Guided reading: young pupils’ perspectives on classroom practice
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Abstract

Guided reading is widely perceived to be tricky in English primary schools; prior research has found difficulties with teacher interpretation and implementation. The study reported here suggests that to understand the problems associated with it we should also take into account pupils’ perspectives on their guided reading lessons. In this case, the pupils were 4–7 years old. The special challenges of accessing young pupil perspectives were addressed through co-authored drawings, a type of graphic elicitation. The drawings, together with other collected data, generated insights into pupil perceptions of literacy practices, of the role of friends and ability grouping in learning to read, and of their teachers’ organisational challenges. A socio-cultural analysis of these data indicates that these pupils were sensitive to the social and cultural contexts of their guided reading lessons. It may be that precise official advice for guided reading in England, originating in the National Literacy Strategy documents in 1999 and the Primary National Strategy documents in 2003 and 2008, has been insufficiently sensitive to the complex teaching and learning contexts of guided reading and that this discrepancy has contributed to the identified difficulties. The paper concludes that some rethinking of the literacy practice of guided reading would be valuable.

Key words: guided reading, primary, research methods, pupil perspectives

Introduction

Little is known about pupil perspectives on their experience of school, especially younger pupils (Robinson and Fielding, 2007, p. 1). Yet, research has shown that as “experts in their own lives” children’s views about their experiences in school are valuable and can contribute to school improvement (Clark, 2010; Rudduck, 1999). Vygotsky’s (1986) insights into the role of language and interaction in learning, emphasising the participation of the learner, suggest some reasons why pupil views can be valuable. If learning and cognitive development are understood to be “shaped to a significant extent by social and communicative interactions” and their cultural context (Howe and Mercer, 2007, p. 1), then pupil views on these contexts and interactions are of crucial importance. As Meek (1992, p. 226) has argued, “the learners’ view of the task (of learning to read) plays a significant part in their mastery of it”. This small-scale study takes a socio-cultural perspective on pupil perceptions of their guided reading lessons. It explores how pupil involvement in guided reading may shape their experience of the process of learning to be literate in school.

Guided reading is a method of teaching reading widely used in English schools. The National Literacy Strategy (NLS) introduced guided reading to English primary schools in 1999 as part of a “carefully balanced programme” (DFEE, 1998, p. 4) for teaching reading. The key features of the NLS version of guided reading were as follows: ability groups of four to six pupils, a separate copy of the same text for each pupil, carefully graded books to match the ability of the group, and a lesson of 15–20 minutes that focused on independent reading (DFEE, 1998). This form of guided reading continued to be promoted by the Primary National Strategy (PNS) when it replaced the NLS in 2003.

The teaching of reading before 1999 differed sharply in approach and organisation. For decades, listening to individual pupils read was a taken-for-granted method of teaching reading in primary schools (DES, 1975, pp. 112, 457; Morris, 1966). The National Foundation for Educational Research report (Cato et al., 1992) reported that over half their surveyed teachers (55 per cent) listened to pupils read on a daily basis. This approach came to be viewed as an over-individualised practice to be replaced by guided reading (Ofsted, 1999). It was argued that guided reading made more efficient use of a teacher’s time, and enabled teachers to teach reading strategies explicitly (Beard, 1999).

It was evident from the start that the change from an individual to a group practice was difficult for teachers. Repeated Ofsted evaluations (Ofsted, 1999, 2001) acknowledged the ‘considerable change’ (Ofsted, 1999, para. 11) of approach and organisation that guided reading required but regarded much guided reading as ineffective. Official documents were generated to provide increasingly precise guidance. An example was Guided Reading: Supporting Transition from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 2 (DFES, 2003), which set out a schema for teaching guided reading. It stipulated methods of assessment to inform the composition of ability groups, a formula for matching texts to the ability of the groups and a seven-step sequence for
teaching guided reading lessons. There were also statements about the importance of talk and opportunities for children to “enthuse and learn from each other” (DCSF, 2008, p. 4; DfES, 2003, p. 10). However, this aspiration was possibly undermined by an increased emphasis on teaching pupils pre-planned ‘strategies’ for comprehension and, from 2008, on pupils using phonic knowledge for decoding (DCSF, 2008). Although centralised NLS and PNS advice on guided reading was discontinued in 2011, at the time of writing primary schools and advisers continue to promote the formula outlined by the PNS (DfES, 2003) for all primary year groups.

There is little independent research evidence on whether official guidance on guided reading helped teachers to change their approaches to, and organisation of, teaching reading. However three independent studies (Challen, 2008; Fisher, 2008; Skidmore et al., 2003) have explored guided reading in primary schools and identified continuing concerns about interpretation and implementation. Challen (2008) and Fisher (2008) found teachers’ interpretations of guided reading guidance problematic. Fisher’s (2008) study of guided reading in three classes revealed difficulties in interpreting PNS intentions and teachers’ continuing use of pre-NLS reading practices. Challen’s (2008, p. 2) study found that teachers remained “unclear about what in guided reading they are attempting to achieve and how they should be achieving it”. The quality of discussion appeared to be problematic in classrooms investigated by both Skidmore et al. (2003) and Fisher (2008). Talk in Skidmore et al.’s (2003) Year 6 (age 10–11 years) guided reading sessions was found to be teacher dominated. Fisher (2008, p. 19) found there was “no opportunity for children to read silently or engage in collaborative discussion, little teaching of inferential comprehension and none of evaluative strategies”.

This albeit limited research suggests that NLS and PNS advice did not support teachers’ management of a fundamental change of practice in their teaching of reading; there appear to be continuing difficulties with the official advice itself and its interpretation and implementation, especially in relation to organisation and talk between teachers and pupils. In this paper, I add to understanding about the nature and quality of guided reading provision by presenting findings from a study which explored how young pupils understood and responded to their guided reading lessons.

The research setting

The research took place in two different English primary schools between May 2010 and June 2011. School A was a small, rural village school (75 children) where I worked with the Reception/Year 1 teacher and her class of 22 pupils, aged between 4 and 6 years. School B was larger (200 children) and located in a small town. Here, I worked with a Year 1/2 teacher and her class of 30 pupils, aged between 5 and 7 years. Guided reading was an established practice in both classes. Out of a total of 36 participant children from both classes, 22 were girls. This imbalance is reflected in the examples used in this paper. It is worth noting that while all examples are from girls, the range of comments is representative of all participants. Written permission was obtained from parents and carers before the project began. The children’s willingness to participate was established before they started each of the tasks.

Methods

Reasons for the small amount of research on young pupils’ perspectives are outlined by Kellett and Ding (2004, pp. 165–172). They list the methodological and ethical challenges of this type of research as follows: the effects of unequal power, acquiescence bias between researcher and children, age-appropriate concentration span, and reading ability and memory span. This study aimed to engage with these challenges and generate shared and mutually comprehensible understandings through a mixed method approach, an adaptation of the ‘Mosaic approach’ (Clark and Moss, 2001).

The Mosaic approach was developed by Clark and Moss (2001) as a framework for listening to and researching with young children. The framework is a ‘mosaic’ of methods, a combination of observation, talk and visual methods, each of which contribute to “a greater level of understanding about young children’s priorities” (Clark and Moss, 2001, p. 37). In this study observational, visual, teacher interview, pupil interview and video-recorded data were collected and used to build up a mosaic of information about the social and cultural contexts for guided reading in the two classrooms. This article primarily considers the contribution of information collected through a visual method: co-authored drawing, which was used to access young pupils’ perspectives on their experience of guided reading. Other observational, interview and video-recorded data are considered in the light of findings from the co-authored drawings.

Co-authored drawing is a type of graphic elicitation. Graphic elicitation involves participants in generating visual data alongside or in collaboration with the researcher (Bagnoli, 2009, pp. 3–4; Prosser and Loxley, 2008, pp. 23–30). Participant understandings and perceptions are elicited through their responses to the visual materials. Previous work (Hanke, 2000; McMahon and O’Neill, 1992; Wall, 2008; Wall and Higgins, 2006) has shown how graphic elicitation can be a successful way of accessing children’s empathetic and cognitive perceptions about their experiences in school. Wall and Higgins (2006, pp. 17, 22) concluded that their initial drawings appeared, unusually, to have the potential to “bridge the world between the concrete and the more abstract”. They found that, as a research tool, graphic
elicitation enabled researchers to gather ‘insightful and powerful’ information and also that, as a pedagogic tool, it facilitated dialogue between teachers and pupils about learning in their classrooms.

In this study, incomplete cartoon-style drawings were created for the pupils to complete. Drawings represented familiar features of their guided reading lessons. The drawings were completed by the pupils in small groups, alongside the researcher. A weakness of graphic elicitation, identified by Prosser and Loxley (2008, p. 26), is that “the direction and focus of the interview is established by the researcher’s initial drawing”. It was therefore important to use images that referred recognisably to the situations and interactions to be investigated. Several versions of these incomplete drawings were created, each focusing on different themes and features as the research progressed. See examples in Figure 1a–c.

Three factors influenced the construction of the incomplete drawings. First, it was important that specific features of each setting were depicted in the drawings. For example, Figure 1a was used in School A and depicts the seating arrangements used by this teacher. Second, the incomplete drawings aimed to depict and probe the themes identified in previous research (Challen, 2008; Fisher, 2008; Ofsted, 2001; Skidmore et al., 2003), especially those which were echoed in interviews with the teachers and pupils. For example, official and independent research has identified teacher interpretation of precise guidance for guided reading as problematic. In interviews, both teachers worried about the composition and dynamics of the groups they constructed; were they too big or too small? How should they teach young children the rules of participating in a small group? The pupil perspective interviews in both settings provided another view of ability grouping. They suggested the pupils considered their friends and peers of all abilities were important factors in learning to read. Figure 1b attempted to probe these issues graphically. Third, care was taken to make it possible for the children to respond in a variety of ways. The drawings’ portrayal

![Figure 1: (a–c) Constructing the incomplete drawings](image-url)
of disposition, gender and interaction was deliberately ambiguous. Drawings were designed to suggest an incomplete narrative, which could be completed by ascribing gender and adding details, annotations, and thought and speech bubbles. An example of this attempt at neutrality is shown in Figure 1c.

During the study, I trialled different conditions for co-authored drawings. I found that the children were more relaxed when they worked in a familiar group in their own classroom while the rest of the class were simultaneously engaged with directed literacy tasks. The calming presence of their teacher and their own classroom helped participants to focus. It was easier to achieve insightful co-authored drawings in groups of four or five than with individuals, pairs or larger groups. Participants worked on the incomplete drawings as soon as possible after their guided reading lesson. A recent memory of the graphically depicted experience prompted more authentic responses. I introduced the activity by showing the group an incomplete drawing. I explained that the drawing showed some children having a guided reading lesson, but it did not tell the whole story of the lesson. I invited them to make their own story of the lesson and said I expected that each of them would tell a different story. This seemed to make the activity intelligible and engaging, and shifted the focus to a more general and less personal plane. The activity lasted for about 20 minutes and had two stages. First, the pupils worked on their own incomplete drawings with high-quality crayons and pens, creating their own versions of a guided reading lesson. As they were young and inexperienced writers, they often dictated text for speech bubbles, which I transcribed onto their drawings under their direction. Second, when they had finished their drawings, they explained them individually to me. Both incidental talk during the drawing stage and the final explanations and commentaries were audio recorded and transcribed.

Analysis

Analysis of the completed co-authored drawings and the other collected data was designed to generate insights into these pupils’ understandings of and responses to their guided reading lessons. In the first stage of analysis, the co-authored drawings and their accompanying commentaries were transcribed and examined. Visual analysis credited the completed co-authored drawings as the product of deliberate choices by participants about “image, the use of colour, the kinds of realism” in response to their experiences of schooling (Jewitt et al., 2001, p. 7). The transcribed pupil commentaries contributed further information about the authors’ intentions and meanings (see Figure 2 for key to transcriptions).

As in Anning and Ring’s (2004, p. 38) socio-cultural analysis of children’s drawings, this analysis began with a broad coding, which examined the ways participants had responded to the contexts depicted in the initial drawings. Analysis then moved to search for similarities and differences between participant responses and to the development of themes.

The next stage of analysis examined the relationship between themes identified in the completed drawings and the collected mosaic of data. The themes were considered in relation to information from a research diary, which recorded participant observations, the transcribed teacher interviews, and the transcribed talk and non-verbal communication between teachers and pupils in the video-recorded lessons. Information from these sources was used to confirm, contradict or illuminate the themes identified in the co-authored drawings (Denscombe, 2003, p. 133).

This iterative, comparative analytic process revealed the completed co-authored drawings and their accompanying commentaries to be dense, complex pieces of evidence, which expressed the distinctive perceptions and responses of their authors to the contexts of their guided reading lessons.

Findings

Three themes were identified through analysis of the completed co-authored drawings and related data:

- new literacy practices to be learned in guided reading lessons;
- the social context for guided reading – ability grouping;
- the constraints of time.

New literacy practices to be learned for guided reading lessons

Guided reading is a complex teaching and learning context, in which teachers require pupils to participate in particular literacy practices. The completed drawings showed that pupils noticed that guided reading involved new, different ways with books, which they had to learn to interpret and enact. For example, each pupil had a copy of the same book and being on the page directed by the teacher was important. Comments from five different drawings included the following:
“You are on the wrong page.”
“He is on the right page.”
“You are right there.”
“Can I move to the next page.”
“Can I turn the page.”
“It’s easier to read if you hold your book up.”

Although there are explicit rules to learn about behaviours associated with books in guided reading lessons, there were also implicit rules about interactions between pupils and between teachers and pupils. Such rules have been shown to be a subtle but important influence on how teachers and pupils interact (Edwards and Mercer, 1987; Mercer and Littleton, 2007). The drawings show the participants exploring these implicit rules. A variety of perspectives were represented: some viewed a guided reading lesson as an opportunity to be seen as ‘cool’ by the other members of the group; others portrayed a collection of individuals, most of whom were bidding for the attention of the teacher; and others appear to be reflecting on the degree to which they should be dependent on their teacher – should they expect their teacher to support them when they are ‘stuck’, or should they try and manage on their own? For example, the same author, Emma (Figure 3) can portray pupils who say:

“I learnt a lot.”
“I’m hungry.”
“Please help me.”
“I read my book. I finished.”
“Excuse me.” (to the teacher because she wants help)

Emma knows about the multiple characteristics of pupils in her class, each with their individual responses. She portrays learners who are eager, distracted by hunger, independent, read quickly or are dependent on help.

The drawings reveal pupils who are aware of learning, know how to conform to the rules and behaviours required for learning to read in a small group, and are finding out what sort of support they can expect from their teacher in this situation. Learning about ways of behaving in guided reading lessons was a theme reflected in other sources in the mosaic of data. Evidence from observation and video recordings shows pupils learning how to handle their own copies of the text, how to be on the right page, find the right word and listen to their teachers’ directions about where they should look in the text. Each of the teachers regularly had to gently guide participants of all ages (4–7 years old) who had lost their place or slid their books around the table. Familiar practices of sharing texts in school and home were different to the way books were used in their guided reading lessons. These pupils appeared to be trying to learn how to perform the literacy practices associated with the social and cultural context of reading with their teacher in a small group.

The social context of guided reading: ability grouping

Ability grouping was part of the social context of guided reading lessons in each class. Both teachers followed official guidance which proposes that ability grouping is the best way in which children “learn from each other” (DCSF, 2008, p. 4). The completed drawings showed pupils also perceived the importance of learning from each other, but in a way that was different from their everyday experience of ability grouping. They portrayed guided reading groups made up of their own friends, who might or might not be members of their actual group. One pupil even included a friend...
from another class. It was not that participants were unaware of different abilities. For example, Louise, a fluent reader, in her commentary indicated one of the figures in her completed drawing and said:

“That’s John … I’ve been helping him draw and write and read.”

Classroom observation showed that she did indeed support her friend John with his reading and writing, but they were in entirely different groups for guided reading. Louise’s drawing and commentary suggest she considered it would make sense for them to be in the same group. Evidence from individual pupil interviews adds another dimension to these views. Over half the participants reported that reading with friends was not only fun, but helped them to learn to read. If pupils view their peers as important for learning to read, then the members of a guided reading group provide significant possibilities and resources for learning from each other.

The composition of groups was perceived as important in most of the completed drawings, but a few (three) pupils provided additional insight into the ways pupils used each other as resources for learning. These pupils created narratives about support for learning between members of a group. For example, Susan (Figure 4) depicted a story about being stuck:

Character 4: “miss Help me I’m stuck on my work”
Character 2: “keep going”
Character 3: “I’ll Help you work”

Character 4 appealed to her teacher for help. The teacher, character 2, encouraged independence. But character 3, sitting beside character 4, responded to the appeal and offered support. The exchange suggests that inter-pupil support was an important feature of the lessons for Susan. She saw that teachers could be hard to access as a source of help but that pupils could and did help each other.

In interviews, teachers articulated a similar dissatisfaction with ability groups for guided reading. In spite of precise official advice about how to assess and allocate pupils to the correct ‘level’ of group and the importance of matching texts to ‘reading ability’ (DfES, 2003, p. 10), they found its management problematic. A typical comment is shown in the following extract, from an interview:

“… where do you fit those children who are not quite capable of being in one group but far exceed the group below them?” (Teacher A)

The teacher’s rhetorical question conveys a sense of exasperation with the constraints of having to construct reading groups using ability as the sole criterion.

The pupils and teachers appear to share a perspective that ability grouping for guided reading can restrict opportunities for learning. The limiting effect of ability grouping has been demonstrated in research, which shows it to have low benefits for the learning of any group (Hattie, 2009). The completed drawings suggest that these pupils consider learning ‘from each other’ in guided reading (DCSF, 2008, p. 4) would be easier in a more flexible social context than ability grouping can provide.

The constraints of time

The completed co-authored drawings showed pupils to be watchful and shrewd observers of their teachers’ actions and intentions. Pressure of time was an integral
theme in a third of the drawings; while maintaining sunny dispositions, teachers were shown dealing with multiple demands on their time and attention. Susan (Figure 4) portrayed the teacher outwardly encouraging pupils to sustain their efforts, while privately fretting about time constraints:

**Teacher:** “‘keep going’” (Speech bubble)
**Susan:** “The teacher is saying ‘keep going’ because they have only five more minutes to finish off reading.” (Commentary)

Another pupil depicted a teacher who appeared to be talking to three different children simultaneously, giving general encouragement, “You are doing well”, dealing with a toilet request “No you can’t in the middle of a lesson”, and asking a question about the text, “Have you any ideas about the end part?” These two pupils accurately and sensitively perceived their teachers’ dilemmas about how to manage the organisational and pedagogical features of guided reading amid the multiple demands of a classroom and curriculum. These perceptions were echoed in interviews with both teachers who described the difficult task of managing the conflicting demands of pupils, organisation and curriculum in guided reading lessons.

“I think the hardest thing is the time … there is just not enough time … when you have done your literacy and it is another half hour (a guided reading lesson) that you have got to dedicate to it when you have got a lot of other things to fit in” (Teacher B).

It is possible to see pupils responding to such time constraints in the 10 drawings, which depict pupils ‘finishing’ their reading or a need to read ‘fast’. Susan explained why she liked to finish quickly:

**Susan:** “This character is saying I like reading and I am finished.”
**Researcher:** “Has that character finished before everybody else?”
**Susan:** “Yes.”
**Researcher:** “What is it like when you have finished quickly?”
**Susan:** “Really happy and you might get a sticker.”

Comments from pupil commentaries about reading ‘quickly’ add another dimension to this notion of finishing. For example,

**Skye:** “He has done well. He read fast with no help.” (Y1)
**David:** “I read very fast when it is quiet.” (Y1)

These comments and the completed drawings suggest a mismatch between teacher and pupil perceptions of the purpose of the lessons. They suggest that pupils could perceive their teachers dealing with multiple, conflicting demands and interpret this as an implicit instruction to read faster and finish quickly. This was not, of course, the intention of their teachers.

**Concluding comments**

This study used the innovatory method of co-authored drawings to access pupil perceptions on their experience of guided reading. It is necessary to be cautious about over-interpretation (Thomas and Silk, 1990) and the degree to which the starting drawings can influence the information gathered from completed drawings (Prosser and Loxley, 2008). Nevertheless the process of completing the drawings did enable these young pupils to articulate and communicate new, unusual and confirmatory insights into the complex context of teaching and learning in their guided reading lessons. The study highlights the importance of gaining pupil perspectives on the activities in which they are involved. Pupil perspectives on their experience of guided reading may not be those which a teacher or researcher might expect, but can provide important insights into how they engage with classroom-based literacy practices.

The completed drawings provide insight into these pupils’ understandings and perceptions of guided reading. The incomplete drawings prompted the children to identify, portray and respond to routine features of their guided reading lessons. As “experts in their own lives” (Clarke and Moss, 2001) the children used the incomplete drawings to show how they were engaging with and making sense of the particular social context of guided reading. The children were prompted to identify, portray and respond to the routine features of their guided reading lessons. Three themes were identified in the drawings, which showed how the experience of guided reading shaped pupil understanding of learning to read in school. They were aware of learning new ways with books, that it was desirable to read fast because their teacher was under pressure of time, and that fellow members of their guided reading group made an important contribution to their learning. The social and cultural context of their guided reading lessons appears to have had a significant influence on what and how these pupils were learning.

This evidence is consonant with other research findings, which have demonstrated the importance of context in literacy learning. It has shown how school contexts using unfamiliar and opaque literacy practices can impact on young children’s participation and attainment. Famously, work by Heath (1983) revealed disadvantageous disparities between the literacy practices of teachers and those familiar to some of their children. More recently, Levy’s (2009, p. 63) work has shown how school literacy practices can erode young children’s confidence and enjoyment; she found that sophisticated, home-based constructions were ‘forsaken’ when the children engaged with ‘schooled discourses’.
The findings from this study reveal similar disparities and missed opportunities. These pupils could misinterpret their teachers’ intentions in guided reading lessons. The emphasis on learning new ways with books suggests that the guided reading lessons missed opportunities to draw on pupils’ previous literary experience. The research showed pupils thought learning from a wide range of their peers in guided reading was important, a possibility limited by standard advice for ability grouping. The views of these learners suggest that the guided reading lessons could have made a more significant contribution to their mastery of the task of learning to read (Meek, 1992).

The findings from this study have indicated that precise official advice may not fully support the complex teaching and learning context of guided reading, and highlight the importance of taking account of pupils’ perspectives on a process in which they are involved. They suggest that reconsidering the social and cultural contexts of guided reading could inform teachers’ practices in ways that would have a positive effect on the learning and cognitive development of their young pupils.

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References


