

# Teaching comprehension and critical literacy: investigating guided reading in three primary classrooms

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## Abstract

With the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy, England's primary school teachers were asked to replace "listening to children read"—a practice deeply embedded in UK pedagogy—with guided reading, a practice focused on interpretive and critical comprehension rather than accuracy and fluency. This small-scale research project addresses the perceptions of the author's Primary B.Ed. student teachers that what goes on under the name of guided reading in the classrooms in which they undertake teaching practice does not do justice to the term. In particular, it examines the claim that fluent readers are still engaged in reading aloud, rather than being taught how to develop analytical strategies for comprehension and engage in collaborative dialogue to develop cognition and promote interpretive critical literacy. Using interpretive methodology, this small-scale study examines episodes of guided reading in three case study classrooms. In each episode examined, although some form of group reading was conducted, there was no opportunity for children to read silently or engage in collaborative discussion, little teaching of inferential comprehension and none of evaluative strategies. The study reaches tentative rather than conclusive answers. These suggest that the effective teaching of guided reading depends both upon the understanding of its psychological underpinning, and also on the teacher's ability, through sharing responsibility for problem solving with the children, to build bridges between what is known and what is new.

**Key words:** critical literacy, comprehension, guided reading, problem solving

## Introduction

The introduction of guided reading into primary classrooms in England at the inception of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) in 1998 proved a challenge for many teachers. Guided reading was both a new term and a new approach, representing a major shift in pedagogy from "listening to readers", criticised by Ofsted (1996) as an inefficient and time-consuming means of enabling children who were already fluent readers, to practise, rather than develop, their reading skills. To move from such one-to-one encounters of

limited usefulness, teachers were asked to group children according to levels of reading need and attainment, and to teach them how to read, understand and create meaning from texts.

It might have been expected that such a radical change in practice would have been supported with a wealth of research evidence. However, as Riley (2001, p. 48) notes, the initial NLS training (DfEE, 1998) failed to offer practitioners a sufficient explanation of the complex theoretical and empirical underpinnings of the different modes of reading teaching. Within the NLS Framework materials, written guidance on guided reading comprises a mere two paragraphs of utilitarian, procedural information, for example:

*"as they progress, these texts will often be selected from reading schemes . . . with questions to direct or check up on the reading"* (DfEE, 1998, p. 12).

Beard's (1999) review of research and evidence relating to the NLS, which purports to provide the research-based justification for the NLS, sheds little light on the process of guided reading for teachers in Key Stage 2. His statement, "the social context of guided reading may play an even more beneficial role when it is extended to small-group silent reading" (1999, p. 38) fails to offer clarity for the non-expert. At a more pragmatic level, at the inception of the NLS, the statutory in-service training focused solely on organisational strategies and phonics. This suggests that some teachers might not have received any specific input, practical or theoretical, on guided reading.

So perhaps it is not surprising that 6 years after the introduction of the NLS, the Ofsted Report *Reading for Purpose and Pleasure* (2004) indicated that many teachers were still finding it difficult to understand the theoretical underpinnings of guided reading:

*"Most schools use guided reading as one way of teaching reading. However, its quality in the ineffective schools was unsatisfactory in one third of lessons. Too many teachers did not understand its principles and struggled to teach it successfully"* (Ofsted, 2004, p. 4).

## Theoretical foundations

The principles underpinning the practice of guided reading are concerned with the teaching of comprehension strategies and the development of critical literacy. They involve changing group dynamics, fostering social interaction, creating cognitive stimulus and giving opportunities for children to form and justify opinions. The teacher's role is to guide the discourse.

Guided reading has been proposed by many (Biddulph, 2000; Dowhower, 1999; Makgill, 1999; Mooney, 1995; Raban and Essex, 2002) to be an opportunity for pupils to learn to comprehend at a higher level by beginning to go solo under instruction. Hobsbaum et al. (2002, p. 28) add that at KS2, the goal is "for pupils to internalise the process of asking themselves questions of this [evaluative] nature as they read so that they become active readers". It can be seen that guided reading provides an excellent context for the specific teaching of inferential and evaluative reading strategies.

Comprehension is, of course, a key concept here. I find Hurry and Parker (2007) persuasive. They see three levels of comprehension: literal, or surface understanding, leading to the formation of a proposition, an interpretive level where inferences are drawn, and an evaluative level involving a personal response from the reader, positively or negatively, to the text itself. They further suggest that the ability to use inference is a characteristic that distinguishes a skilled from a poor comprehender.

This notion of comprehension is shaped by approaches to learning drawn from a social constructivist perspective, where children are encouraged to talk, think and read their way to constructing meaning. In this sort of learning exchange, children could be taught to analyse text through what Rogoff (1990, p. 138) calls 'guided participation': the teacher provides bridges from what is known to what is new through sharing responsibility for problem solving, then transferring responsibility to the children.

Current thinking on critical literacy (Johnson and Freedman, 2005; McDonald, 2004) proposes that education in reading is not simply about deconstruction and response: it is about making a difference, moving the book out of the class, developing an awareness of the book as an artefact and giving children a real voice in discussing text. This moves us to the area of critical literacy. Significant work (McDonald, 2004; Skidmore et al., 2003; Whitehead, 2002) argues that the teacher's role in developing comprehension of this sort is not to scaffold children towards uncovering the author's intentions and meanings, but to empower them to bring their own understanding and experiences to the text. To achieve this, Hall (2003, p. 178) suggests creating a critical literacy classroom where "teachers and pupils work together to see how texts construct their worlds, cultures and

communities". A step towards this is to empower the children to frame questions themselves, and I would suggest that children who have been taught how to go "beyond the text" and offer evaluative responses might feel more able to take a critical perspective. A guided reading group offers a supportive environment in which to promote such active participation in meaning making.

Yet a recurring theme of recent research into the nature of dialogue in the literacy hour in particular, and the primary classroom in general (Alexander, 2005; Hurry and Parker, 2007; Myhill, 2004; Skidmore et al., 2003; Whitehead, 2002), is that control of the discourse remains very much in the hands of the teacher. As Skidmore et al. (2003, p. 2) comment, discussion in guided reading frequently involves recalling of episodes or "assent to [the teacher's] canonical interpretations".

Alexander's (2005) notion of dialogic enquiry, where practitioners act as discourse guides, seems particularly pertinent to the successful conduct of guided reading. If children are to be helped to develop both higher order thinking, and an ability to engage in speculative dialogue about text, then there is a need to develop "a coherent and expanding chain of enquiry and understanding" (Alexander, 2005, p. 26). It should be acknowledged, however, that, in order to promote cognitive dialogue and a collaborative problem-solving approach to reading, teachers need to be confident, both in their subject knowledge and their 'book knowledge'. Hence guided reading, properly undertaken, is an ambitious enterprise that requires a degree of confidence, understanding and knowledge.

## Student teachers' perceptions

In my current work with primary PGCE and B.Ed. student teachers, 8 years after the inception of the NLS, I hear from them regularly that their schools do not "do guided reading". Student teachers are puzzled by the video extracts used in university teaching sessions, which show expert teachers running successful guided reading sessions, with high levels of critical analysis, discussion of comprehension strategies and critical literacy. They appreciate the relevance of applying higher order thinking and questioning in guided reading sessions through such expert management of dialogue, but wonder why it seems to be missing from the practice they observe. When they are required to plan sessions during teaching practice, plaintive e-mails request clarification as "we do it last thing on a Friday and everyone reads around the group".

A preliminary investigation conducted in 2006 with second year B.Ed. student teachers revealed that all those who had seen some form of guided reading stated that it was just that: the children took it in turns to read aloud around the group. This left very little

opportunity for meaningful dialogue, or the explicit teaching of inferential or evaluative comprehension strategies. It seems that over 30 years after the publication of Bullock Report, *A Language for Life* (DES, 1975), "listening to readers" is still conceptualised as the principal way to teach reading by primary practitioners.

Against this background, between November 2005 and June 2006, I undertook this small-scale study to discover what was happening in the name of guided reading in primary classrooms. Unlike the Skidmore et al. (2003) study, which focused entirely on the quality of teacher-pupil dialogue, this small-scale study sought to do the following:

- build a picture of what guided reading looks like, in a sample of real classrooms, for fluent readers who do not need to practise reading aloud;
- determine whether guided reading groups offer a positive opportunity to develop critical and analytical reading; and
- examine how far the case study teachers were using guided reading in order to develop those skills.

## Methodology

In order to investigate the student teachers' perceptions of the conduct of guided reading, and to examine the embeddedness of key theoretical concepts of cognitive dialogue, inferential comprehension and critical literacy in the practice of guided reading, I carried out three case studies in real classrooms, preceded by a pilot study.

I freely acknowledge that the number of episodes observed can represent only a very small sample of practice in the partnership placement schools. Similarly, in focusing on the conduct of guided reading with fluent readers well beyond decoding level, and on their interaction with fiction texts, the scope of the enquiry is further narrowed. This, however, may be justified as purposive because these were the areas most commented upon by student teachers as departing from the interactive model promoted at college. As Denscombe (2002) reminds us, any generalisation from a case study can only be made in terms of its relation to theory, not as representative of teachers per se.

I gave careful thought to participant selection. I was initially offered a list of leading literacy teachers by a Local Authority adviser, but it seemed evident that this would not give a picture of how non-specialist teachers were approaching guided reading. Because I considered that they would represent the kind of practice student teachers were most likely to encounter, I decided to make direct contact with schools in three local authorities that regularly accept my institution's primary student teachers. Initially, three teachers working with Years 2, 4 and 6 expressed interest in

participating. All three asserted that they followed the NLS (1998) approach to guided reading. I hoped that this spread of year groups would help to show how far the guided reading experience of fluent readers changed as they progressed up the school, and how far the teachers' assumptions that they were following the NLS model were justified.

The methods of data collection selected were non-participant observations of episodes of guided reading and semi-structured interviews. I hoped that observations drawn from 'live' teaching episodes would make it possible to identify themes relating to the teachers' philosophical, pedagogical and professional understanding of the nature of guided reading itself. I used the interviews to explore further the themes that emerged from the observation. In combining instruments, I acknowledged Pring's (2000, p. 99) caveat that any interpretation needs to consider not merely the words that the participant uses, but also the 'subjective meaning' that might be embedded in their actions. Unfortunately, timetable constraints in the pilot study school led to the teacher being interviewed before her lesson, which served to emphasise the necessity of observing first, to provide a concrete experience on which to base the discussion rather than perception-based opinion.

In order to capture as truthful a picture of practice as possible, I used a video camera with a sensitive microphone, mounted on a tripod, to reduce any of the narrowing of focus, or filtering out, that is possible with an observation schedule. I discussed openly with participants ethical considerations relating to my presence in the classroom and the use of videoed material. Every effort was made to keep material and the identity of participants confidential and pseudonyms have been used throughout this article.

To allow significant issues to emerge by comparing and contrasting interviews and observations, and then examining any anomalous or unexpected findings, the data were analysed borrowing techniques from open coding.

*Snapshots of teaching: the teachers' perceptions and practice.* The pilot interview was carried out in a primary school with a teacher of a mixed Year 1 and 2 class. Both interview and observational data suggested that organisation, rather than pedagogy and psychology, shaped her approach to guided reading, and that "listening to readers" remained embedded in her practice. However, as mentioned previously, the necessity of conducting the interview before the observed lesson inevitably affected the manner in which the teacher later interacted with the group, for example, in prompting her to break off to comment to me. For this reason, I discounted these data and determined to reverse the order of events in the study proper.

All three participants in the main study professed themselves to be champions of reading, and of guided

reading in particular, and all stated unequivocally that they followed the guidelines set out in the NLS. However, in practice, as the student teachers had indicated, under the name of guided reading, each teacher asked the children to read aloud around the group, all used at least two-thirds of their guided reading teaching time on this, none fostered critical literacy and there was little explicit teaching of comprehension strategies.

### Case study 1

Case study one was undertaken in an urban school. In this guided reading episode, six fluent readers from Year 4 – three girls, then three boys – were seated in a row on a low bench facing a portable interactive whiteboard displaying a text extract (untitled and unidentified by the teacher) in the ‘fantasy worlds’ genre. The children’s attention was drawn to the fact that this was a new text, but they were given no opportunity to read it before Teacher 1 asked a series of closed syntactic questions of nominated children. There was no calling out, no peer interaction, and all responses were expressed hesitantly. After 10 minutes the children took it in turns to read aloud, fluently and expressively. In the remaining teaching time, Teacher 1 posed a number of comprehension questions. However, the first inferential question was not asked until 15 minutes had elapsed. And, at 147 words long, Teacher 1’s extended explanation of ellipsis at the close of the session was one of the longest utterances, in marked contrast to the children’s responses, which were generally of six words or fewer. There was no discussion of what had been learned, nor any suggestions for further reading.

In the first part of this episode there was a lack of opportunity for the children to move beyond a search for answers in a type of oral cloze procedure. The discourse was rigidly controlled, rather than guided (Alexander, 2005; Mercer, 2000; Rogoff, 1990), and there was scant evidence of Alexander’s (2004, p. 12) “more consistently searching and more genuinely reciprocal and cumulative dialogue”. Throughout, there was frequent repetition, both of the teacher’s closed questions, and of the children’s hesitant one-word responses as they attempted to answer. The following exchange is representative of the closed IRF (initiation, response, feedback) questioning that characterised the first part of the session:

- T1:** “OK, let’s go back. Can you find then, can you find me please an adjective?”
- Gemma:** “Wrinkly.”
- T1:** “Yes, that’s one. Well remembered.”
- Paige:** “Wispy?”
- T1:** “Wispy, yes, good. It was wispy.”
- Cathy:** “Sparse?”
- T1:** “Thank you, yes, sparse.”
- Shawn:** “Six inches shorter.”
- T1:** “Say again?”

**Shawn:** “Six inches shorter.”

**T1:** “Six inches shorter (points to the text), so which is the adjective?” (nominates Gemma)

**Gemma:** “Erm . . . shorter?”

**T1:** “I’d say six because it’s describing how much, isn’t it? OK . . .”

### Extract 1: Teacher 1 conducts closed syntactic questioning

According to Harrison (2004), a psycholinguistic approach to comprehension may encourage the examination of parts of speech in order to develop genre sensitivity. But it is not clear that this was the case here. When closed questions about adverbs were clearly problematic, the teacher moved on to adjectives, giving an incomplete response to Gemma, because ‘shorter’ is a comparative adjective. There was no consolidation of word classes, and an opportunity to address a misconception was missed. This is unfortunate, because, as Alexander (2005) states, it is what we do (or fail to do) with children’s responses that leads to cognitive growth.

The second half of the episode, in which the children took it in turns to read aloud fluently and without miscue, occupied a significant part of the potential teaching time. Not until 15 minutes had elapsed did Teacher 1 ask the first inferential question: “Why does Orin say, ‘A BREAK? Snap?’ And why is ‘break’ in capital letters?”. Extract 2 below represents the first half of the exchanges following this initial question:

**T1:** (indicates next question) “‘A BREAK? Snap?’ Explain why Orin says this. Why does Orin say ‘A break? Snap?’ And why is ‘break’ in capital letters?”

**Shawn:** “A Break is the name of a chocolate bar.”

**T1:** “Mmm, I wasn’t thinking about a chocolate bar. Break?”

**Paige:** “Is it cos, he’s erm . . . the reason he says ‘snap’ is cos . . . is it because it takes a little while to eat?”

**T1:** “We need to think about . . . I think you need to know . . . look, it’s not all . . . OK, so let’s all look back at the first sentence: ‘No’, laughed Joe, ‘a holiday is like a break.’ ‘A break?’ Orin said, ‘Snap?’ What’s . . . what’s Orin’s problem?”

**Gemma:** “He doesn’t exactly understand what Joe means. Like break, like, erm . . . snap. Can snap be break?”

**T1:** “And break as in . . . ?”

**Gemma:** “. . . ?”

### Extract 2: Teacher 1 conducts oral cloze procedure.

This is a well-structured inferential question, but there is no evidence of what Whitehead (2002) refers to as “joint talking to understanding” or of Mercer’s “interthinking” (2000). The children spent 5 minutes individually attempting to guess what was expected,

until a response close enough to satisfy the teacher was offered.

In the interview following the session, Teacher 1 discussed the importance of developing inferential comprehension, which he considers an essential skill:

**T1:** *"I went on an excellent course [on developing reading comprehension]. It really made me think about my questioning. If you don't ask higher order questions, those about inference, they can't see it in the text."*

**Extract 3: Interview with Teacher 1**

This is somewhat ironic, because only two inferential questions are asked in the entire session. However, this teacher was the only person in the school to attend the course, and it may well be that, as Fraser et al. (2006) speculate, it is hard to embed pedagogic change without the opportunity to discuss and evaluate it with informed others. It is also interesting to note that the untitled extract and the accompanying questions were published course materials. This guided reading episode is not an opportunity for children to learn inferential or evaluative comprehension strategies, nor to develop critical literacy. Although Teacher 1 acknowledges a value in allowing children to pose questions, it is a qualified acknowledgement:

**T1:** *"Yes, [there is a value] in getting them to ask questions, but if you give them a longer time to discuss the question, they'd spend 10% of the time talking about the question, and the rest of the time talking about whatever they wanted to; what ever they were interested in!"*

**Extract 4: Interview with Teacher 1**

The only spontaneous question occurs 2 minutes before the end of the session when Paige questions the meaning of 'righted', which is then defined for her without any suggestion that she might speculate on its meaning in context. When the children stray too far from the teacher's interpretation of the text they are told:

**T1:** *"Look, be careful, I've told you before to use the information in the text to help you answer. Don't use too much of your own ideas, ok?"*

**Extract 5: The text is not open for discussion or personal interpretation**

Having failed to spot crucial clues, the children in this group may well have felt de-skilled. Despite Teacher 1's frequent repetition of the question, they clearly did not share the same (his) interpretation of the text. But should they? As Gamble and Yates (2002, p. 128) state "there may be no consensus in such discussions, but there would, one would hope, be challenge and understanding of a range of perspectives".

Many of the assumptions made in the NLS guidance on guided reading – about teachers' confidence and their ability to engage with text themselves – need to be challenged. The episode above and the discussion that followed indicate that this particular teacher appeared to have an instrumental view of literacy. There was a lack of understanding of the whole picture of comprehension, in particular of the way in which guided reading could be used to develop critical analysis through reader reflection and response (Martin, 1999; Palincsar et al., 1987). There was also misunderstanding of the role that dialogue (Alexander, 2004; Mercer, 2000) could play in probing children's responses. Teacher 1 was clearly the controller of the discourse: he asked the questions, nominated the responders, repeated answers and moved on. The questions were not used as starting points for discussion, nor were they genuinely exploratory: the answers were printed on the teacher's card and all engaged in the quest for the 'correct' response were clear about that. The children were not expected to expand, to confer, to speculate or to question. I could see why primary student teachers on placement in such a class, where the teacher stated clearly that the NLS guidelines were followed, would begin to question their own understanding of the practice and purpose of guided reading.

*Case study 2*

The second case study was conducted in a rural primary school with the five most fluent readers in Year 6. Although Teacher 2 had been keen to participate in the study, had asserted that the NLS model of guided reading was part of her programme, and had expected my visit, the morning's guided reading session had not been planned. Eventually it was decided to use the class novel, Beverley Naidoo's (1986) *Journey to Jo'burg*. Of the 20 minutes allocated for guided reading, however, the children spent approximately 15 taking it in turns to read aloud, which they did expressively and accurately. Unlike Teacher 1, Teacher 2 posed some questions as the text was read, and carried out a small amount of teaching. Although the dialogue was also characterised by IRF exchanges, opportunities for the children to contribute ideas were actively constructed, mainly through the use of wait time.

This episode appeared to support another two of the student teachers' perceptions: firstly, that guided reading can be a sporadic, last-minute event, rather than a planned opportunity to develop comprehension and critical literacy through dialogue; secondly, that although points made were summarised regularly, and used to move the discussion forward in a speculative manner, the children were not encouraged to pose questions themselves, and there was no evidence of collaborative discussion, either spontaneous or directed. This observation contrasts strongly with the

emphasis placed on collaborative and reciprocal discussion to develop cognition that underpins the approach proposed by the NLS, and with the stress given to it in their centre-based sessions.

The questioning, however, was managed carefully. Questions were usually open to the whole group rather than a single, nominated child, and repetition was avoided through use of elaboration. For example, "what words have they put in?" was rephrased as "what word choices has the author made to give us that impression?". Teacher 2 encouraged the children to be more precise in their answers, but refrained from repeating or rephrasing them herself. As Alexander (2005, p. 26) states, recasting responses can leave children wondering whether their work is being "celebrated, challenged or charitably dismissed". Use of wait time rather than intervention avoided a 'recitation script' (Alexander, 2005, p. 3) and the responses offered by her fluent readers demonstrated that Teacher 2 was beginning to foster not merely extended talk but the cognitive stepping-stone of dialogic talk.

**T2:** "Yeh, why? [2 second pause] Why does she need them to go to school to get educated?"

**John:** "Because they could have better lifestyles, and say how they could actually do a lot of things because if you don't get educated, then you can't do very many jobs? Cos they want to get a better life style for their kids."  
(2 second pause)

**Lucy:** "It's just that she's really scared that, um, if she, like, loses her job, or gets arrested or something, her children won't grow up properly and they'll end up back on the streets because she's the only one who can really care for them because they can't just live, just live on their own with their little sister who's sick."

#### **Extract 6: Using wait time to encourage deeper thinking**

Teacher 2's awareness of the complexities of the text and of its poetics (the way story elements relate together) were used in order to ask better questions (Thomas, 1998) and to scaffold the children towards speculating about feelings, characterisation and motivation based on their reading and the topic work they were undertaking.

However, although in her interview Teacher 2 stated "I don't do extracts; I do whole texts", it became apparent that this normally referred simply to allowing the children to finish reading the book afterwards. In this episode it appeared to be the children's prior knowledge of the story that enabled them to engage with characterisation, the focus of the session, at a deeper level than might have been possible otherwise. However, there was no opportunity for them to contribute their own thoughts or opinions based on knowledge

from outside school, or to pose their own questions. Activation of prior knowledge was limited to factual recall of a previous chapter and did not capitalise on the possibilities of developing critical literacy.

After the session one child explained to me that she was writing to her grandfather, currently working in the Townships of Johannesburg. An ideal opportunity to develop critical literacy had been missed. This pupil could have been invited to speculate how her grandfather's comments approximated to the picture she had built from reading about this period of recent history, which would have moved the book out of the classroom and connected it with the real world. It must also be questioned how far the last-minute choice of the class novel gave children an opportunity for critical literacy, albeit one that was not developed and is not part of Teacher 2's usual practice.

This episode, therefore, offers a positive model of questioning and probing, but not of critical literacy or of collaborative and reciprocal questioning. The decision to use three-quarters of the teaching time to allow these very fluent readers to practise reading aloud does not match the philosophical or pedagogical conceptions of guided reading, a concern often expressed by student teachers.

### *Case study 3*

Case study 3 was also undertaken in a rural primary school. Here, the English co-ordinator worked with five very fluent Year 2 readers using a book from the reading scheme. She opened the session with a recognisable NLS format: book introduction, prediction based on recall of a similar text, recently read, and scaffolding of an unfamiliar word. Departing from the NLS guidance at this point, Teacher 3 invited the children to take turns to read the text aloud. Three fluent and accurate circuits of the group, with each child making only one miscue, took three-quarters of the teaching time.

Although Teacher 3's questioning also followed an IRF format, she promoted a collaborative problem-solving approach to vocabulary development, encouraging children to help each other with unfamiliar words, usually by permitting interjections.

**Alex:** "... a thick layer of b . . ."

**T3:** "[quietly] that's a tricky one. Sound . . . bbb"

**Alex:** "Blubber"

**T3:** "Do you know what blubber is?"

**Alex:** "No."

**Mat:** "Fat!"

**T3:** "[laughs] Fat, that's right, Mat, you're absolutely right."

#### **Extract 7: Vocabulary development**

In her interview she explained that her approach to reading is shaped by experience in KS2:

**T3:** *"I'm a junior teacher so I've done guided reading with years 4 and 5. I think that also changes the way you approach it in some ways . . . when you've done juniors you're more into the comprehension and I think you're clued into those types of inference and deduction questions."*

#### **Extract 8: Comprehension strategies**

Indeed, she was the only practitioner in the project to pose a question requiring a personal response to the text, but despite her apparent confidence, the children's answers were not explored in depth. In the following extract, the questions are appropriate in considering the feelings of the baby blue whale on discovering he faces the return journey alone, but the responses are superficial and Teacher 3 made no attempt to explore them further:

**T3:** *"Well done. How do you think he's feeling?"*

**All chn:** *"Sad."*

**T3:** *"Why d'you think he's feeling sad? Karl?"*

**Karl:** *"Cos he's not with his mummy."*

**T3:** *"Yes, cos he's not with his mummy. Why else is he sad?"*

**Mat:** *"Cos he's lonely."*

**T3:** *"Would you like that?"*

**All chn:** *"No."*

#### **Extract 9: Empathetic questions**

A follow-up question about the colours used in illustrations representing the Arctic and Africa could have been linked through discussion of the use of blue to represent cold and sadness.

**T3:** *"We've only got 3 pages left, so let's do some reading in pairs. What have you noticed about the colour of this page?"*

**Alex:** *"It's sunset."*

**T3:** *"When he was in the Arctic, what sort of colour was it?"*

**All chn:** *"Blue."*

**T3:** *"Lovely! Shall we do the last page together, Karl?"*

#### **Extract 10: Failing to probe for deeper cognitive engagement**

Guided reading in this class was structured through cued elicitation (Mercer, 1995). The children were indeed 'guided' to speculate, to offer suggestions, to comment upon each other's responses and to gain confidence in themselves as readers. However, this focused principally on vocabulary development, pronunciation or recall of prior learning. However, although Alexander (2005) might comment adversely on Teacher 3's use of 'habitual praise', this appeared designed to reinforce the development of confidence.

**Alex:** *"[reads] . . . drinks his mother's warm milk."*

**T3:** *"Well done. Did you know that whales do that?"*

**All chn:** *(in unison) "Yeah."*

**T3:** *"Did you? You're cleverer than me, I didn't know that. OK, lovely reading Alex, good boy."*

#### **Extract 11: Boosting the children's self-image as readers**

In her interview, Teacher 3 stated that enjoyment of reading was her ultimate goal for the children. It is clear, however, that in this episode of guided reading the children are encouraged to uncover the 'true' meaning of the text, and to read accurately, rather than to speculate and question for themselves. Teacher 3's real aim seems to develop the children's accuracy and literal comprehension through listening to them read. Again, this does not match the NLS model and it could be argued that if they read silently, the children could focus more on the meanings and connections within the text rather than on the pronunciation of words.

## **Summary and discussion**

At this point, it is useful to return to the three research questions:

- What does guided reading with fluent readers look like in a sample of real classrooms?
- Do guided reading groups offer a positive opportunity to develop critical and analytical reading?
- How far were the case study teachers using guided reading in order to develop those skills?

Firstly, were the student teachers correct in their assertion that guided reading was not happening in their classrooms? It is hard to tell from such a small-scale project. The snapshots taken in these three classrooms indicate, however, that practice might be, at best, uneven.

Secondly, all three teachers saw a benefit from conducting guided reading, but they saw it as an opportunity to hear children read, and one that was particularly beneficial for the less able children, but still useful for their more successful classmates. Although the children in each group observed were fluent readers who made fewer than five miscues in total, all were required to take it in turns to read aloud. Rather than analysing how the children created meaning, teaching appropriate strategies to enhance this or encouraging a personal, analytical and critical response, each teacher spent three-quarters of their teaching time listening to the children read. As Hobsbaum et al. (2002, p. 2) state, "Hearing children read individually is necessary when recording their behaviours and analysing their skills, but it is not a way of teaching".

Of the teaching time that remained after the text was read aloud, at least two-thirds was taken up by the teacher asking all the questions and providing individual feedback. Hurry and Parker (2007) suggest that because much of the focus on the NLS has been placed on subject knowledge, rather than pedagogy, teachers are not aware of such strategies as reciprocal teaching for developing comprehension, and thus fail to capitalise on the opportunity offered by guided time. The present study tends to support their view.

Finally, it seems apparent that in these classrooms:

- achieving the teacher's interpretation of the text remains the goal for children;
- posing questions, or drawing upon their own experiences in order to interpret the text are not encouraged;
- the development of critical literacy is closely related to the teachers' view of what constitutes 'guiding'.

The main observations drawn from these snapshots of practice are as follows:

- these teachers found it challenging to ask inferential and evaluative questions;
- even well-framed initial questions were ineffective when not followed up by further cognitively demanding probes;
- the case study teachers did not link the text to the children's knowledge;
- their encouragement of critical literacy appeared to be limited by a fear of relinquishing control of the discourse;
- they made no use of alternative strategies to develop textual analysis, such as mental imaging and imagining.

If such experienced practitioners as these three teachers are having difficulty in using guided reading as a means of developing interpretive and evaluative comprehension, then perhaps we need to explore what it is about the activity and the attempts made to introduce it in classrooms that is proving problematic.

### **Conclusions: barriers to developing critical literacy through a dialogic approach in guided reading**

As I acknowledged earlier, this is a very small-scale study, and as such, allows me to draw only tentative conclusions. It does, however, represent practice in three local authorities, with three different age groups and three teachers with different levels of experience and both urban and rural settings. Each school in the study regularly accepts student teachers and each appears not untypical of placement classrooms. Perhaps the most significant issue to emerge is that while all three teachers claimed to be conducting guided reading following the NLS (1998) guidelines, "using

questions to direct or check up on the reading" (DfES, 1998, p. 12), this was as far as they went. None of the case study teachers was aware of the 2003 publication *Guided Reading: Supporting the Transition from KS1 to KS2* (DfEE, 2003) which advises that "all guided reading sessions should include independent reading" and that children require time to "respond to text, develop and justify opinions and express personal preferences" (DfEE, 2003, p. 33).

McDonald (2004, p. 17) proposes that in recent years "there has been a major shift in the way readers have been asked to respond to texts" involving engaging them in the active construction of meaning from text, exploring alternative perspectives and daring to speculate. But this shift appears not to have reached these classrooms: although I saw some inferential comprehension encouraged, I saw no teaching of evaluative comprehension. To be critically literate, children have to be helped to question how they make sense of the world and interpret it, and to draw on their own experiences. It is, I would argue, easier to do so when you have been actively, and collaboratively, involved in reading beyond the lines and making personal judgements, for example about the extent to which a text has achieved its purpose. Smith (2005) describes the characteristics of critically literate children as follows:

*"Children who can tune in to the voice of a text, who can take on the ideas of others in interpreting that text, and who can imagine for themselves what other people, with other experiences and other needs, might make of a text, are well on the way to becoming critically literate"* (Smith, 2005, p. 38).

Hall (1998) explains that this means moving beyond asking for a simple response to a story: it involves teaching that a text is a crafted object, which has ways of presenting 'reality'. To create an understanding that "there are multiple ways to present the world and to be in the world" (Hall, 1998, p. 184), children should be encouraged to investigate the world of the text in relation to their own lived reality, and to discuss other possibilities. Literal comprehension is quite inadequate in today's world. Even interpretive and evaluative comprehension will take our children only so far. They also need a critical literacy that enables them to view the constructedness of the world and of text, and gives them the power to think that both could be otherwise.

Such a conception transforms literacy from an instrumental, passive, responding process, to one in which the children are actively engaged in the construction of multiple meanings, learning that both the text and their responses are socially constructed. This cannot be achieved through a sequence of IRF exchanges to achieve a set of predetermined right answers: it requires a different relationship between teacher and



students. But in the learning exchanges analysed, instead of Rogoff's (1990) 'guided participation' we saw something closer to what Smith (2004) identifies when he writes of teachers who take an authoritarian stance to text, who 'guide children' to uncover their pre-existent interpretation. This suggests that classroom teachers may have a rather different concept of what 'guiding' entails.

Perhaps, as Bielby (1999) asserts, the initial training of KS2 teachers in the teaching of reading has not been effective in the past. It seems also that an understanding of the importance of higher order questioning is not sufficient and there needs to be deeper understanding of the cognitive function played by dialogue. McGuinness (1999) argues that to create thinking classrooms, teachers require good in-service support; Duncombe and Armour (2004) characterise this as active, ongoing, reflective, collaborative, planned and need specific. Recent work on professional development (Fraser et al., 2006; Friedman and Philips, 2004) suggests there may be a value in conceptualising teacher change as the product of professional learning as well as professional development. Instead of the practice of attending courses, professional learning focuses on cognitive and affective change in an "emerging paradigm which promotes the notion of lifelong learning" (Friedman and Philips, 2004, p. 369).

This is very different from the "one size fits all" approach provided at the inception of the NLS through one-off training sessions, or cascade-style staff meetings, where the school's literacy co-ordinator undertook responsibility for disseminating the pedagogy of this radical change in practice. The call for a change in training resonates with the case studies: Teacher 1 appeared unable to apply the comprehension strategies from his recent course to the context of guided reading; Teachers 2 and 3 had recently attended LA training on assessment of reading.

Unfortunately, where the teacher, or student teacher, has weak subject knowledge, or lacks confidence in reading between and beyond the lines, practice may well tend to default to the certainties provided by a comprehension card. Indeed, it may be that, with the relaxation of the literacy hour and introduction of the Primary National Strategy (PNS, 2006), if its underlying principles are still not completely understood, guided reading disappears completely.

It is hard for a young teacher not to conform to decades of established practice in "listening to readers". But it is easier to try if there is a more evident theoretical framework to support the change, and if that framework can be provided by a more needs-led, lifelong approach to teacher learning. If student teachers, and experienced teachers, can be persuaded that questions need to be genuine, and that exploratory dialogue considers all viewpoints in a quest for common

understandings, perhaps guided reading will be seen as a learning opportunity rather than "twenty minutes for listening to readers". This area seems ripe for further research given the current shift of practice from the old literacy framework (1998) to the new, and a timely focus on comprehension.

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