Guided Reading and Reading Science
by Dr. Jan Richardson

There have been numerous attacks from Science of Reading advocates seeking to convince Guided Reading teachers that their method of differentiating reading instruction is not aligned with reading science. The white paper on my website explains in detail how the "Next Steps" approach to small group instruction aligns with reading science and the National Reading Panel (2000). Although I agree with the Science of Reading advocates on several points, I currently disagree on two areas. Since reading research continues to grow and evolve, this paper reflects my personal understanding as of today. Should new research appear that clearly translates to improved classroom instruction, I will adjust to it as needed.

Let me begin with the points of agreement:

- The Science of Reading (SOR) is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Children will need different kinds of instruction to meet the common goal of becoming proficient, engaged readers.
- The SOR is an evolving body of research, not a reading program that can be purchased. Although many districts are searching for a "Science of Reading Program," there is no such thing.
- There is a difference between obtaining information from the media and choosing to read the research (Aukerman, 2022; Shanahan, 2023. Unfortunately, too many well-meaning reading enthusiasts simply repeat what they have heard on social media and don't consult the research.
- Guided reading is used in a variety of contexts. It does not always have an agreed-upon definition (Shanahan, 2023). This is my definition: *During guided reading, a teacher meets with a small group of students and differentiates instruction by targeting specific learning needs, providing appropriate scaffolding, and gradually reducing support to promote independence.* My lesson framework aligns with the basic tenets of effective reading instruction as described by Structured Literacy. It also explicitly teaches the key elements of reading defined by the National Reading Panel (2000).
- Guided Reading is part of the basic format for a multicomponent intervention plan approved by structured literacy. On page 221 of Structure Literacy Interventions, 2021, a sample intervention activity is described in this way: "Guided reading of instruction-level text with immediate teacher feedback to decoding errors; teaching comprehension strategies, such as summarization; question writing (by students); comprehension questions (from teacher) and discussion of texts students have read; turn-and-talk routine as part of explicit teaching of target vocabulary words." This description aligns with the components of my Next Steps lesson.
- Reading Instruction should meet a student's needs and be based on formal and informal observations and assessments (Ordetx, 2021).

- Guessing words is not an acceptable reading strategy. Teachers should never encourage a student to guess at a word. Children should decode the word, attending to the visual information (letters) and sequence of sounds and confirm with meaning.
- Phonics is essential, but not sufficient. There are several key elements that children need to learn to become proficient readers. In addition to phonics, children need instruction in decoding (the application of phonics), encoding, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing.
- Phonics should be taught explicitly and systematically. All the books I have written include a phonics scope and sequence aligned with the developmental stages supported by decades of research (Bear et al., 2019; Ehri, 2022; Ganske, 2013) and a variety of effective, engaging, and research-based procedures that explicitly teach phonics using analogic, analytic and synthetic approaches (Flannigan, 2022) to support students in learning letters, sounds, sight words, high-frequency words, orthographic mapping, spelling patterns, inflectional endings, and morphemic units.
- Decodable texts can be useful for helping students practice phonics skills.
- Readers must attend to the orthography of a word for it to become part of their sight word vocabulary.
- Small-group instruction should be based on diagnostic assessment, a critical element of structured literacy and a basic tenet of my books.

The following paragraphs present my position on decodable texts and the three-cueing model, areas in which Science of Reading extremists have attacked guided reading. My position is strongly supported by reading science research:

Decodable texts
I have personally taught thousands of small group reading lessons and used a variety of instructional texts, including decodable texts, leveled books, basal stories, newspaper articles, chapters from novels, and sections from textbooks. I've even taught guided reading to advanced middle school readers using a chapter from a physics textbook! One of my favorite genres for guided reading is poetry. My point is that you can use my small group lesson framework with any text. My framework is simply a way to integrate reading, writing, and phonics to bring about greater acceleration. It does not mandate or exclude any type of text.

The current debate about whether to use decodable texts or leveled books centers on emergent readers (reading levels A-C). Books published for emergent readers differ significantly according to the publishing company. Some beginning books are highly patterned and repetitive; some are highly decodable. Moreover, others use multi-criteria, which include high-frequency words, decodable words, and meaning.

Despite the enthusiasm for using highly decodable texts, the research on using them is inconclusive (Lindsey, 2022; Mesmer, 2000; Shanahan,2023). Some studies favor decodable texts (Cheatham and Allor, 2012; Compton, 2005; Mesmer, 2005), while others favor multi-

criteria texts [(Juel and Roper/Schneider, 1985](#); [Jenkins, Peyton, Sanders, and Vadasy, 2004](#); [Menon & Hiebert, 2005;](#) [Mesmer, 2020;](#) [Price-Mohr and Price, 2019)](#).

My position is similar to Shanahan's, 2019. He writes, "I think it's okay to use decodable texts as part of phonics instruction, but such practice should be severely limited, and even beginning readers should be reading more than decodable texts." In another blog by [Shanahan (2019)](#), he says it is reasonable to use decodable texts to practice a phonics skill, but "kids are likely to be best off in classrooms that provide them with a mix of these text types rather than a steady diet of any one of them." He goes on to say, "Personally – based on my own experiences as a primary grade teacher—I would use all of these kinds of text."

Shanahan is critical of using predictable texts, and so am I. Predictable, patterned books offer emergent readers an opportunity to learn print concepts and simple English language structures, which supports the development of phonological and decoding skills ([Mesmer & Williams, 2015;](#) Scanlon & Anderson, 2020; however, once children control early print concepts and know the letter sounds, teachers should avoid patterned text and use decodable texts along with multi-criteria texts so the students can develop a "mental set for diversity" [(Shanahan, 2019).](#)

Although we might disagree on some aspects of decodable texts, I hope we can agree on these points presented by ([Mesmer, 2020](#)):

- **Use them (decodable texts) at the right developmental window**, which Mesmer defines as when children are solid with the concept of a word, know all letter sounds, and are ready to decode words. She states, "I suggest that children be able to decode a simple c-v-c word prior to using decodables."
- **Use after a phonics lesson to practice a target word family or sound**. In my recent reading intervention program [(RISE)](#), I wrote decodable texts for each lesson so children could practice the sight words and phonics skills that were taught in the lesson.
- **Do not use decodable texts exclusively.** Children benefit from also using multi-criteria texts that target high-frequency words, decodability, and meaningfulness.
- **Pay attention to the level of decodability.** There are times when highly decodable texts may be appropriate, but if the reader is having to sound out every third word, the book probably contains too many decodable words.
- **Know when to stop using decodable texts.** Mesmer recommends ending the use of decodable texts after children can easily blend c-v-c and c-c-v-c words. Most children master this skill in the spring of kindergarten or fall/winter of first grade.

Three-cueing system (MSV)
I think we can agree that readers use multiple sources of information to make sense of print – semantics (**M**eaning), syntax (**S**tructure), and graphophonics/letter-sound relationships (**V**isual).

Many teachers, myself included, use the sources of information as a tool for analyzing student errors, self-corrections and self-monitoring. The coding helps teachers decide which sources of

information students are using (and which they are ignoring) so the teachers know how to prompt the student during reading. When a reader makes an error that ignores phonics, teachers should prompt the student to look more closely at the word, sound it out, or break it into parts. If the reader tries to sound out the word but ignores meaning, then teachers should prompt them to crosscheck the visual (phonics) with meaning. *You used all the sounds, but what word would make sense?* (Bates, McBride, & Richardson, 2020; Shanahan, 2021).

Research has shown that teachers who prompt students to attend to cues the students are ignoring tend to be more effective (Scanlon & Anderson, 2020). The goals are for the reader to integrate multiple sources of information to read the exact words in the text, and for the teacher to teach children to use the sources as part of their active self-regulation and self-monitoring (Duke & Cartwright, 2021).

The current controversy surrounding the three-cues is fueled by an assumption that if children are prompted to use meaning-based strategies, they will learn to guess at unfamiliar words (Hanford, 2019, 2022). Ehri (2014) has shown that children with partial alphabetic word knowledge often use initial letters plus pictures to anticipate what a word might be. I don't consider this guessing. It is part of the developmental process of word solving and learning. The goal, of course, is for these children to acquire more letter sound knowledge so the teacher can direct the student's attention to using all the letters in the word for accurate word identification.

I agree with Scanlon and Anderson (2020) that children can use both meaning and visual information right from the start: "We do not view the use of context and decoding within an either/or framework, but rather encourage the interactive and confirmatory use of both code- and meaning-based strategies during word solving, within an instructional approach that is also responsive to the needs of students as they develop skill with the alphabetic code" (p. S20).

There is widespread misunderstanding among SOR proponents that the V in MSV means pictures. They suggest it is a way of encouraging children to guess at words. See Hunts Institute Virginia Education Summit, 2:50:16. That is totally false -- yet I have heard it presented numerous times.

Page 31 of the Science of Reading Defining Guide says that in order to be good citizens of a science and practice community, educators should fairly evaluate all evidence "regardless of whether the conclusions are inconsistent with your beliefs." It also says we should "acknowledge differences and discuss them with respect and decency." Unfortunately, I seldom see this kind of respectful debate on social media posts. I sincerely hope we can find common ground on the essentials of effective reading instruction, and when we disagree, we can do so with respect and professionalism.