outlook and new ideas enhance the book discussions.

In all guided reading lessons, the first element to be taught is introducing the text. Calkins (2001) sets this up as a three-to-four minute conversation including, "...a summary of the book and a discussion of key concepts and new vocabulary words" (p. 176). The introduction is critical in reading comprehension. When students first look at a book, the teacher's hope is to instill a sense of interest, wonder, and the confidence to succeed at reading the text. "As you plan your introductions, think about the reading process, the demands of the text, and the readers' strengths and needs" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006, p. 374). Students will make predictions, connect the text to their own lives, and raise questions. Once readers have a basic understanding of what their text is about, they are ready to read the text.

Again, depending on the group of readers, the format in which the book is read will vary. The children may independently read it to themselves or they may softly read it out loud (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). As the students read, the teacher observes and listens to each child independently for a short time. The teacher makes notes of the strategies and reading behaviors the child effectively succeeds at and those that need improvement. During reading, some possible strategies students use are decoding words accurately, monitoring and self-correcting, and summarizing the text. If students are not self-correcting words they are mispronouncing, Calkins (2001) recommends that teachers

prompt students with questions such as “Does that sound right? Does that make sense? Does that look right?” (p. 115). When students have trouble pronouncing an unfamiliar word, teachers should remind them of the strategies they were taught to help them with the decoding process (Cunningham et al., 1999). To check for comprehension, teachers ask readers questions part-way through their reading. This gives teachers an idea of how the students are summarizing the information. If students within the guided reading group finish at different rates, teachers have those who finished first go back and read the text again or find their favorite part for the post-reading discussion (Calkins). This way, the group is still contained, and the post-reading discussion can begin once all readers are finished with the text.

Once all of the students in the group are finished reading, it is beneficial for students to engage in a follow-up on the book. Teachers choose follow-up activities based on the book’s content and the group’s ability. Cunningham et al. (1999) suggest that the follow-up portion be five to ten minutes long. Students can discuss the text, make follow-up predictions, act out the story, complete graphic organizers, or connect new knowledge to what they knew before. Fountas and Pinnell (2006) encourage students to share comments and questions about what they read, benefiting both the students and the teacher. “As you listen to their comments, you will also gain a great deal of information about the degree to which they understood what they read” (p. 378). Follow-up activities provide meaningful closure to a story, which confirms to the students that there was a purpose for reading the story.

Besides reading and discussing a text, students within guided reading groups may also participate in mini-lessons. A mini-lesson is a five to 15 minute lesson geared

towards improving a skill or strategy students use in their independent reading (Calkins, 2001). Mini-lessons emerge from what the teacher has observed while reading with the guided reading groups (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Mini-lesson topics and activities will vary, which allows teachers the opportunity to target multiple intelligences. Wikipedia (2008) defines multiple intelligences as the following:

An educational theory, first developed by Howard Gardner, that describes an array of different kinds of intelligences exhibited by human beings. Gardner suggests that each individual manifests varying levels of these different intelligences, and thus each person has a unique cognitive profile. (para. 1)

Mini-lessons taught during guided reading provide opportunities to reach students' different learning styles. Coil (2007) highlights the different intelligences and learning activities that would benefit each style. Visual learners will often thrive with picture books, graphic organizers, story boards, and story maps. Verbal learners enjoy listening, poetry, skits, speeches, and dialogue. Kinesthetic learners, students who learn through hands-on activities, like manipulatives, performing plays, and playing games.

Technological learners prefer completing activities using a word processor, computer, or a smart board. Musical learners flourish by communicating through music and poetry, performing a choral reading, and rhyming. Logical learners often prefer to sequence stories, create story timelines, compare and contrast characters, and construct charts.

Naturalist learners will often thrive on reading nature-related books, creating categories to classify information, and making a shadow box to display a story's setting.

Intrapersonal learners, students who learn from themselves, learn best from successes and failures, listing story-problem solutions, and by writing reflections about books they have

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read. Interpersonal learners, students who learn best by working with others, succeed by reading with peers, leading discussions, and completing projects with other members of their guided reading group.

By offering a variety of mini-lessons during guided reading, teachers can target students' multiple intelligences. Kagan and Kagan (1998) encourage teachers to reach out to students in a variety of ways because they believe that everyone is smart in a different way. "Recognizing that different students have different ways to be smart, when a student 'doesn't get it,' we attempt to reach the student in a different way" (p. 1.1). Using flexible groups, teachers can gather students together who possess the same intelligences, and create mini-lessons targeted to meet their needs.

During guided reading instruction, students will be exposed to an array of strategies that can help them in the reading process. With all the different instructional strategies available in guided reading, students will hopefully grow to be proficient readers. Ford and Opitz (2001) find that guided reading time enables teachers to work closely with small groups of children. This personal time allows teachers to learn more about their students and plan appropriate instruction to meet their students' needs. Guided reading also affords children with more opportunities to interact with each other, in addition to their teacher. As a result of these interactions, students are more likely to understand what it means to engage in a discussion. Meaningful discussions lead to better comprehension of text.

#### *Grouping Structures*

"Small group instruction is usually synonymous with guided reading" (Ford & Opitz, 2001, p. 6). Fountas and Pinnell (2006) agree, stating that students benefit from

focused instruction due to the small group setting. Teachers have many options of how to group their student, including homogeneous (ability) grouping or flexible (mixed ability) grouping (Opitz, 1998). Homogeneous grouping and flexible grouping both have their advantages in the classroom; therefore, the major decision is when to use the desired group structure.

In the past, researchers have promoted using ability grouping in guided reading. According to Caldwell and Ford, “In 1988, data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showed that 80 percent of students in fourth grade were in reading groups formed on the basis of ability” (p. 1; as cited in Langer, Applebee, Mullis & Foertsch, 1990). Fountas and Pinnell (1996), also suggested setting up guided reading groups based on students’ reading ability. “The teacher works with a small group of children who use similar reading processes and are able to read similar levels of text with support” (p. 2). Ford and Opitz (2001) refer to ability grouping as grouping children into small reading groups based on the number of words they can accurately read from a passage. Ability grouping can also be termed homogeneous grouping (Opitz, 1998).

Teachers choose homogeneous grouping for a number of reasons. Students may be grouped depending on the amount of remediation or enrichment they need, similar abilities, or learning styles (Coil, 2007). The work students complete in homogeneous groups is also determined by the assumption of the group’s ability: “Different groups receive different kinds of instruction with the ‘low’ group receiving more lower-level tasks” (Opitz, 1998, p. 11).

According to Fountas and Pinnell (1996), when young children are learning to read, ability grouping can provide them with the materials and support they need for development.

For example, children who are just beginning to understand important concepts about print need clear words with spaces between them and only one or two lines of text. To force them to read complex texts with three or four lines and without clear picture clues would confuse them. (p. 98)

Ability grouping provides children with the support they need to read material that is at their skill level, but it is not a teacher's only option.

Today, flexible grouping is also being encouraged (Caldwell & Ford, 2002). Ford and Opitz (2001) define flexible grouping as follows: "Students work in a variety of differently mixed groups that are drawn together for a specific purpose. Sometimes the children in these groups are similar in their reading behaviors, and at other times they are diverse" (p. 22). Flexible grouping allows children to meet in a group to work on a specific skill. Once that skill is reached, the group disperses. Coil (2007) agreed, stating,

Flexible grouping means arranging for students to work together in a variety of ways and configurations depending on the classroom activity and desired learning outcomes. One key to flexible grouping is to make sure students aren't in the same group for every classroom activity (p. 19).

Flexible groups can be implemented in a number of ways. The groups can vary in how big or small they are, how they are chosen, and what is taught. Flood, Flood, Lapp and Nagel (1992) offer the possible suggestions on how teachers could group their students: by skill development, interest, work habits, prior knowledge, task, social,

random, and by students' choice. Caldwell and Ford (2002) offer the same suggestions for grouping, in addition to age, materials, and size.

The size of the groups should always be considered when working to meet the students' needs. Kuhn (2004) conducted a study, which provides an example of how group structure must be carefully considered when using flexible grouping. She studied a group of 24 second graders, focusing on fluency instruction. She sought four groups, composed of readers of varying reading ability. In her case, group size was the determining factor in the structure of the flexible groups:

The size of the reading groups was determined in consultation with the classroom teachers. We discussed what they considered to be a realistic number for small-group literacy instruction, with four to six students suggested as reasonable for such activities. After reflection, I decided to include six per group because of the possibility of attrition (p. 340).

Kuhn's project was designed to assess the effectiveness of a modified repeated-reading strategy, fluency-oriented oral reading (FOOR), and a wide-reading approach, in which students read equivalent amounts of non-repetitive text (2004). Using flexible grouping, she was assessing the fluency of struggling readers. Flexible grouping was the ideal grouping format for Kuhn, because she was looking at the various techniques used to teach fluency. In this case, the students ranged in their fluency abilities, so that she could focus on the different fluency strategies.

Depending on the learning goal at hand, the size of the group could change often. Flood et al. (1992) suggest implementing six different formations: individual, pairs, groups of three or four, groups of seven to ten, half-class, and whole class. Before

deciding what type of group is best, teachers need to ask themselves exactly what the desired learning outcome is, and what type of group structure will help students meet that learning outcome (Coil, 2007).

### *Benefits of Flexible Grouping*

Flexible grouping has benefits for students. One benefit is that learners are not stereotyped with a label according to their ability (Ford & Opitz, 2001). Labels affect the way instructors interact with students. Teachers tend to treat low ability students differently than high ability students. With the low ability students, the lessons are simpler, the students get corrected more often, and the focus of the lesson is centered around skills such as decoding. With the high ability students, lessons are centered around comprehension, deeper levels of discussion, and higher-level thinking questions (Wiggins, 1994). Additionally, teachers working with higher reading ability groups and lower reading ability groups provide different types of cues to their readers. With the high groups, the cues are meaning-based. When teachers work with lower ability groups, the cues they give their readers focus on letter and sound clues (Caldwell & Ford, 2002). With flexible grouping, all students have the opportunity to engage in the higher-leveled lessons, because students of varying abilities are now in common groups.

Ability grouping influences the way teachers regard their students and the way the students regard themselves. When students are consistently placed with other students of their same ability, students are inclined to label themselves. “Low expectations often result in a self-fulfilling prophecy of low-performing students, thereby contributing to a cycle of failure and lowered academic achievement and motivation” (Caldwell & Ford, 2002, p. 6). With regards to reading, teachers begin to label their students according to



stages of reading development – such as early, emerging, and fluent (Ford & Opitz, 2001). Labels affect the way a teacher treats his/her students, and labels also affect the readers' self-esteem. When students are placed in ability groups, "Students see themselves as low and perform according to their expectations" (Opitz, 1999, p. 14). With flexible grouping, it enables children to work cooperatively with a wide variety of peers. Students who perform at a lower ability are not fixed in the same group with other lower ability readers all year long, receiving inferior instruction.

The social status of students in ability groups varies as well. Caldwell and Ford (2002) found that the higher ability groups were perceived more positively by students and teachers. Members of the same group tend to stick together throughout the entire day. This limits social interactions with different classmates on the bus, playground and in the cafeteria. Group placement affects how students feel about themselves beyond the walls of the reading classroom. Opitz (1998) found that students placed in low-ability groups feel excluded from class activities, have lowered self-concept, find their classmates unfriendly, and are more apathetic.

"Drawing from the work of Vygotsky and our personal experiences, we recognize that one of the best ways to advance ourselves is to collaborate with those who are more capable (Ford & Opitz, 2001, p. 13). In flexible groups, students who are strong in one area can interact and help students who may struggle in that same area. The students learn to work cooperatively. Students who work cooperatively develop interpersonal and small group interaction skills, they become less dependent on the teacher, and they become more tolerant of others' differences (Caldwell & Ford, 2002).

A last benefit to flexible grouping is that teachers have the opportunity to meet the skills-based instruction that all students need, regardless of ability. Cantrell (1999) conducted a study, which provides an example of how skill-based lessons are brought into a flexible, guided reading lesson. She studied a group of eight teachers who were implementing new educational reforms in Kentucky's primary schools. One teacher used skills-based, flexible grouping as her primary guided reading instructional method:

Ms. Taylor conveyed that she explicitly taught "old fashioned skill lessons" to small flexible groups of students who exhibited need. When she noticed that some students were having difficulty with a particular skill, she pulled those students together for small group skill instruction (p. 375).

By grouping flexibly, a teacher can concentrate on specific skills, bringing all readers who need help with that skill together, no matter what their reading ability is. Cantrell (1999) went on to say, "Observations of other Kentucky's teachers who have successfully implemented the primary programs have revealed the importance of this kind of flexible grouping for explicit instruction in specific reading and writing skills" (p. 375).

### *Summary*

Guided reading is one type of reading instruction taught to children in the primary grades. The first step in teaching guided reading is for teachers to carefully choose the texts they want to teach their students. Next, teachers plan reading lessons around those texts. A variety of strategies, mini-lessons and concepts are covered, with a focus on reading comprehension. Lastly, teachers must decide how they want to group their students. Flexible grouping is one type of grouping format being encouraged by

researchers. Flexible grouping can affect a student's learning in many positive ways. Implementing it in a guided reading program, has the potential to prepare students with better reading comprehension than if guided reading is solely set up in an ability-grouping format. More work that investigates the different results in reading comprehension between the two grouping formats needs to be done to move away from the more traditional way of formatting guided reading groups.

### Chapter III: Methodology

This study investigated the effects of flexible grouping used within guided reading. The research focused on three groups of second-grade students from a rural northern Wisconsin school over a three-year period. The researcher reviewed data from assessments she conducted on her students from 2005-2008. There were limitations to the study; however, they were surpassed by the knowledge the study provided to the researcher.

#### *Selection of Sample*

The researcher reviewed assessments administered to three groups of second-grade students, over a three-year period. During the 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 school years, the researcher's reading classes consisted of 15 students. During the 2007-2008 school year, the researcher's reading class consisted of 14 students, for a total of 44 students.

The researcher decided to review assessments from students that only she taught rather than other second-grade students for many reasons. First, the researcher believed that teaching style highly affects the way children learn. By selecting her own students, teaching style was one variable that remained constant to all three groups of students. Second, convenience was a factor. Documentation of the students' assessments were easier to track for the researcher since they were her own students. Lastly, the researcher administered the assessment to her own students. The three groups of students were assessed with the same materials and procedures over all three years.

*Description of Sample*

The researcher's sample consisted of 44 second-grade students from a rural northern Wisconsin school. The sample included 27 males and 17 females, all between the ages of seven and eight. Forty of the students were of European-American decent, two were of African-American decent, one was of Asian-American decent, and one was of Latin-American decent. Thirty-one percent of the students received free or reduced lunch. All students were labeled as regular education students. The students were placed in the researcher's classroom through a random selection process on the school's computer.

*Description of Setting*

The researcher's school was located in rural, North Central Wisconsin. The district was comprised of a high school, a middle school and an elementary school, all of which were housed in the same complex. Because of the district's rural setting, the student population had limited ethnic and cultural diversity. The school was primarily composed of Caucasian students. A closer look at the student population from the 2007-2008 school year revealed the following: Out of 1,558 students, 10 were American Indian, 11 were of Asian descent, 7 of the students were Black, 5 were Black-Non Hispanic, 11 were Hispanic and 1,544 students were Caucasian.

Special education and socioeconomic diversity presented the greatest challenges in the researcher's district. This was apparent in the percentage of students who received free or reduced lunch. The number of students who received free lunch was 267 while the number of students offered lunch at a reduced cost was 128. This totaled 395 students on free or reduced lunch, giving the school district a percentage of a little over 25% (.2545).

During the 2007-2008 school year, the researcher's district had an enrollment of 1607. That included students enrolled in early childhood, elementary, middle, high school and St. Mary's School (K-5). Out of the 1607 students enrolled, there were 186 students with disabilities in the district. Those numbers made up 11.6% of the district's population of students that were identified as students with a disability. When broken down by disability, 7.5% of the students were children with autism (14 students), 8.6% were children with cognitive disabilities (16 students), 13.4% were children with emotional behavioral disorders (25 students), 1% were children with orthopedic impairments (2 students), 8% were children with other health impairments (15 students), 2.2% were children with significant development delays (4 students), 37% were children with a learning disability (69 students), 20% were children being treated for Speech/Language only (38 students), 1% were children with traumatic brain injuries (2 students), and .5% was a child with a visual impairment (1 student).

#### *Instrumentation*

The instrument used in this study was a reading assessment. It was the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), which assesses a child's reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. It was an assessment tool used in grades kindergarten through second grade at the researcher's school. It is also used in many other schools nation-wide. Because of its reputation to provide meaningful results related to a child's reading ability, this assessment was both valid and reliable.

#### *Data Collection*

The researcher collected data during her time as the students' second-grade teacher. The DRA was administered to the students during their second-grade year, in the

classroom, by the researcher as their teacher. At the end of the school year, the DRA was placed in the students' school cumulative folder. The researcher was reviewing the data, tracking where the students started their second-grade year, and where they ended, according to the DRA.

### *Data Analysis*

The researcher analyzed the amount of growth students made in reading throughout their second-grade year through the use of the DRA. The researcher was specifically looking at four items. First, she determined how many students reached a level 24 (considered a proficient reading ability at her rural northern Wisconsin school) during her 2005-2006, 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 school years. Second, she determined how many students reached a level higher than 24 for each year. Third, the researcher averaged the amount of growth each group made throughout the year. This was done by looking at how many levels each student progressed on their DRA during the 2005 – 2008 school years. The researcher then individually averaged the amount of growth for the 2005-2006 school year, the 2006-2007 school year, and the 2007-2008 school year. To determine the amount of growth, the researcher looked at what level the students started at coming into second grade and where they ended. Lastly, the researcher averaged the scores reached by the end of the each year. She found what the median level attained on the DRA was for each group of students from 2005 – 2008.

The data from 2005-2006, 2006-2007, and 2007-2008 were all compared. From 2005-2007, the researcher implemented ability grouping only within her guided reading classes. During the 2007-2008 school year, she implemented flexible grouping. The researcher analyzed under which instructional method the most amount of reading growth

was made. Specifically, the researcher wanted to determine if more growth was made during the 2007-2008 year, using flexible grouping as her instructional method for guided reading.

### *Limitations*

The methodology of this study had a few limitations. First, the sample size was small. Each year the maximum number of students the researcher taught was 15. This decreased the statistical reliability of the study. A second limitation was the ratio of male and female subjects in the sample. The last limitation was the format of the assessment tool. The questions of the DRA were structured as oral, short answer.

Although this study had its limitations, the results were still valuable to the researcher. The researcher could develop a better understanding of which instructional method helped her students become more proficient in reading. This could influence the way she approached teaching reading in the future. The researcher would also be able to share any insights she gained with her coworkers.



## Chapter IV: Results

### *Introduction*

The purpose of this research was to review data in order to determine which style of reading instruction used within guided reading produced higher levels of student achievement. The research focused on collecting data from the researcher's 2005-2006, 2006-2007, and 2007-2008 teaching years. Data from the students' Developmental Reading Assessments (DRA) were compared. The researcher wanted to determine whether using ability grouping or flexible grouping produced higher gains in reading achievement. To be considered proficient, students needed to reach a level 24 or higher on their DRA. Specifically, the researcher wanted to determine if more students reached a level 24 during the 2007-2008 school year, when flexible grouping was implemented. The data would reveal the median amount of growth made each year and the median score reached each year by students on the DRA. This chapter will incorporate the results from the data collection and a table that indicates the students' reading growth during each year.

### *Item Analysis*

The individual reading assessments revealed the DRA level each student started at entering second grade and the highest DRA level the student achieved by the end of their school year. Individual reading levels were determined by assessing the child's reading accuracy and text comprehension. A child was considered proficient at a certain level if they scored a 95% or better on their reading accuracy and an 80% or better on text comprehension. Text comprehension was measured by the correct number of responses students gave to retell questions. The researcher tabulated the percentage of students who

reached the benchmark level of 24, and also the percentage of students who reached a level higher than 24. Additionally, the researcher averaged the scores each group of students made from 2005 – 2008.

By comparing the DRA level a student entered second grade with and the DRA level they exited second grade with, the researcher was able to determine how many levels each students advanced on their DRA throughout the school year. From this information, the researcher was able to tabulate the median levels achieved for each group from 2005-2008. The table indicates the results from the 2005-2006, 2006-2007, and 2007-2008 school years.

Table 1

*Summary of Reading Achievement Based on the DRA*

School Year	Median Levels Gained	Percentage of Students Achieving Score		Average Level Reached
		Level 24	> Level 24	
2005-2006	4.5	87	67	27.5
2006-2007	4	87	80	30.0
2007-2008	4.8	93	79	30.1

*Summary*

Throughout the 2005-2006 school year, the researcher taught 15 students. On average, students achieved 4.5 levels. Eighty seven percent of the students reached a level 24 on the DRA and 67% of the students achieved a score higher than level 24. The average level reached was 27.5. During the 2006-2007 school year, the researcher taught 15 students. On average, four levels were achieved. Eighty seven percent of the students reached a level 24 and 80% of the students achieved a score higher than level 24. The

average level reached was 30.0. Throughout the 2007-2008 school year, the researcher taught 14 students. On average, 4.8 levels were achieved. Ninety three percent of the students reached a level 24 and 79% achieved a score higher than level 24. The average level reached was 30.1.

## Chapter V: Discussion

### *Introduction*

The purpose of this research was to review data in order to determine the correlation between students' reading proficiency and comprehension and their placement within guided reading groups. The researcher collected data from the three years she taught to determine whether using ability grouping or flexible grouping in her guided reading groups produced higher gains in student reading achievement. Data was collected and analyzed from the DRA from the years 2005-2008.

### *Limitations of the Study*

1. The class sizes in second grade at the researcher's northern Wisconsin school were small. Each year the maximum number of students in a class was 15.
2. The ethnicity at the researcher's northern Wisconsin school was primarily Caucasian/European-American. Therefore, the study did not include a lot of diversity.
3. The school was a SAGE school. A small population of the researcher's students received extra reading support from a Title I teacher.
4. The study reviewed scores over a three-year period. The researcher's knowledge and presentation of material could have been stronger in the second and third years due to experience.

### *Discussion*

Through the review of literature, it was determined that students placed in reading groups based solely on reading ability will not flourish compared to groups formed flexibly. Wiggins (1994) discussed the differences between grouping students according

to their reading ability. With the low ability students, the lessons are simpler, the students get corrected more often, and the focus of the lesson is centered on skills such as decoding. With the high ability students, lessons are centered on comprehension, deeper levels of discussion, and higher-level thinking questions. By providing higher-level thinking lessons to all students, reading accuracy and comprehension rates will increase for all students.

### *Conclusion*

According to the data, there was a higher gain in the amount of levels achieved in the 2007-2008 school year. Additionally, more students that year reached a level 24 on the DRA, reaching the district's proficient reading benchmark. The statistics confirm that using flexible grouping within guided reading is a valuable instructional method. Using flexible grouping has improved students' reading accuracy and comprehension.

### *Recommendations*

The data and literature confirm that the benefits of implementing flexible grouping within guided reading outweigh the implementation of ability grouping. It is recommended that teachers form guided reading groups based on the skills that students need assistance with, and constantly reorganize the groups after the students' needs are met. Grouping students based only on their reading ability according to their phrasing and fluency will not produce the maximum amount of reading achievement. It is recommended that students are exposed to a variety of leveled texts within their guided reading groups and that they have the opportunity to be grouped with numerous different classmates throughout the year.

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