
MCTE GRANT PROVIDES DIFFERENTIATED READING RESOURCES TO PARK ELEMENTARY

Historically, methods for teaching beginning reading have been the subject of controversy since early reading ability influences academic success across the school curriculum. The International Reading Association has developed a position statement to clarify the Association's stance on methods for teaching beginning reading: "There is no single method or single combination of methods that can successfully teach all children to read. Therefore, teachers must have a strong knowledge of multiple methods for teaching reading and a strong knowledge of the children in their care so they can create the appropriate balance of methods needed for the children they teach." One of education's perennial challenges is enabling teachers to divide their time, resources, and efforts to effectively instruct so many students of diverse backgrounds, readiness levels, skill levels, and interests. Differentiated instruction is just that—allowing students to maximize their growth despite the vast differences in abilities within classrooms. Differentiation involves large group instruction, small group instruction, and individualized instruction. Guided reading is one of the methods to differentiate beginning reading instruction.

According to Cindy Merrilees, as presented at her workshop entitled *Effectively Using Guided Reading: Help All Your Students Become Better Readers (Grades 1-3,)* guided reading is a small group activity involving four to six children working with

a previously unseen book. The role of the each child is to create meaning independently while drawing support from the group and the teacher. Teaching is responsive—the teacher follows the children’s lead, supporting their efforts to read for themselves. During guided reading the teacher observes, monitors, affirms, and responds to the children’s needs. Rather than provide answers, the teacher helps students become aware of the resources they bring to the task, clues held in the text, and the strategies for combining the two to make meaning. The teacher sets the purposes, invites predictions, asks questions, and reminds students of strategies they’ve used successfully. The focus is on developing a repertoire of reading strategies in a climate where risk-taking is encouraged and applauded. Guided reading groups are formed by placing together students who have a common need at a particular time. These students are identified from teacher observations during ongoing reading and learning situations and by taking running records. When selecting texts, the amount of supports and challenges within the text should be considered. Ideally, a book should have enough supports to enable the students to keep going with some help, but enough challenges to be engaging. The teacher supports young reading at the moment of need by helping them try out alternate strategies for making meaning.

While the research supporting guided reading is strong, the practical side of funding is a challenge. After checking into various literacy resources, it became apparent that a web site subscription to ReadingA-Z.com offered many and varied resources at a minimal cost. Readinga-z.com supports a balanced approach to literacy by providing a rich selection of resources that will help children become fluent readers. In addition to guided reading books and lessons, ReadingA-Z.com provides phonics resources such as decodable books, read-aloud books, lesson plans, worksheets, and flashcards. There are over 290 lesson plans to accompany each leveled reader and decodable book; over 900 worksheets to reinforce and practice what has been taught; over 1500 flashcards to help teach the alphabetic principle, phonemic awareness, and sound/symbol relationships; over 480 downloadable books to supplement the reading

program. Every month new downloadable resources are provided to members. The printable, leveled readers are suitable for use in small-group guided reading instruction, or for use as take-home books to be read with parents and other family members.

Through a literacy grant from MCTE, thirteen teachers at Park Elementary School, serving students in grades 2-5 in Hutchinson, Minnesota, received a subscription to this website. Others have since joined the site license. Most special education staff have subscriptions, and representatives from each grade level also piloted the resources. Along with the high quality of the materials, other advantages include being able to allow students to write in the books since they are downloaded and then duplicated on the copy machine. Teachers have agreed that the largest disadvantage is the time it takes to download the materials and make the books. In order to address the time issue, all staff who had subscriptions have divided the task of downloading by assigning each person one level of materials to retrieve off of the website and to put in a 3-ring binder in a central location. In this way, these teachers could do a small part to create a large collection of materials readily available for duplication as needed. Also, for those who feel more comfortable with a paper copy than with manipulating their way through a website, these binders of materials are more user-friendly.

After exploring the resources and using them with students, eighteen teachers will continue to subscribe to Readinga-z.com for the 2004-2005 school year. Many thanks to MCTE for enabling Park Elementary teachers to collaborate across grade levels and better individualize instruction for all students in the critical area of literacy. To learn more, go to www.readinga-z.com.

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