

From Captive to Captivated: Using Action Research to Improve Guided Reading

by Abby DeAngelis

Last year I was an overwhelmed graduate student incredibly excited about learning to be a teacher and equally daunted by everything that entailed. How I felt about myself as a teacher changed dramatically from day to day. Sometimes I'd come home beaming with a feeling of success, while other days I felt like a hopeless failure. I often obsessed about my shortcomings, but I wasn't reflecting in a useful way about my classroom practice. One of the things looming over my head that semester was an action research project. Initially, contemplating this task left me anxious and intimidated. I was still very unsure of myself in the classroom and taking on something else while at school seemed impossible. Plunging into my project, however, actually reduced some of my feelings of stress. Instead of obsessing I used reflective research to produce positive changes helping me feel better about myself as a teacher, and my students feel better about themselves as learners.

The research question

One of my responsibilities as a student teacher was to lead a first grade reading group. The typical format of a guided reading group was explained to me and I followed it religiously. I presented a reading strategy, previewed the book (a leveled reader), had the students read the book, and gave them a follow up activity. I found, though, that I left each group meeting feeling disheartened. I was constantly taking on the role of bad guy; redirecting students and keeping them on task. I noticed that the students in my group, who were generally enthusiastic children, dragged their feet when it came to reading the leveled readers. They complained, asked to do other things, and pretended to read books when they were clearly just turning the pages. I was also disturbed by how competitive the group became. The kids hurried to finish first, bragged when they knew a word that another student didn't know, and

got upset when other children finished reading before they did.

A crucial goal of reading instruction is instilling in children a desire to read independently. I was very concerned that my guided reading group was impeding that goal. The students didn't find reading to be enjoyable at all; they saw it as a task that they had to get through. Additionally, the air of competition that pervaded my reading groups made my students feel negatively about themselves as readers. It created an atmosphere in which children felt they had to prove themselves, rather than feeling confident enough to discuss challenging things and learn new skills together.

For my action research project, I decided to explore the potential role that guided reading groups can have in the important processes of helping children to develop 1) a desire to read independently, and 2) the skills and disposition necessary to respond to text, both independently and collaboratively. This exploration deals with the long term goals of guided reading groups, which cannot be directly observed or assessed in the short term. As such, I decided to frame my central research question around the first steps towards those goals. I finally settled on the following question: **How can I create an effective guided reading group in which children enjoy reading, and work collaboratively?**

Review of the literature

My first step in answering this question was to turn to research on guided reading. My research led me to three key findings which framed the parameters of my action research project:

- The acquisition of strategies or self-extending systems is an important goal of guided reading that

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cannot be neglected. Strategies are best taught by capitalizing on teachable moments, teaching students strategies as the need emerges when they are reading.

■ Reading per se is not enjoyable, it is the stories and information contained in text that makes reading fun. If children are to enjoy reading, they must be allowed to read things they are interested in.

■ Reading groups need not be homogenous groups that read leveled texts — there are many ways to run an effective reading group (e.g., literature circles, interest groups, etc.).

Research method

I conducted my research by running my guided reading group in new ways and watching and recording the results. Because I was particularly interested in making my guided reading group collaborative and enjoyable, I created a checklist that contained indicators of collaboration as well as competition, and indicators of a genuine desire to read as well as a lack thereof. My plan was that, by changing the format and content of my reading group in a variety of ways, I would see more signs of enjoyment and collaboration and fewer signs of competition and boredom.

Because of the importance of teaching strategies (self-extending systems) during guided reading I also recorded all explicit instruction in reading strategies. I decided to let strategy instruction emerge naturally as students encountered the text. After each guided reading group I filled out my checklist and described strategies that had come up that day.

The project

For my group's first meeting I let each child select their own book. I brought a selection of books about building and construction because the class was studying those areas so, I presumed, my students had a vested interest in learning about them. This line of reasoning backfired, though, because two of my three students were not actually interested in reading

about that unit of study. I decided, then, to let the students select a topic for themselves, hoping that researching something they were internally motivated to learn about would give them a true sense of purpose when reading. I hoped that the process of choosing a topic together as a group would lead to group cohesion and collaboration. After much discussion, we settled on sports as a topic. One child would focus on gymnastics while the other two would research baseball.

Our next step was a trip to the school library in search of books about baseball and gymnastics. We browsed through books, holding onto good ones and weeding out those that seemed too difficult or "boring." These books became our reading material

Action research is not unlike what all good teachers do, sometimes without even realizing it.

Checklist:

Indicators of competition (check all that are observed):

Rushing to finish ✓ N, DK

Claiming that other students aren't really reading

Putting down others

Remarks comparing the reading ability of 2 or more students

Indicators of collaboration:

Helping another student with something he/she is doing

Engaging in discussion with peers

Collaborating on a task

Sharing what one has learned

Indicators of a genuine desire to read:

Demonstration of excitement about text ✓ DY, N

Appear engaged in reading ✓ DY, N

Desire to share what they have read/are reading ✓ DY

Indicators of a lack thereof

Asking "do I have to?", groaning, etc... ✓ DK, N

Frequent requests to get a drink

Pretending to read (not actually reading words) ✓ N

for the next four sessions. I assigned each child a section of a book for each session. After reading, the students responded to the text by writing, drawing, or discussing. This generated a lot of excitement. The kids exclaimed at pictures and captions, showing things to each other when they found them particularly captivating.

Although I gave them individualized tasks, the nature of those tasks led them to spontaneously work together. They asked each other questions about what they were doing, shared exciting information, and even helped each other out in the process of reading and constructing meaning. For example, Daniel became extremely interested in gymnastics when he discovered that many gymnastics moves have historically been performed on the backs of bulls. He grilled Alison about what she had learned about this and she happily answered his questions. When he asked a question that she couldn't answer, they looked at the book and together reread the relevant section.

After these four sessions I stepped back and looked at my data to re-assess how my project was going. The students were collaborating beautifully and there was a sense of excitement at our group meetings. One problem remained though. The kids were delighted to browse and talk about pictures, or read a few headings, but actually focusing and reading was a different story. If I wanted them to read through a section of text, I basically had to force them to do it. This was upsetting because it meant that my students weren't discovering the joys of reading.

Thinking back to the beginning of the sports research, I remembered that I had asked the students to

develop lists of their questions about baseball and gymnastics. It dawned on me that I had neglected the lists since their conception. Maybe having questions would motivate them to read thoroughly as they searched for the answers. I presented each child with a typed list of their questions. The only problem was, the answers to many of their questions could not be found in our library books, because they were primarily interested in current athletes. I searched the Internet, and looked for informational pages containing pertinent information that I could print up and give to the children as resources. I found a number of great sites and, though the passages were challenging, I thought the children would be able to read them with my support.

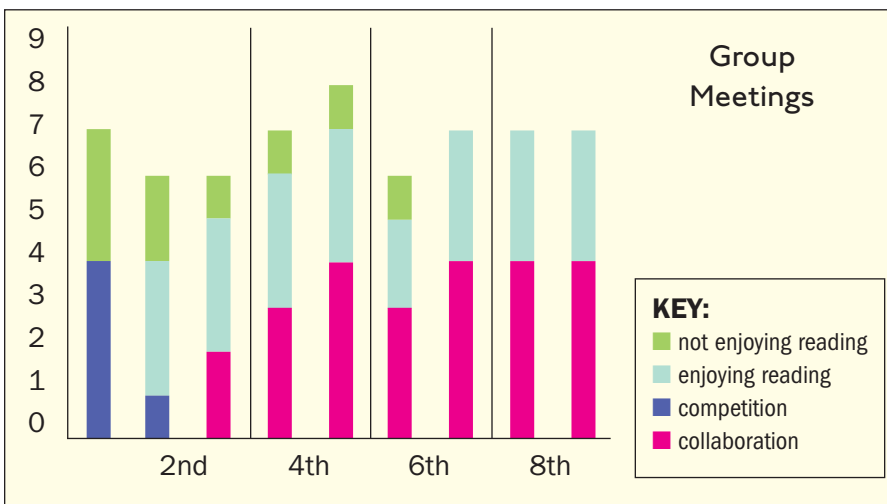
During the next group meeting the kids reread their lists and crossed off the questions they had already answered through their research thus far. Then, I showed them the new resources I had brought. Their response was overwhelming. They plunged right into the resources with enthusiasm. Daniel looked over some pages on the Triple Crown, Kevin read a bio page about David Ortiz, and Alison read about Olympic gymnast Carly Rae Patterson. The enthusiasm continued over our group's last few meetings. The kids were tackling difficult texts so they needed a lot of support and help identifying and using reading strategies. This made for very fruitful, individualized, reading lessons. The children were very excited about their reading and were well supported, so they were able to effectively construct meaning and did not get frustrated or overwhelmed by the difficulty of the task. I never had to nag a child to sit down and really read.

In these last few group sessions the enthusiasm of my students began to spread throughout the class.

Students who were in the independent reading center came over to read with my group members. Other class members copied down web site addresses so they could look up the sites at home. I allowed other children to join in because I was so delighted by my students' infectious enthusiasm — it was enthusiasm for sports, but it was also enthusiasm for reading.

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Discussion and conclusions

A major lesson learned from my project is that children's interests and passions must be taken into account when planning curriculum. When teachers allow children to pursue their own interests, they are more enthusiastic and motivated to work and learn, and consequently they learn much more than they otherwise would. In the case of my project, my children's passion for sports ensured that they had a wonderful time reading. I hope that this will play a role in helping my students to develop a positive attitude towards reading. Although in some ways I was already aware of the power of student interest and choice in curriculum, I was nervous about teaching guided reading and, therefore, was hesitant to deviate from the norm. My project helped me to realize that child-centered teaching improves *any* element of classroom practice.

I also confirmed my belief that it is most effective to teach reading strategies when the need for them emerges authentically. Looking over my notes about strategy instruction made it clear that each of my students had very different reading needs. The responsive, individualized nature of the way I ran my group enabled me to meet those needs.

I also learned an interesting lesson about collaboration from my project. I had been prepared to develop specific measures to help my students collaborate, but that proved unnecessary. Collaboration seemed to emerge naturally when the group began researching sports. My conclusion from that is tentative, but it seems that when children are allowed to pursue things

that truly excite them, they naturally want to share that excitement with peers. When the group format is flexible enough, this shared excitement seems to naturally lead to collaborative efforts.

Most importantly, my project showed me the power that action research can have. At the beginning of the semester, guided reading was an element of my practice that I felt terrible about. I didn't even want to think about it because I was convinced that I was doing a truly lousy job. Through research, reflection, and action, however, I transformed my feelings of incompetence into pride. I left feeling really good about what I had been able to accomplish with my guided reading group. It has been very empowering for me to realize

that when something isn't going well, it is not because I am a 'bad teacher.' It simply means that I need to put some effort into improving elements of my practice. Now I know that I have the tools to do that very effectively.



The 'translation' of the child's writing is:
 "The machine throws balls and the catcher has to get it. They were practicing. The Red Sox players work hard."

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Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers

by Kay Albrecht

A familiar predicament: This author faced a familiar predicament where the teaching strategies she was asked to implement felt developmentally inappropriate and unsuccessful. She was able to turn the situation around and support an alternative by pursuing an action research project. Talk with teachers about this journey and see if any feel the need to do exactly the same thing to redirect questionable practices.

Reviewing the literature: This important step gave DeAngelis the support she needed to find better ways to do guided reading. Support teachers who have similar questions to research with time and resources to find out what the early childhood literature says about the topic of interest. Provide release time to read research, copies of resources from the school's library, and a springboard for discussion about what was found and how the information might fit into an action research project.

Gathering written data: DeAngelis came up with an easy way to collect and represent data that was very helpful in her action research. It enabled her to see the results of her data collection in a visible, clear way. Support teachers' action research projects by helping them figure out how to collect data and represent it in such a way that it makes sense.