

From Guided Reading to a Structured-Literacy Approach: My Journey as an Educator

By Kim Still | Categories: Science of Reading, Reading



Kim Still

As educators we all want reading instruction that is effective and equitable, reaching every student. But how do we get there? Most (if not all) of us have faced challenges in our learning journeys as teachers of reading.

In this blog post—the first in a new series titled “Structured Literacy: Unpacking Eight Key Questions for Transforming Reading Instruction and Outcomes for Readers”—Kim Still shares her journey from guided reading to small-group instruction with a structured-literacy approach.

If Not Guided Reading, Then What?

I began my teaching career in the early 2000s, at the height of the guided reading era.

Most days after walking my first-grade students outside for bus dismissal, I would hunker down at my kidney-shaped guided-reading table and analyze the day’s running records. It was never a surprise, but always a frustration, that my students were more likely to use meaning and structure—and not visual information—to read unknown words.

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Many of my first graders used enough visual information to advance to the reading level benchmark set by the district. The whole-group phonics lessons and small-group guided-reading lessons gave them enough traction with print to read with a sufficient level of accuracy to fully comprehend the text.

Other students were so disconnected from the print on the page that I had to question whether guided reading was an appropriate model. *But without guided reading, what would small groups look like in my Readers’ Workshop?*

I didn’t know, so I continued on the guided-reading path and tried to learn more in the hopes that it would have an impact.

Trying Something Different: Structured, Explicit Small-Group Instruction

Fast forward to 2016. After years of classroom teaching and training and serving as a Reading Recovery teacher, I became a literacy instructional coach.

I still spent many hours analyzing running records, this time alongside the teachers I worked with. In much of our analysis, we found that the use of visual information remained a challenge for a good number of students.

Around this same time, my school district was piloting a reading comprehension program (*Making Meaning*), loving it, and wanting to try more Collaborative Classroom resources. In 2017, the publication of the first edition of *Being a Reader* prompted us to try that, too.

I was part of that new pilot, serving as the district literacy coordinator. At first, I wasn't a fan of the small-group instruction. The structured lessons focused on phonological awareness, phonics, and high-frequency word learning.

With very little experience in teaching these skills with explicit instructional routines, I was at a bit of a loss for what the instruction should look like. The instructional routines and their clear, concise, consistent nature weren't obvious to me at first.

It was only when I saw the power of these routines in minimizing teacher language and getting students actively engaged and doing the work in the lessons that things started to click for me. Our students' participation in the phonological-awareness activities and blending of decodable words allowed them to own their learning in these areas and demonstrate a level of mastery that I hadn't seen in the past.

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My other initial reservation was about the texts that were used for the lessons. Although the texts in the later lessons looked very similar to those I was used to in guided reading, the decodable texts used early on went against everything I had learned through guided-reading professional development. It had been ingrained in me that decodable text was boring and lacked the rich meaning and language to which students should have access.

Quite the opposite of being bored, however, our students devoured these books, attended to print, and solved words like I had never seen before. Students were far less likely to miscue with words that had almost no visual resemblance to the words on the page. They were now actively blending the sounds to solve the words, attending to the parts of words more thoroughly, and only using meaning in their decoding if their self-monitoring alerted them to an error.

This careful attention to print was what had been missing for many of our students, and we came to see more students meeting grade-level benchmarks than in previous years.

The full thrust of the science of reading hadn't yet emerged, but I was beginning to see its potential through the impact of our shift in curriculum.

[Introducing a New Blog Series, "Structured Literacy: Unpacking Eight Key Questions for Transforming Reading Instruction and Outcomes for Readers"](#)

Back in the early 2000s when I was just beginning my teaching career, I never could have imagined that I would find a small-group instructional model to replace guided reading, but I am so happy that I did. The shift from guided reading to small-group instruction with a structured-literacy approach was transformative for me, my teachers, and our students.

Over the past few years, I've learned more about the elements and research behind this model. It wouldn't do justice to the model to unpack it all here, so my Collaborative Classroom colleagues and I, along with some additional experts in the field, are writing a blog series, "Structured Literacy: Unpacking Eight Key Questions for Transforming Reading Instruction and Outcomes for Readers."

Here's a preview of what the series will cover:

1. Foundational Skills Instruction: Whole Group? Small Group? What's Best?
2. Lesson Structure: What Components Lead to Foundational Skills Mastery?
3. Phonological and Phonemic Awareness: How Do We Bridge Research to Practice?
4. The Power of Continuous Blending: How Do We Harness It?
5. Multi-Sensory Supports: What's the Difference Between Micro and Macro?
6. Orthographic Mapping: What's It All About and How Does It Link to Comprehension?
7. Comprehension: What Does the Science Say?
8. Changing Hearts and Minds: What Will It Take to Truly Shift Classroom Practice?

Sharing Our Stories, Learning Together: Toward More Effective, Equitable Reading Instruction

It can be difficult to share so openly about the confusions and challenges I encountered on my journey as an educator. However, as I hear from others who share a similar story, I am convinced that it is through our collective struggle and the resulting knowledge we gain that we can move forward with reading instruction that is more effective and equitable for all students.

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Maybe your story is similar to mine, or maybe you've had different challenges and insights along your journey. Either way, I hope you'll join us for this series and learn alongside us.

Follow Collaborative Classroom manager of educational partnerships Kim Still on Twitter at @kimstill35.