

# Portraits of Practice: A Cross-Case Analysis of Two First-Grade Teachers and Their Grouping Practices

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*This interpretive study provides a cross-case analysis of the literacy instruction of two first-grade teachers, with a particular focus on their grouping practices. One key finding was the way in which these teachers drew upon a district-advocated approach for instruction—an approach to guided reading articulated by Fountas and Pinnell (1996) in which students are instructed in small groups based on reading level—as a resource for their sense-making. Analysis indicated that the two teachers enacted the practice in distinct ways based on their experiences and personal characteristics. Findings further suggested that, reminiscent of research on ability groups conducted mainly in the 1970s and 1980s, instruction and materials in both classrooms were qualitatively different between lower groups and higher groups. Although we do not implicate the practice of guided reading per se, we call for closer examinations of modern manifestations of ability-grouped practices and explorations of alternatives to such practices.*

Ability grouping—the practice of evaluating and sorting students into categories to provide differential instruction—has been a topic of interest in educational research and policy for more than a century. Previous studies of elementary reading groups examined single classrooms in depth and came to bleak conclusions concerning the emotional, behavioral, social, and achievement effects on students who were in low reading groups (e.g., Eder, 1981; Good & Brophy, 1972; Rist, 1970). Partly in response to such consistently negative findings related to ability grouping, educators began to search for alternative ways of structuring instruction that best addressed students' differentiated needs. Teachers were encouraged to flexibly group their students and provide multiple opportunities to engage in reading and writing activities. While scores of studies examined ability grouping in reading instruction in the 1970s and 1980s, it has been relatively unexamined in recent years (LeTendre, Hofer, & Shimizu, 2003), although more recent research

has identified ability grouping as one of the mechanisms responsible for achievement gaps between poor and minority students and students from backgrounds of privilege and power (Carbonaro & Gamoran, 2002; Lleras & Rangel, 2009).

Some educators assert that it is not the presence of ability grouping that should be of concern but rather how grouping is structured and how instruction is implemented within groups. A case in point is the form of “guided reading” articulated by Fountas and Pinnell (1996), which has proliferated in schools through professional development, word of mouth, and educational books. Fountas and Pinnell, borrowing elements of Reading Recovery (Clay, 1993), recommend flexible or dynamic reading groups, which change frequently based on teachers’ continual assessment of students’ strategy use and progress through leveled texts (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Iaquinta, 2006). While anecdotal observations suggest that many teachers are enacting some sort of small-group reading instruction in their classrooms, we know little about what that instruction actually looks like or how teachers are taking up approaches such as guided reading in their classrooms.

The study reported here is a cross-case analysis of two first-grade teachers and their literacy instructional practices—particularly those practices that involve small-group literacy instruction—and an attempt to provide contextualized portraits of practice that help enrich our understandings of the current uses of grouping. The history and journey of this investigation is important for understanding the purpose and scope of this manuscript. Our initial focus for the project grew out of our collective experiences in classrooms over the last several years. In our informal observations of classrooms, we have noticed a rise in teachers who are grouping students by ability for their reading instruction, partly (we think) in response to the high-stakes assessments and district mandates for achievement. Many of the teachers we observed were some of our most exemplary teachers, and our observations caused us to wonder: What are the grouping practices in primary classrooms? Are we seeing the same ability grouping so criticized by researchers in the 1970s and 1980s, or is this something new and different? In what ways does ability grouping still exist, and what are its consequences for students and teachers?

Our observations and questions prompted us to conduct an interview/observational study of ten teachers (Worthy, Maloch, Hampton, Jordan, & Steen, 2008). We found from this study that all ten of the teachers grouped their students by ability, although the ways they talked about their practices suggested considerable variance across the classrooms. To further investigate and understand these differences in grouping practices, we selected two teachers to observe in more detail. A year in these two classrooms indicated that teachers were indeed using ability grouping, and our observations helped us better understand these practices and their implications for students. Our observations over the course of one academic year indicated the teachers’ reliance on a well-known approach—guided reading. While guided reading has been variously defined (Harris & Hodges, 1995; Hoffman

& McCarthey, 2000; Spache & Spache, 1986), the approach these teachers drew on was the one articulated by Fountas and Pinnell (1996), which had been previously introduced within their district.

While the teachers implemented guided reading, grouping, and literacy instruction in very different ways, this approach was clearly a resource for their thinking about and enactment of grouping for the purposes of literacy learning. Given these differences and the clear influence of a district mandate, our analysis moved from a description and interpretation of how the teachers grouped their students to a consideration of the ways in which these two teachers drew on the same approach but enacted it so differently. As in the work of Cohen (1990) and Kersten and Pardo (2007), we directed our attention to not just the teachers' practices but to the meaning-making behind their enactment. While our observations and analysis addressed all facets of these teachers' literacy instruction, the analysis reported here focuses particularly on the teachers' grouping practices and the ways they drew on and enacted guided reading.

It is important to note, however, that it is not our intention to study the impact of professional development. Instead we direct our attention to how the *teachers* were making sense of and enacting instruction within their classrooms. Our observational data provide a picture of their practice, and the interview data help us understand how they made sense of their previous and current teaching experiences, including but not limited to their professional development work. We argue that the combination of the two affords the richest portraits of their practices.

## Literature Review

In this review, we attempt to provide background on areas of research that might inform an understanding of this research. First, to better understand the history of grouping practices and how these practices have played out in classrooms over the years, we address reading instruction from the early 20th century to the present with a focus on grouping. Next, we provide an overview of the purposes of and research about guided reading, as articulated by Fountas and Pinnell (1996). Finally, we provide a theoretical consideration of teachers as sense-makers and instruction as enactment.

### *Reading Instruction: Early to Late 20th Century*

Although the first appearance of ability-based reading groups is hard to pinpoint, teaching materials published as early as 1913 advised elementary teachers to form separate groups for "slow" readers and those who made more rapid progress (Barr & Dreeben, 1991). By mid-century, virtually all elementary teachers instructed students in low, middle, and high reading groups, with each group progressing lockstep through graded basal readers. While the teacher worked with a group, the rest of the students completed "seatwork," which consisted of fill-in-the-blank

workbooks or copied worksheets. Teachers' goals for seatwork included management (low noise, minimal activity) and instruction (reading and writing skills, developing independence) (Anderson, Brubaker, Alleman-Brooks, & Duffy, 1985; Leinhardt, Zigmond, & Cooley, 1981).

Durkin's study of basal reading instruction in first-grade classrooms (1978/1979) found that instruction within reading groups was most often teacher-directed, with students reading round-robin style and answering teacher-posed literal-level questions. In a historical review of reading instruction in the 20th century, Ford and Opitz (2008a) noted that instruction in these groups was not what well-respected reading educators and researchers had in mind when they described the "guided reading" instruction that should take place in basal reading groups (Betts, 1946; Bond & Wagner, 1966; Gray & Reese, 1957). Harris and Hodges' definition of guided reading in *The Literacy Dictionary* (1995)—"reading instruction in which the teacher provides the structure and purpose for reading and for responding to the materials read" (p. 102)—did not mention ability grouping or round-robin reading; neither did the two-part description of guided reading lessons offered by Spache and Spache (1986), which included teacher-directed pre-reading instruction and purpose-setting followed by students reading the text with teacher support.

Research of the 1970s and 1980s found that students who were placed in low reading groups suffered negative effects due to limiting instruction, materials, quality of interactions, and lowered teacher expectations and attitudes (Allington, 1983; Gambrell, Wilson, & Gantt, 1981; Hiebert, 1983; Pallas, Entwistle, Alexander, & Stluka, 1994; Rist, 1970). Brophy and Good (1970) concluded that the elementary teachers in their study of ability grouping "communicate differential performance expectations to different children through their classroom behavior, and the nature of this differential treatment is such as to encourage the children to respond in ways which would confirm teacher expectancies" (p. 373). Researchers also identified declines in achievement, attention, behavior, attitudes, and social skills among students in lower-level groups (Eder, 1981; Good & Brophy, 1972; Hiebert, 1983; Rosenbaum, 1976; Weinstein, 1976). Further, these researchers found indications of potential long-range effects of ability grouping. Students tended to stay in high- or low-level classes and groups year after year, such that a student in a low reading group in first grade was likely to be in lower-level classes in middle and high school (Eder, 1981; Ireson & Hallam, 1999).

Due to negative conclusions about ability grouping, educators and researchers began advising teachers to use cooperative learning strategies and replace ability groups with heterogeneous, flexible, or interest-based groups (Berghoff & Egawa, 1991; Radencich & McKay, 1995). Some teachers did experiment with different grouping formats; however, with the introduction of literature-based instruction in the 1990s, many teachers moved to whole-class reading instruction, with students

of widely varying levels reading the same book. Not surprisingly, the instructional needs of some students were not met through whole-class instruction, and many teachers began to again group students for instruction. Enter Fountas and Pinnell and their book detailing a philosophy and procedures for implementing a small-group approach to guided reading (*Guided Reading: Good First Teaching for All Children*, 1996).

### ***Guided Reading Groups: Late 20th Century to the Present***

Influenced by the ideas of Betts (1946) and other mid-century educators (Bond & Wagner, 1966; Gray & Reese, 1957;), as well as by Clay's (1993) *Reading Recovery* intervention model, Fountas and Pinnell's (1996) conceptualization of guided reading included the following elements: first, students were grouped according to developmental reading level. Second, rather than simply introducing the story and setting purposes, as in earlier forms of guided reading, the goal of the book introduction was to help students develop strategies to use in their independent reading. Third, students read the text as a whole rather than in segments, with the goal of reading successively more challenging texts. Finally, "Children are grouped and regrouped in a dynamic process that involves ongoing observation and assessment" (p. 4).

Instead of basal readers, children read from short books that were more finely graded than basal readers and could easily be read in one session. A first-grade basal program, for example, included 3-4 graded anthologies, while there were 8 levels in the Fountas and Pinnell (1996) system (and 16 in the Developmental Reading Assessment leveling system that some school districts use). According to Ford and Opitz (2008b), guided reading seemed like the answer to many of the challenges of earlier forms of reading instruction:

After struggling with how to accommodate individual differences in whole group instruction, teachers are rediscovering the value of balancing whole group instruction with the use of small groups to differentiate instruction in their reading programs. For some teachers who have been around long enough to have seen grouping formats come and go, the challenge has been how to return to small group reading instruction without returning to all the problems that caused people to move away from the practice in the first place. Conceiving of small group reading instruction as guided reading seemed to provide that needed new direction. (p. 309)

In contrast to instruction found in reading groups of the past, guided reading is intended to emphasize the complex nature of literacy development and attention to students' individual needs within an explicit lesson format using leveled books with natural, predictable language (Iaquinta, 2006). Instruction is designed to support children in developing a complex set of reading strategies that they learn to use independently in reading a variety of texts. Regular assessment, through

the use of running records and other measures, is used to determine students' constantly changing levels and instructional needs.

According to Rasinski and Hoffman (2003), "It is nearly impossible today to find a primary classroom where some version of guided reading is not being used" (p. 520). However, some educators and researchers have recently identified potentially troubling issues with the use of guided reading. After using it in her kindergarten classroom, Mere (2005) found challenges that eventually prompted her to move to a reading workshop format. Mere found that organizing her schedule to meet with reading groups left little time for students to read independently and practice strategies she presented during guided reading; thus, she found her students had difficulty using the strategies in independent reading. Another issue related to reading independence was that many of Mere's students did not develop proficiency in choosing appropriate books for independent reading because she always chose the books they read for guided reading groups. Mere also found that students even within the same group needed varying degrees of support and instruction and that the format of guided reading groups made differentiation difficult.

Ford and Opitz (2008b) conducted a national survey of guided reading practices focusing on primary (K-2) teachers' understandings about the purposes, grouping formats, texts, assessment, instruction during reading groups, and what students do while they are not working with the teacher. One issue they identified was that, in a majority of the classrooms surveyed, most students spent more time away from the teacher working in centers or doing seatwork than they did working with the teacher. Teachers also reported that students' access to information texts was limited, as two-thirds of the leveled texts they used with students were narrative stories. Perhaps most surprising was that, even though reading instructional-level texts is one of the most important features of guided reading, "Teachers reported that students read texts at their instructional level only a little more than half of the time" (p. 318).

Ford and Opitz (2008a) raised another concern. While acknowledging that the focus, format, and instruction described by Fountas and Pinnell (1996) were vastly different from those found in ability groups of the past, they noted that because they are formed on the basis of leveled texts, guided reading groups may become static, which can lead to some of the issues found in ability-grouped instruction of the past: "One problem that could resurface is the debilitating effects of labeling. Continual reference to these levels could work to label—and stigmatize—the groups in much the same way the traditional labels . . . of years past did" (Ford & Opitz, 2008a, p. 73). In a 2008 survey of 1500-plus elementary reading teachers, Ford and Opitz (2008b) found that most respondents reported that their guided reading groups were fairly static. They cautioned, "As teachers rediscover the value of homogeneous small groups in reading programs, they must be careful to not to [sic] return to what got us in trouble in the past—the inflexible use of homogenous small groups" (p. 316).

Rasinski and Hoffman (2003) also raised concerns about the practice: “While the historical roots and theoretical base for these guided reading procedures support their use in the classroom, we recognize that there is little empirical evidence to support their use in promoting reading achievement” (p. 518). These researchers called for studies that “carefully document the kinds of instruction offered and examine related patterns in student learning” (p. 520). In the study presented here, we hope to offer this sort of documentation of both teachers’ practices and students’ conceptualizations of these practices. In our analysis, we center our thinking within a theoretical framework that views teachers as active sense-makers (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002).

### *Teachers as Sense-Makers*

Teachers have always had to deal with mandates and suggestions—new ideas or practices from curriculum coordinators or principals, initiatives from districts or, as we have seen recently, state or national policy mandates. One consistent finding of research on teachers’ responses to policies, initiatives, recommendations, mandates, and the like is that teachers’ responses are varied and depend on a wide range of factors including the teacher, the context, the students, support for the changes, and the nature of the change, to name a few.

In their articulation of a “cognitive framework of implementation,” Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer (2002) argue that “what a policy means for implementing agents is constituted in the interaction of their existing cognitive structures (including knowledge, beliefs and attitudes), their situation, and the policy signals” (p. 388). While our research does not examine a comprehensive reform effort, a theoretical framing such as this one is relevant as we attempt to understand better how these two teachers actively made sense of district messages about literacy and enacted instruction within their classrooms.

Teachers are sense-makers, and their enactments of practices necessarily take into account their backgrounds, their experiences, their beliefs, and their local contexts. For example, Cohen (1990) provides an example of a teacher, Mrs. Oublier (Mrs. O.) who intended to follow policy, worked hard to do so, and believed she had fundamentally changed her instruction in response to policy, yet observations of her practice showed only superficial changes. Mrs. O., who was part of Cohen and Ball’s (1990) research on teachers’ responses to the California Math Frameworks curriculum, described her pre-math-frameworks curriculum as traditional and her practice as consisting mainly of learning facts and algorithms through worksheets. Mrs. O. attended professional development workshops and, in her own eyes, wholeheartedly adopted the new curriculum and made extensive changes to her practice. In Cohen’s (1990) observations, however, Mrs. O. used the new curriculum and materials, but “seemed to treat new mathematical topics and curriculum materials as though they were a part of traditional school mathematics” (p. 312).

Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer (2002) assert that a fundamental issue in educational policy implementation, and a major reason that even thoughtful and well-intentioned reforms may have ultimately disappointing results (Elmore, 1996), is that while policymakers can mandate reform, they have no *real* power to enforce it. At the end of the day, the ones who are in charge of interpreting and enacting policies are “local implementing agents”—that is, district officials, school principals, curriculum and instructional specialists, and, most importantly, teachers. According to Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer, “By assuming that implementing agents understand what policymakers are asking them to do, most conventional theories fail to take account of the complexity of human sense-making” (p. 391). To address this issue, the authors outlined a theoretically and empirically based cognitive framework to characterize how local actors make sense of and enact policy initiatives. As Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer explain, the way each person makes sense of and enacts a policy will be somewhat varied due to differences in background knowledge, experiences, teaching context, beliefs, and values. Thus, even if the agents intend to follow policy to the letter, interpretations and enactments may be quite different from what policymakers intend.

What teachers believe about the policy, or about instruction, or about content areas, for example, is likely to influence their enactment of the related policy. Research in the area of teacher beliefs indicates that the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and their classroom practices is a complicated one (Pajares, 1992; Richardson, Anders, Tidwell, & Lloyd, 1991). Some research has demonstrated a mismatch between teachers’ professed beliefs and their classroom practices (Duffy, 1981; Hoffman & Kugle, 1982); teachers may express particular beliefs about students and teaching while enacting something quite different in the classroom. Other research shows that teachers’ practices always rest on some sort of theoretical basis, whether or not this basis matches with what teachers articulate about those beliefs (Deford, 1985; Richardson et al., 1991).

Spillane’s concept of “enactment zones” speaks to the importance of another dimension—the social context—in teachers’ uptake of policy reforms (Spillane, 1999; Spillane, 2000; Spillane & Zeuli, 1999). Defined as “the space in which [teachers] make sense of, and operationalize for their own practice, the ideas advanced by reformers” (Spillane, 1999, p. 159), enactment zones range on a continuum from very social to very individualistic. Spillane (1999) illustrated this concept in his study of mathematics reform in Michigan designed to help teachers shift from “procedural” to “principled” instruction. The study participants were 25 mathematics teachers whose survey responses indicated they agreed with the reforms and had worked diligently to implement them. However, observations and interviews showed that the teachers’ practices were widely divergent and that only four teachers fundamentally changed their practices. Others changed incrementally or not at all. Spillane examined a range of factors considered influential

in implementations of reforms, including the teachers' academic background, preparation, content knowledge, interest, and inclination toward change, along with the quality of professional development and colleague and campus-level support, but he was unable to discern patterns among teachers that could explain the differences in their implementations. Only the nature of their enactment zones differed. The four teachers whose practices changed were on the social end of the enactment zone continuum. They engaged in sustained interactions and deliberations with colleagues and reform experts within and outside their schools and districts about the core ideas and practices that were central to the policy reforms, and they had access to an array of artifacts and resources, which they used in negotiating meaning about and enacting the reforms. The remaining teachers demonstrated more individualistic enactment zones. Although all teachers heard the same policy messages and believed they were implementing the reforms, the teachers with more individualistic enactment zones were unaware that their instruction was not in keeping with the intent of the reform because they did not have the input of colleagues. According to Spillane (1999), "I conjecture that whether, as well as the extent to which . . . teachers revise the core of their practice in response to recent reforms will depend not only on their individual capacity but also their enactment zones" (p. 171).

In the study described in this paper, we examined the ways in which two teachers understood and enacted guided reading and grouping within their first-grade classrooms. The collection of a variety of data sources, including multiple interviews, videotape records of instruction, artifacts, and observations by multiple observers over the course of a school year, allowed us to closely examine the teachers' instruction and their sense-making related to this instruction.

## Methods

Our analysis was directed toward two research questions. First, we addressed a more descriptive question: How do two first-grade teachers group their students for literacy instruction? Our data collection and analysis of this first question led to our second question: In what ways do these two teachers make sense of guided reading as an approach, as evidenced in the ways they enact this approach in the classroom and the ways they talk about their instruction?

## Participants

Both teachers from this study taught in the Brookway School District (pseudonym). Our aim in this study was to examine the grouping decisions of first-grade teachers who taught in schools representing the district's ethnic and socioeconomic diversity. Thus, we selected a school serving middle- to upper-middle-class socioeconomic communities and one serving middle- to lower-middle-class communities. Next, we asked the principals to select teachers who they felt engaged in effective lit-

eracy instruction. Their designations of effective, they told us, were based on their own observations, students' progress/achievement, and the teacher's reputations among parents and colleagues as "good teachers." Finally, from among the names the principals submitted, we asked for volunteers to participate in the study. In one school, one of two teachers whose names were submitted volunteered; in the other, two of four teachers volunteered. We chose one teacher from each school based on our desire to study participants with a range of experience.

Pamela taught at Canyon School, a large, recently built K-5 campus serving an upper-middle-class area of the district. She had 5 years of experience, all in first grade. There were 22 students in Pamela's class. Ellen, a K-2 teacher for 27 years, taught at Rockland, a small, older building close to the older part of the town that was the focal point of the school district. Rockland served a more mixed community, with some students living in public housing projects, some in middle-class neighborhoods and a few in areas of wealth. There were 22 students in Ellen's classroom. Both Pamela and Ellen are white with middle-class backgrounds.

For the purposes of contextualizing our analysis and this study, we also include information related to the professional development offered by the Brookway district. As mentioned earlier, our study was not focused on the influence or effectiveness of professional development; because of this, we include this information as background rather than as a major data source. All of the information comes from our conversations (both face-to-face and over email) with the district's elementary literacy coordinator, who described the purpose, components, and professional development associated with the district initiative to implement its literacy instruction model.

### ***District Context: Professional Development***

In the years preceding the study, the literacy curriculum staff had become frustrated with what they saw as inconsistent methods of literacy instruction taking place across the district and decided to select approaches they considered "best practices" in literacy and build an instructional model around them. Starting four years before our study, teachers in the district participated in a three-part, multi-year intensive professional development initiative as part of the district's effort to assist teachers in learning and implementing the district's literacy instruction model. One part of that larger initiative was a focus on guided reading.

Convinced of its value as an instructional approach, the literacy curriculum staff built their reading instruction model and professional development initiative around guided reading as articulated by Fountas and Pinnell (1996), along with the supporting components of shared reading, read-aloud, and running records. During the first year of the initiative, teachers were required to attend two full-day sessions with a cohort of teachers from their school; these sessions were primarily devoted to learning about guided reading. During the sessions, teachers observed

guided reading lessons, learned to plan their own lessons, and learned about and practiced running records. Teachers were asked to videotape themselves working with students and doing running records and to bring these artifacts to use for problem-solving purposes during follow-up trainings, which were held in half-day sessions three times during the remainder of the year. According to the literacy coordinator, these follow-up sessions were not well attended, and only a handful of teachers who attended them brought videos of their teaching. Pamela and Ellen each attended one of these sessions.

The final component of the professional development initiative was a summer institute in which participants observed “collaborative teachers,” chosen for their expertise in the reading and writing practices described earlier, as they taught in demonstration classrooms. Teachers were then expected to implement these practices on their home campuses, to support each other, and to ask for support from the district literacy staff. Both Pamela and Ellen participated in the summer institute.

### ***Data Collection***

Classroom observations occurred across the academic year in both classrooms and were conducted by members of the research team. Two members of the research team were assigned to each classroom, with the two primary investigators (the first two authors) observing in both classrooms. Observers documented classroom observations in an open-ended format, following the tradition of participant observation (Spradley, 1980), recording notes in three columns: 1) time notation/duration, 2) running narrative of what was happening, and 3) interpretive notes or comments. Using this format, observers recorded notes on laptop computers and included a detailed narrative of what happened in the class, containing time notations, descriptions of activities, and notes about teachers’ and students’ discourse, actions, and interactions. To ensure consistency, the initial observation of each classroom was conducted by two different observers (observing at the same time). Following this visit, observers compared each set of field notes, discussing similarities and differences and making attempts to align the format and focus of the field notes. To maintain consistency in content and format, field notes were reviewed at monthly data analysis meetings.

Across the school year, observational attention progressed from broader in scope to more narrow and focused. Fall 2006 observations, which began in September (12 in Pamela’s; 13 in Ellen’s), focused on general classroom organization, grouping patterns, and teacher-student interactions primarily in reading groups. These observations, with the exception of one all-day observation in each classroom, were 90–120 minutes long. For the spring 2007 observations (6 in Pamela’s; 5 in Ellen’s), we more intensively examined interactions between teachers and students during whole-group and reading-group instruction. All of these observations were videotaped. After each classroom visit, the observer watched the videotape of reading groups and expanded observational field notes.

We formally interviewed each teacher twice. These interviews, each of which lasted about an hour, followed a set of predetermined questions and focused on instruction, materials, activities, grouping, and student progress. Because multiple researchers were conducting interviews, they followed this set of questions closely and only asked open-ended follow-up questions designed to elicit more language (e.g., “Can you say more about that?” “What do you mean?”).

At the end of observational data collection in each classroom, we selected students from each classroom for structured interviews in order to provide a sample with a wide range of achievement (8 in Pamela’s class; 9 in Ellen’s class). These audiotaped interviews were conducted either just outside of the classroom door or in a nearby empty classroom to remove possible distractions. During the interviews, we asked each student about first grade in general, as well as their views about reading, materials, and activities in the classroom. Again, because we had multiple interviewers conducting these interviews, interviewers were asked to closely follow the list of predetermined questions. During our observational visits, we also talked informally with the teacher and students about decisions they made in their work or teaching and recorded detailed field notes. For example, when Ellen reminded a student about book selection, the observer later asked Ellen a few follow-up questions about what books students could choose from and her reasoning behind that decision. We also collected students’ beginning, ending, and middle-of-year levels on the Developmental Reading Assessment and their scores on a state standardized test of reading.

### ***Data Analysis***

Data analysis was ongoing throughout all phases of data collection. During data collection, we wrote analytical memos summarizing emergent themes and detailing our developing theories or hypotheses about the data, shared these ideas during research meetings, and focused our data collection in response to these initial analyses. Following data collection, we first created case binders for each teacher that included field notes and notes from video viewings, transcribed teacher and student interviews, and achievement data. Following this compilation of data, we began phase one of more intensive data analysis. In the first phase, all researchers independently read and open-coded transcripts and field notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). Each researcher read the data binders for each teacher, making notes in the margins as to possible categories and patterns in the data, and generated beginning hypotheses about the data. Each researcher constructed notes detailing patterns identified in her independent analysis and these ideas were compiled, charted, and discussed during multiple analysis meetings. During these meetings, as a group, we moved back and forth between these analytic memos generated by individual researchers to the raw data to check for saliency in the data set. We gave most credence during these discus-

sions to patterns identified by multiple researchers, yet we attempted to pursue all possible patterns in the data. As well, we searched for negative cases (instances in the data that disconfirmed our emerging hypotheses) in an attempt to guard against potential biases we brought to our analysis. For example, when Pamela's emphasis on leveling emerged as a pattern, we searched for instances in the data in which she used aspects other than level to describe or discuss students. These group discussions, which took place regularly over a series of months, resulted in decisions about preliminary themes and directions for further analysis.

Table 1 provides an overview of the most relevant themes generated in this early analysis and later confirmed across the data, as well as how we sought to refine these themes in our subsequent analysis. After identifying these themes within each teacher's case, we worked intentionally to consider how these themes might be related to one another and to existing literature. This process led to consensus around an overarching theme regarding the ways in which the teachers' practices reflected their district's policy initiatives related to reading instruction. As the teachers talked about their practices, they continued to connect back to what the district had asked them to do in professional development—specifically, guided reading.

During phase two, a subset of researchers systematically examined each teacher's case for evidence of these initial themes, particularly through the frame of how the teachers were drawing on and enacting guided reading. To further contextualize what we were hearing from the teachers, we sought additional information regarding the district's professional development via ongoing conversations with the literacy coordinator. During this phase of analysis, we moved continuously between the data and the research literature relevant to teacher sense-making and enactment, as we sought to both refine working hypotheses and consider these findings within the existing research.

In phase three, we used cross-case analysis (Merriam, 2002) to identify similarities and differences across cases. This analysis indicated the ways in which the teachers' understandings and enactments differed from one another and from the original intent and underlying philosophy of the authors of these approaches. Across all phases of data collection, we regularly cross-checked findings from one data source (e.g., field notes) with others (e.g., interviews; video transcripts) in an effort to triangulate our analysis and ensure evidence across data sources. Referential adequacy materials (i.e., the actual audio and videotape records of the observations) afforded opportunities for us to revisit the classroom events as we analyzed. Within the findings section, we embed raw data in an effort to better enable the reader to draw conclusions about our interpretations. All of these techniques, along with prolonged engagement in the field, helped safeguard the trustworthiness of the study.

As will become evident in the next section, our findings concerning the classroom grouping practices were not always positive. We chose not to intervene

TABLE 1: Sample of coded categories across data

Emergent themes across data	Theme description (in italics) and data examples	Subsequent analysis
Pervasiveness of leveling	<p><i>Although there was variation across classrooms, both classrooms evidenced a high emphasis on leveling, as articulated by both teachers and students (student quotes included in body of text).</i></p> <p><u>Pamela:</u>            “Another thing is there’s another teacher and I that have split the kids so that has helped a lot, so that the kids are more accurately grouped, exactly on their level.” (TI)            “They’re like obsessed with their levels and they want to flip them over [the books] and see where they are so when they get to be moved up then that extra, just praise and encouragement.” (TI)            “I have one on a G right now, which would be about a month ahead of where he needs to be.” (TI)</p> <p><u>Ellen:</u>            “Well the lowest group is the red group. And umm they’re still a little bit behind. Right now the district in December says that they should be at a level 8 to 10, about a level 9. In January, they’re expected to be on a 10. Most of them are at about a 6-7.” (TI)</p> <p>Student groups for workstations grouped by level (FN; TI)            Students only allowed to select books from their assigned level (FN; TI)</p>	Systematically reviewed the data for evidence of leveling talk (by teachers or students), as well as any indication of how the use of leveling as a construct impacted instruction
Differential instruction	<p><i>In both classrooms, instruction varied across low and high groups with low groups receiving more skills-based instruction and leveled readers and high groups receiving more open-ended assignments and more extended, engaging texts.</i></p> <p><u>Pamela:</u>            In an early interview, Pamela explains how she works on “neat” comprehension activities with the higher groups, then fluency and “word work with struggling readers.” (TI)            In January, observations indicate that the higher group is doing a research project rather than guided reading. (FN)            “My groups of 8’s and 10’s more on decoding words, accurately reading words. The other children working on fluency, building that up with them.” (TI)</p> <p><u>Ellen:</u>            In all but her highest groups (who read chapter books), students read texts that were re-bound stories from basal readers from the 1980s (e.g., <i>Happy Pan; Barb Likes Pizza</i>). (FN)            The two girls in the highest group were given <i>Mayflower of 1620</i>, a scholastic trade book, which sported a cutaway/cross section of the Mayflower. While the two students in this group took turns reading in a round robin style similar to other groups, the questions Ellen asked them were more inferential and evaluative kinds of questions than questions posed to other groups (e.g., Why did they want to leave England? Why did he put them in prison?). Additionally, these students looked at and discussed the cutaway of the Mayflower, and used a globe to find England and Holland. (FN example)</p>	<p>Constructed a table that included each session of a reading group and included columns related to texts used, teacher prompts, overall format, time spent reading, etc.</p> <p>This table was reviewed systematically for patterns in instruction, particularly across different levels of groups</p>

TABLE 1: Continued

Differential time	<p><i>In both classrooms, teachers allotted different amounts of time to different groups. In Pamela's class, more time was devoted to lower reading groups than to higher groups. In Ellen's classroom, these groups received less time.</i></p> <p><u>Pamela:</u> For students who need "extra help"—Pamela and her first grade team have organized the kids into groups that meet during DEAR time each day. She works with students from other classes and sends her lowest three to other classes. She also spends extra time with her two lowest kids during the day, and once a week after school. (FN; TI)</p> <p>She meets with the groups who are "well ahead" ("like the level Ms and above") every other day, because it's hard to get to all her groups daily. (TI)</p> <p><u>Ellen:</u> Observations documented only two brief instances of Ellen meeting with her lowest group. (FN)</p> <p>"I don't think I've spent enough time especially with the low ones but it's hard to get to each group, especially every day." (TI)</p>	Re-viewed videotape records and field notes to log time spent by each group, including a breakdown of time spent reading text vs. time spent listening or doing other activities.
Level of productivity during workstations	<p><u>Pamela:</u> "One of the disadvantages, I guess, of centers...is monitoring the kids, when you're at a group. Because a lot of the questions will come to you, and you need to, you can't do that, you're in a group right then. And trying to solve little problems that you're seeing going on around the room." (TI)</p> <p>During every 60-minute observation, there was a minimum of 4 and a maximum of 8 interruptions to the reading groups from students in stations. (FN)</p> <p>[Sam] is messing around playing air guitar, shooting his chair backwards, and singing... He pretends to write (writes fake lines on his paper). (FN, October 22, 2006)</p> <p><u>Ellen:</u> "Lots of confusion about what students are supposed to be doing" (TI)</p> <p>There were frequent interruptions, as many as 10 during one reading group (FN, November 15, 2006) from students who wanted to show her work, ask questions about a station, or tell her they were finished.</p>	Examined the nature of tasks students were asked to complete and patterns of work within the various stations.

in these classrooms for two reasons. First, our research design was such that, as researchers, we took on participant observer roles in the classroom that intentionally fell more on the observer end. That is, we worked to stay out of the action and focused on our observations. Our intent was to observe and document what was happening, not to intervene or change what was occurring. Second, although we noted negative trends in one of the classrooms during data collection, our most in-depth analysis came at the conclusion of data collection. Thus, some of the patterns that were most concerning (i.e., the limited number of times one

teacher met with her lowest group) did not emerge until after data collection was complete. Unfortunately, we did not do a final member check with the teachers due to personal circumstances in the teachers' lives in the summer immediately following our data collection. To that end, we have worked diligently in our analysis and in this manuscript to represent the findings as *our* interpretations of the teachers' practice. While we believe that our use of other analysis techniques (e.g., inclusion of raw data; triangulation across data sources), as described above, helps safeguard the credibility of our analysis, we note the lack of a final member check as a limitation of this study.

The final stage of analysis involved constructing written cases for each of the teachers, incorporating the most salient themes identified during analysis and the themes most relevant to the overarching frame related to teacher enactment of professional development. These cases are presented below.

## **Findings**

Concisely put, Pamela and Ellen enacted their literacy instruction differently. While both teachers grouped students by ability for their literacy instruction, and while there were considerable surface similarities in the structure and set-up of their reading programs, the ways they made sense of their instruction and the nuances of their classroom practice widely diverged from one another. Through the lens of teaching as sense-making, we hope to portray each of these teachers' practices, their understandings and decision-making related to that practice, and the ways these practices impacted their students.

Before moving into the cases of enactment, we first want to make clear that we saw Pamela and Ellen as dedicated and skillful teachers. Their commitment to children and their learning were evident in the time and energy they spent thinking about and organizing their classroom environments for students' learning and in the classroom communities they built. Both were warm and kind toward their students and took care to build personal relationships with them. In both classrooms, most students made progress in their reading, as evidenced by the DRA. The analysis that follows focuses on their sense-making and enactments of guided reading and grouping. Our careful study of their enactments sometimes exposed problematic aspects of their implementation, in the way that close inspection of any practice will potentially uncover both positive and negative aspects of that practice. However, our illumination of such aspects in an effort to understand how these teachers made sense of and enacted these particular practices should not reflect on the whole of their practice.

### ***Pamela: "Guided Reading Is the Best Way"***

From our analysis of Pamela's interviews and our observations of her instruction, we conclude that her sense-making and enactment, particularly her *talk* about guided

reading, were mostly in keeping with the principles and practices outlined in the books. With close examination and extensive observation and analysis, we observed that Pamela's tendency toward efficiency and controlled routine mediated aspects of her implementation. We begin our analysis of Pamela with a brief description of her classroom and literacy instruction and then describe her enactment with examples from the data with a focus on guided reading.

Pamela filled her classroom with bright new posters, big books, and a library consisting mostly of leveled books by The Wright Group, Rigby, and other publishers of leveled books, which were mostly provided by her school. Pamela's daily literacy block schedule included a writing time (55 min.), a daily read-aloud followed by guided reading/workstations (60 min.), an Open Court phonics lesson (15 min.), and a 20-minute independent reading time called Drop Everything and Read (DEAR). Our observations and the bulk of our analysis focused on the Guided Reading and workstations portion of the block (although we focus on guided reading here). This hour-long segment typically began with a short read-aloud (lasting approximately 10 minutes) and then moved quickly into guided reading groups, which were formed based on assessments of reading level. As students met in their reading group, the remaining students rotated to various workstations set up in the classroom.

### Guided Reading

Pamela organized her instruction according to the district's guidelines for guided reading and was convinced of the effectiveness of its components as a way to structure and deliver reading instruction. She asserted, for example, echoing Fountas and Pinnell (1996): "I definitely think what we're doing—guided reading—is the best way to help the kids learn to read and it makes meeting their needs on their level, at their pace, when they're ready" (TI, 1/07).

Pamela assessed students with the Developmental Reading Assessment (Beaver, 2003), placed them into groups according to their level, and used the materials and lesson structure recommended by Fountas and Pinnell (1996), with some modifications for students who were reading above grade level. In addition to choosing books because they were on students' assessed levels, Pamela chose books within the levels that she determined were appropriate for guiding her students in their reading development (Clay, 1993), as she explained in her April, 2006 interview:

So I look and see what the book's going to be about—content in the book that I can talk with the kids about, specific skills that are in the book that I can pull from . . . that I want the kids to be working on.

To assess student progress, Pamela used the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) three times per year as required by the district. She used running records "once a month or more frequently when I can" (TI, 4/06) for more ongoing as-

essment that might lead to movement among groups. In accordance with a key principle of guided reading, Pamela described her reading groups as flexible and constantly changing:

And so that's how I've used that data [running records and DRA] to help determine who gets to move where and how changes are made. And changes are made at any time I see that a child's ready to make a move. It doesn't have to be at the end of a month or the end of a grading period. It's whenever the child is ready, the child moves up. So their groups are very, very flexible. (TI, 4/06)

Pamela echoed Fountas and Pinnell's (1996) recommended principles for effective implementation of guided reading, describing her major goal in working with students as developing independent strategy use ("to get them to use those different strategies when they're reading and independently start using them instead of having me prompt a lot."). Based on her assessments and observations, Pamela had differential goals for her reading groups (e.g., fluency, vocabulary), and for some individual students (e.g., middle vowels, high-frequency words), but she named comprehension as the major goal for all groups. In our observations of Pamela's work with her more independent groups, she rarely listened to students read aloud; instead she had conversations with students about reading they had done independently. With most of her groups, however, Pamela engaged the students in the guided reading practice of "whisper reading." During this time, Pamela leaned in to listen and support the reading of individual students, as we see below in the transcript from the *Itchy, Itchy Chickenpox* (Maccarone, 1994) lesson (Transcript, February 2, 2007).

**T:** [leans in to listen to Sam. Puts her hands on top of his book and points to word parts. The word is "another." She helps him sound it out.]

**SAM:** Another

**T:** Good

[Sam continues to read, but stops a few words later and looks up for help. Pamela was writing "another" on a word card for Sam. She stops to supply word.]

**T:** Not oh-uh, but uh-oh.

**WILL:** [begins building his pace as he is reading.] Under my shirt, under my shirt.

**T:** [Puts hands on book again and points to word] Does that look like that word? Under my shirt...under my sh...

**WILL:** Other..ssss...oooo...cckkk. Under my sock!

**T:** Good.

[Pamela leans in to listen to Arthur.]

- KEITH:** Batch, Ba..tch. Batch. [Keith reads word and looks up expectantly at Pamela, says it again loudly and then looks at book again.] Batch [Looks over at Arthur reading, then says it again, getting Pamela's attention this time].
- T:** [Nods to Keith, affirmingly. Then looks back at Arthur and puts hand on book and points to words for Arthur.]
- JARED:** Down my back, on my nose,
- T:** Good [turns page, but quits pointing].
- JARED:** Lots [Pamela lets go of page and returns to Sam. Arthur's book closes without Pamela's hand to hold it open.] Ahhh, shoot. I lost my page.
- T:** [As she points to word in Sam's book] Not /oh/.
- WILL:** /oh/, No on.
- T:** [looking back over at Keith]
- KEITH:** [sounds out] Between
- T:** Good, Keith

As seen here, Pamela shifted her attention from reader to reader as they read. In addition to suggesting word identification strategies, pointing to difficult text, and helping students track text, Pamela also made cards with words that each individual stumbled over. These cards went in students' personal collections of words and were often reviewed in later sessions. Pamela's strategy prompts focused primarily on word identification; she offered mainly phonetic cues ("What does *bake* start with?" "What does 'o-w' say?", "Sound it out", "Get your mouth ready", "Chunk it"), although she also cued meaning ("As you're reading, when you read a word and it doesn't make sense, you need to reread that sentence and look at the other words around it and see what would make sense there;" "Make sure every word makes sense;" "Skip a word and come back"). With her reading groups and with individual students, then, Pamela used a variety of strategies geared to students' instructional needs.

As described in the previous section, Pamela's small group sessions seemed consistent with those described by proponents of guided reading, and in her interview she almost perfectly described the core principles and practices used in the core text of the district's initiative (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). We also observed that facets of Pamela's personality appeared to mediate aspects of her sense-making and enactment of the initiative in both useful and sometimes obstructive ways. Pamela was regarded as a conscientious, dedicated, highly organized, skilled teacher by members of the research team who had observed her. When we met to talk about data, there were frequent comments like "Pamela has amazing energy" and "I can't believe she can keep up that pace." One observer commented,

She is business-like, efficient, and “no-nonsense,” keeps it moving, but she addresses the children as sweetheart and other such terms. This seems important that she does this to maintain rapport even though it’s pretty fast-paced. (FN, 11/2/06)

Controlled scheduling and business-like efficiency marked many aspects of Pamela’s literacy instruction, from read-aloud to guided reading to literacy stations; one observer noted a “sense of hurriedness throughout the whole class time” (FN, 12/4/06). Although we often hear from teachers that they find it challenging to follow their plans regarding the number of reading groups they meet with, Pamela was usually on schedule, meeting with at least four and occasionally up to six groups per day. Even during her students’ independent reading time, she worked with a group of struggling readers from other first-grade teachers’ classrooms. (The first-grade team had decided together to form these “intervention groups.”) However, this tight daily schedule left little room for flexibility. There was no time in her reading instruction block for her to work with her students as they worked in stations or to observe or confer with them during DEAR time, as she was busy with guided reading groups during workstation time and with an intervention group during DEAR time.

We hypothesize that Pamela’s penchant for efficiency may have also led to her intense focus on leveling, an organizational aspect of guided reading that Fountas and Pinnell (1996) caution against emphasizing: “Matching children to texts is tentative and cautious, because young children learn very quickly” (p. 99). We observed a focus on levels in Pamela’s classroom that was evident in her classroom setup, in her interviews, and in her students’ voices, and it shaped many aspects of her reading instruction, as shown in our observations. This framing led to a large number of reading groups finely differentiated by levels, a seemingly narrow conception of students as readers, and progression through the levels as the apparent primary goal of reading instruction. During the school day, students only had opportunities to read from leveled texts, and they were assigned leveled texts to read for homework as well, rather than from a variety of texts, as recommended by Fountas and Pinnell (1996) as well as by the literacy coordinator.

When Pamela spoke of students’ reading, and when they spoke of their own reading, the focus was the level of book rather than author, genre, or subject matter. In talking about her groups, Pamela often referred to them—and the students within them—by their levels. For example, telling us about one of her groups, she remarked, “Those two students in particular, my lowest group, they are now Gs.” Then, “My next level is level L. It’s got two little girls in it” (TI, 3/07). While she sometimes used other descriptors in talking about her students—descriptors related to skill/strategy acquisition (e.g., “they came in not having one-to-one and not knowing all of their sounds”) and social relationships (e.g., “I have two little boys in it and they are hilarious. They’re best friends and they’ve been best friends forever”), her most prominent descriptor was a student’s reading level. Further, she

viewed these levels as being highly precise. In talking to us about her students, she noted, "I have one on a G right now, which would be about a month ahead of where he needs to be" (TI, 1/07). The idea that she could identify exact levels and exact months students should reach these levels suggests a view of reading that is linear and sequential, with progress achieved by movement through incremental steps of increasingly difficult texts. Pamela's emphasis on level, and her view of reading levels as precise indicators of progress, led to a proliferation of reading groups. Her 22 students were divided into anywhere from six to nine groups throughout the year, and most groups were separated by just one or two levels; at one time, she had an F, G, and H group and a J, K, and M group. Moreover, she and her partner teacher divided the children across both their classes into groups, "so that the kids are more accurately grouped, exactly on their level" (TI, 1/07).

This leveling frame as a way of understanding students as readers was appropriated by students as well. In response to our interview question, "If I talked to your teacher, what kind of reader would she say that you are?" 5 of 8 students interviewed answered with their level. For example, Will's answer was, "Uh, I and J... Mostly I." Two said "good reader," and one said "great reader" without elaboration. Students' responses to other interview questions provided further evidence that they were cognizant of reading levels as a way of defining themselves as readers and as a way of framing the instruction they received.

Despite Pamela's descriptions of her groups as "constantly changing" and "very flexible," her focus on leveling also appeared to restrict students' movement among reading groups. When we traced student movement in groups throughout the year of the study, we discovered that the composition of groups stayed virtually the same, with the exception of some groups splitting in two and a handful of students occasionally moving up or down one leveled group. For these very reasons, such a focus on leveling is not recommended by proponents of guided reading.

In her efforts to make sure students were in a group that exactly matched their level, Pamela and her students became almost entirely focused on their "letter" (i.e., level), sometimes, we observed, to the exclusion of reader factors such as interest, instructional need, purpose, strategic reading, and book factors such as information, language, and quality of illustrations. Although Pamela chose books within levels to appeal to students' interests and to focus on selected strategies, students were required to read leveled books at all times of the day and even in their home reading. An alternative or additional explanation for the focus on leveling is offered in a survey of guided reading practices conducted by Ford and Opitz (2008b), who also reported a leveling focus in their teacher survey, perhaps due to "the devotion of staff development time to the leveling of texts and learners" (p. 317). We do not know the extent to which leveling was a focus in this district's professional development, but Pamela's school had an extensive leveled library, which all the teachers used for guided reading.

Observing Pamela's reading groups in action led us to believe that she viewed the students' daily opportunities to read texts, with active support from her as they read, as enough to move students to the next level. And it did for most students. Most progressed steadily through the levels and ended the year reading on or above grade level. The district's expectation is for students to score at level 18 or early second-grade level on the DRA or above by the end of the first-grade year. Almost 80% (15 of 19) of Pamela's students for whom full-year achievement data were available met or exceeded the district's goal after starting the year at levels 6 (pre-primer) through 28 (late second grade). On the state test, 16 students (84%) met the minimum standard of "developed."

Considering that a number of her students progressed at the rate of two or more grade levels, the *average* amount of progress made by Pamela's students during the year would be impressive by any standard. However, an achievement gap between students reading below grade-level expectations and those reading on or above grew larger throughout the year. Pamela was clearly concerned about those students who made minimal progress; in her final interview, she talked about her attempts to modify her instruction for them: "Sometimes just getting those kids, it's kind of hard to understand why they're not moving up as quickly as the rest of the group, so we just readjust those kids according to that." The readjustments were in the form of additional instructional time—Pamela met with the more proficient readers every other day but with her "lower groups" every day—as well as "intervention groups," organized by Pamela and the seven other first-grade teachers:

As a first grade team, we got together, and we grouped all of our low kiddos from all of [our classes]. So all eight of us took our kids, the lowest groups, and we divided them up between all of us, and so we have—it's during that DEAR time—I have a group of four kids that are not in my room, but they come to see me and work with me. So my lowest three go out to other teachers and work as well.

Despite the extra attention and instruction they received, these students did not make the progress expected by the district, most notably Teresa, who started the year reading at a DRA level 3 (pre-primer level) and progressed only to level 10 (primer). Three students progressed to level 16 (late first-grade level) from the pre-primer level, but they scored below the minimum level on the state test. Yet, despite or because of their minimal progress through the levels, the students continued meeting with Pamela during guided reading time, with another teacher during independent reading time, and on some days a third time with an aide. In each group, the routine remained unchanged—rereading, picture walking, and whisper reading.

We have no way of knowing if these students would have made more progress under different conditions. Instruction for students who struggle with reading is the subject of innumerable studies with inconsistent conclusions. However,

we suggest that these students may have benefited from a re-evaluation of their instruction and perhaps a focus on other practices. For example, sustained time for reading in independent level text is considered by many literacy educators and researchers as essential for literacy progress, as it affords students time to practice using independent reading strategies (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Taylor, Frye, & Maruyama, 1990). Yet Pamela's lower-achieving students missed DEAR time because the established schedule had them attending extra guided reading sessions during that time. The guided reading lesson plan, which Pamela followed to the letter, included little time for independent practice. In interpreting Pamela's work with struggling readers, then, we again see aspects of her personal values and motivations come into play in her sense-making about learning and instruction. Her desire for an efficient, well-run classroom led her to focus on an organizational aspect of guided reading, an invariant instructional routine, that overshadowed one of the core principles stated in the Fountas and Pinnell book (1996)—flexibly responding to individual students and their varying instructional needs, interests, and progress.

In sum, Pamela was a dedicated teacher who evidenced strong knowledge of the components of reading and a desire and commitment to helping all students make progress in literacy. She seemed to fully embrace the tenets of guided reading and sought to collaborate with her teaching colleagues, consistent with a zone of enactment on the more social end of the continuum (Spillane, 1999). Pamela's position as a relatively new teacher influenced her desire to adhere closely to these practices, in the way that new teachers often search for "the right way" to teach. Together with her personal disposition towards efficiency and order, these dimensions all worked as sense-making devices in Pamela's enactment of guided reading and the accompanying grouping practices.

### ***Ellen: "There's No One Program Out There"***

Ellen, having taught for over 25 years, had witnessed the coming and going of many professional development initiatives. The guided reading initiative was not the first, and she knew it would not be the last. Not surprisingly then, Ellen was open with us about her guarded uptake of guided reading. For Ellen, her own teaching experience and "what worked" in her classroom operated as key meaning-making resources and mediated the district messages about guided reading. In contrast to Pamela, Ellen did not report working with or collaborating with other teachers to sort through these new initiatives, perhaps partly in response to her recognition that initiatives come and go. Thus, similar to the teachers observed by Spillane (1999), who made only surface changes to their practice, she did not have or pursue opportunities to engage with the ideas of the initiative beyond those opportunities provided within the district-level trainings. Her enactment zone was individualistic, rather than social. In terms of classroom practice, Ellen's privileging of her own

experience and beliefs about literacy instruction and accompanying guarded stance towards the district initiative led to a classroom enactment that blended old and new practices. Ellen's classroom contained remnants of her years of experience, such as dated laminated instructional charts and basal readers. An interesting juxtaposition of old with new was seen in her use of round-robin reading within a guided reading context, old basals cut apart and rebound into "little books" (rather than the leveled books provided by the district), and literacy workstations stocked with SRA cards and jigsaw puzzles along with more contextualized reading and writing activities.

### **Guided Reading**

Whereas Pamela relied on the initiative and surrounding professional development as an authoritative influence on her teaching, Ellen privileged her own teaching experience above the district's recommendations. When asked about the most important influences on her teaching, she alluded to both her "years of training" and her own experience—"what I feel has worked and what hasn't worked in the past." Not surprisingly, Ellen's years of experience and her attendance at countless "training" sessions through the years seemed to lead to her cautious consideration of new initiatives, arguing that there was "no one program out there" that would work perfectly for all students (TI, 9/06).

Ellen folded guided reading and workstations within her broader reading program and within practices that had evolved over almost three decades. While Ellen articulated a belief in meaning as the ultimate goal of reading, Ellen also expressed an understanding of literacy development that involved learning a series of discrete skills, strategies, or "tools" that were eventually pieced or pulled together by the reader. This understanding was evident in how she talked to us about her instruction and the literacy development of her students. She told us in her December interview:

I've looked at all these pieces that we've done . . . cause it's like throw all these pieces at them. It's like this, this, and this. And then they start putting it all together. . . . now we've given all the pieces. Now it's time to applaud everything that they [have learned].

Her underlying philosophy was also evident in her central focus on a campus-wide, rote-memory-based phonics program called "Johnny Can Spell" (JCS). Ellen's uptake of JCS was similar to Pamela's uptake of guided reading in that for each teacher, these approaches fit within their existing beliefs and practices. And, because Ellen had fully embraced JCS, there was little room temporally or mentally for the whole-hearted embrace and uptake of guided reading. That is, Ellen viewed guided reading as supplementary to this core component of her reading instruction that captured 30-45 minutes of her daily instructional time. This

program, which focuses on teaching phonograms, included about 10 minutes of direct instruction, which began with a review of previously taught phonograms followed by presentation of four new phonograms, followed by a spelling test over phonograms, words, and sentence dictation. According to observers, the lessons moved along at a quick pace with “many concepts covered in a short time period” (FN, 9/20/06). While observational notes documented that students often seemed confused during the lessons, Ellen noted that the goal of the program was “repetition instead of mastery.” She argued, citing the program’s author, that “children will reach mastery at different levels,” and “so you can’t just sit there and do it over and over and over and over . . . again; it’s just keep going and they’ll grasp it” (TI, 9/06). Ellen’s acceptance and enactment of this particular program exposed an understanding of literacy development as skills-based and incremental.

Yet, despite the prominence she gave to this program in her classroom, she continued to assert that there is no one approach that works for every student:

But it (JCS) doesn’t work for all of them. There’s still those kids that are struggling. So we use the Guided Reading. I watched Carla, the Reading Recovery teacher, doing a lot of lessons trying to pull that in, so I can’t say that there’s one thing . . . If there was one program, I’d sure be out there selling them! (TI, 9/06)

We see in Ellen’s words that guided reading groups functioned as supplemental instruction for those students for whom JCS—whole group, direct instruction—did not work. We also see in the above quote a cautious and limited acceptance of guided reading instruction, arguing again that no “one program” is universally effective for all children.

Ellen’s view of guided reading as supplemental helps contextualize an understanding of her enactment of it. Drawing on her experiences with “what worked,” Ellen described to us how she continued to conduct reading groups the way she always had, in spite of the numerous trainings she had attended and the district’s “push” to use guided reading approaches. In all but her highest groups, who read chapter books, students read texts that were re-bound stories from basal readers from the 1980s (e.g., *Happy Pan*; *Barb Likes Pizza*). In contrast to Pamela, who worked with as many as 4-6 groups in a day, Ellen typically pulled two groups each day for 20 minutes each. During that time, other students worked in various stations with peers who were in their reading groups. Ellen called students to the reading table by their group color name, which corresponded to their reading level. All groups—from the highest to the lowest—participated in a similar reading group structure. First, Ellen led students through a picture walk, along with some introductory questions about their new text. Below, we see teacher prompts/questions, excerpted from one reading group encountering a text called *A Magic Show* (FN, 3/27/07).

“What is a magic show? What do you call someone who does magic? Have you ever been to a magic show?”

“What is the name of this first chapter? What does that mean, ‘The show must go on?’”

[Ellen reads the first page] “Look at the story and see what’s going to happen.”

“What does that mean ‘Will the show go on?’”

“Do these look like people you would expect to be a magician?”

As seen in the above examples, Ellen typically asked students about experiences and background knowledge related to the texts they were about to read. The interactions around these questions were typically brief, included many yes/no questions, and seemed to convey the message that students’ experiences were a welcome addition to the conversation, as evidenced by students’ free sharing about their connections to the text.

Following this opening discussion, students read the new text round-robin-style. Another example of her blending of old and new and her reliance on what had worked for her in the past, Ellen was open with us about continuing to have her students read “round-robin” style during reading groups, despite the district’s recommendations to use “whisper reading” instead. Ellen told us,

I know that right now the push is not to do what they call the Round Robin, where each child is reading individually per page. It’s for all of them to read the entire book, all at once in whisper voices (TI, 12/06).

Her words “right now” suggest an awareness of the transitory nature of professional development initiatives. Her comments also demonstrate her recognition of what the district is “pushing” her to do, indicating her active instructional choice to do what she felt worked for her in her classroom.

During students’ reading, Ellen’s prompts most often focused on word calling or finding phonograms (e.g., “Do you see a phonogram?” “Now, think, what is this phonogram?”). Her attention to these phonograms, and the reference back to Johnny Can Spell, provided further evidence of her privileging of this particular phonics-based approach as well as the supplementary position held by guided reading. However, her prompts also included attention to meaning; for example, “Let’s see, what would make sense and make a few of the sounds?” and “If it doesn’t make sense, read it again.” As they read the book, Ellen also asked questions after each page to check students’ comprehension (e.g., “Who has the case of magic tricks?” “What was she doing with the wand?”). Ellen’s intention of focusing on meaning, then, did show up in her guided reading groups, but was often overpowered by her focus on identifying words or word patterns. Overall, the reading groups in Ellen’s classroom followed a predictable format. They included more actual discussion (or questioning) than Pamela’s groups—which were much more focused on time

spent reading—but this discussion was minimal and, in most cases, stayed at the level of checking students' literal comprehension.

While instruction stayed consistent across most groups, with the exception of the highest group who encountered more engaging and complex text and more comprehension-oriented activities, time did not. That is, in Ellen's classroom, students in lower reading groups received additional instruction outside the classroom (i.e., literacy groups led by the Reading Recovery teacher), but within the classroom they received less instruction from Ellen—both during reading groups and during stations. Ellen's intention was to meet with each group an approximately equal amount—two groups a day, for 20 minutes each—theoretically allowing her to meet with each group once, maybe twice, each week. Although our observations occurred regularly, and it is likely that there were group meetings that we just missed because of our observation schedule, we documented only two brief instances of Ellen meeting with her lowest group across the year. In her December interview she expressed concern that she had seen these groups less often than she had intended, saying, "I don't think I've spent enough time especially with the low ones, but it's hard to get to each group especially every day." Further, she noted a concern about their lack of progress, but attributed it to the patterns of the school year:

The low group is not making the progress that I would hope, but it seems like it's the same as what's happened in years past. It's real slow the first semester and the beginning of second semester and then about February it's like, you know I've looked at all these pieces that we've done to . . . like throw all these pieces at them. . . . And then they start putting it all together. (TI)

In her words, we again see Ellen's perspective on reading as a set of skills or pieces that can eventually be put together in ways that result in reading progress. In this way, her beliefs about her students and about reading seemed to show up in the way she enacted her practices. That is, her most intense instructional focus occurred with the Johnny Can Spell program because it was that program that, in her perspective, gave students the "building blocks" of reading success. Guided reading, in her perspective, served as a place for practice—a place to "put it all together." Unfortunately, we are unable to provide specific information about the two students in Ellen's lowest group since they were among three students in the class whose parents did not consent to their participation in the study.

At the end of the year, a number of Ellen's students scored below grade level both on the DRA and the state test. While 14 (71%) of her 21 students ended the year scoring at DRA level of 18 or above, meeting or exceeding the district's standard of early second-grade level, four finished at level 12 or 14 (first grade) and one finished at level 6 (pre-primer). Ellen's students scored somewhat lower on the state test than on the DRA, with 14 (67%) meeting the "developed" criterion. More students started the year at reading levels below those of Pamela's students.

In sum, Ellen's enactment of guided reading did not mirror Fountas and Pinnell's (1996) model. Ellen's sense-making of the district's initiative was mediated by her own experience with children and her beliefs about instruction, as well as her history as a teacher who had experienced many rounds of literacy initiatives. On the surface, her guided reading groups appeared similar to Fountas and Pinnell's notions—students were grouped by their reading levels, read texts graded by difficulty, and engaged in picture walks and reading that was guided or supported by the teacher. However, her groups stayed stable across the year—with little movement between groups—and proceeded in routine, procedural ways that did not appear designed to address students' unique needs. Further, while Fountas and Pinnell argue that guided reading is one component of a literacy program that includes authentic opportunities to read and write, Ellen fit guided reading into a classroom curriculum centered on whole-group, phonics-based direct instruction with few authentic literacy opportunities evidenced during her literacy block. Guided reading consequently played a supplementary role, with the purpose of providing additional instruction and/or additional "practice" time. Ellen's "reading" of guided reading groups as a slightly alternative version of the more traditional ability groups resulted in an enactment that looked more like old than new.

For Ellen, guided reading was an approach that did not align cleanly with her own beliefs about literacy instruction. Further, she recognized certain features of this practice as similar to instructional practices already present in her classroom, particularly ability groups, and she enacted this new approach in ways that did very little to change her existing practice. Her long-term experience as a teacher mediated her uptake of these initiatives. Together, Ellen's experience as a tenured teacher, her beliefs about literacy as skills-based and incremental, and her privileging of "what works" for her students all worked as sense-making devices in her enactment of guided reading.

## **Discussion**

In the many classrooms in multiple districts we have each visited in recent years, as well as in our previous research (Worthy et. al., 2008), we have seen reading instruction organized in groups and centers in the classrooms of teachers who, like Pamela and Ellen, put a great deal of effort and thought into their work with children while dealing with numerous requirements and constraints. Thus, while the findings are tied directly to Pamela's and Ellen's classrooms and cannot be generalized beyond them, we believe the conclusions and implications presented in this section extend beyond those two classrooms.

### ***Enactment of the District's Initiative***

The district in which Pam and Ellen taught used procedures recommended by researchers and educators in the field of professional development, including ex-

tended professional development experiences, active learning opportunities with follow-up trainings, and some coaching components (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000; Joyce & Showers, 1981; Little, 1982; Morrow & Casey, 2004; Silin & Schwartz, 2003). The curriculum coordinators researched models of instruction and determined what they thought best fit the needs of the students in their districts. The district superintendent supported the curriculum coordinators in planning and provided necessary resources, including personnel and materials, to properly provide the intensive, extensive professional development that research says is needed for educational change to take hold and keep going (Birman et al., 2000), with the exception of campus-level coaching. An observer conducting a “walk-through” or watching from a distance, as district personnel and sometimes even principals do, would probably conclude that everything was going according to the district’s plan in Pamela’s classrooms and perhaps in Ellen’s as well, with the exception of the materials she used for reading groups. Even a longer, closer, one-time examination, short of the kind of analysis we did for this research, might yield similar results in Pamela’s room. However, our findings highlighted complexities that would not be seen on the surface.

Through this more nuanced lens, we could see how the teachers’ values and beliefs impacted their sense-making and enactments as seen in their day-to-day practice. Although Pamela believed she followed the district’s initiative to the letter, and Ellen also claimed to be implementing guided reading in her groups, it appeared to us that much of the spirit of guided reading, as intended by Fountas and Pinnell (1996), was missing. Fountas and Pinnell, along with Iaquinta (2006), caution against some of the procedures Pam and Ellen were using, including labeling readers by level, organizing materials in the classroom by levels, and using level as “a rigid sequence that defines reading progress” (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, p. 10).

As discussed in the literature review, teachers have varied responses to policy mandates and initiatives, as well as different understandings of terms and practices that can lead to differences in implementation. Pamela and Ellen were not exceptions. Our observations and interviews with Ellen indicated that her acceptance of the district’s model for reading instruction was minimal at most, despite intensive professional development presented in multiple sessions and varied contexts over a full year. While Ellen did not actively challenge the district’s expectations, she quietly continued using her own methods while appearing to accept what she was told to do. Her practice was “hybridized” (Kersten & Pardo, 2007), but in ways that did not seem to have an overarching philosophy, in that her instruction mixed transmission (round-robin reading, Johnny Can Spell) with constructivism (eliciting students’ experiences, asking open-ended questions), and old materials with new practices (basal readers with picture walks), overlain with the new label of guided reading.

In contrast, Pamela bought into the district’s professional development model

in such totality that, rather than making it her own practice, she seemed to use the model as an inflexible, highly controlled system that appeared to limit her reflections on student interest and engagement. Thus, although she appeared to follow the procedures of guided reading, the principles appeared to be missing. Her work with Teresa, in which she continued to use the same practices and texts despite Teresa's stalled progress, is an example of following a practice dogmatically regardless of its effect (or lack of) on the learner.

We also found the concept of enactment zones (Spillane, 1999) important in this research in that it helped to explain some of the differences in Pamela's and Ellen's enactments of the initiatives. Working with colleagues who were positively inclined toward the new practices was a likely influence on Pamela's thinking and relatively faithful implementation of guided reading, just as social enactment zones in the four teachers in Spillane's study led to mathematics instruction that more closely matched that intended by the reforms. However, after initial professional development, the social component of Pamela's enactment was mainly limited to organizing for reading groups and sharing materials with the first-grade teachers in her building. Although teachers could request input and coaching from the district, Pamela and her colleagues seemed confident in their instruction, trusting that the guided reading lesson structure and leveled books would provide what all students, except the most proficient readers, needed.

Ellen was similar in some ways to the teachers in Spillane's study whose enactment zones were more individualistic and who did not change their practice or changed it only incrementally in that she faithfully attended the professional development and had positive things to say about some of the components. However, her perspectives, as shown in her interview and in observations, were heavily influenced by the value she placed on her years of experience and the philosophies she had accrued over a nearly 30-year career, and these were more meaningful to her than yet another set of new ideas (Nisbett & Ross, 1980). It is not surprising that a teacher like Ellen, who has taught for over 25 years and witnessed countless "new" ideas, would privilege her own experiences of what worked above these district mandates. Indeed, we advise our own pre-service teachers to consider district recommendations in light of what they know about literacy instruction and what they know about their own students and to explore multiple perspectives and sources.

### ***Are Guided Reading Groups a Modern Example of Ability Grouping?***

Additionally, we raise what we consider a serious issue in this research. Across these classrooms, and in most of the classrooms in our previous study, we observed strong similarities to research on ability-grouped reading instruction conducted in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. The guided reading groups in both Pamela's and Ellen's classrooms stayed virtually the same, like those in our previous study (Worthy et

al., 2008) and in Ford and Opitz (2008b), despite the fact that the teachers intended for them to be flexible. Again, we stress that flexible, dynamic reading groups are a hallmark of guided reading as envisioned by Fountas and Pinnell and are intended as a means of avoiding the traditional problems with static, ability-based groups (Iaquinta, 2006). However, our findings, along with the findings of our previous study and those of Ford and Opitz, lead us to question how easy is it for teachers to make groups flexible. An implication from these results is that, while in theory groups “should” be dynamic, maybe it is not such an easy thing to do in practice. Why might this be? We have some hunches. When students are placed in a group by level and then guided through leveled books with their group in lockstep manner, in tightly controlled increments, from A to B to C to D, there seems to be no place to go but E and then F and then G. Although it would be theoretically possible, this structure would make it difficult for a child to break out of the group and go, say, from C to F to G, to stay at G for awhile and then make a leap to K, to make the kinds of bounds and plateaus that readers are known to make (Leslie & Allen, 1999). Thus, it is not surprising students stayed mostly in the same groups all year.

In her zeal to make sure students were in a group that exactly matched their level, Pamela and her students became almost blindly focused on their “letter,” often, we observed, to the exclusion of reader factors such as interest, instructional need, purpose, strategic reading, and book factors such as information, language, and quality of illustrations. Several researchers and educators have warned against inflexible use of leveled books (Calkins, 2001; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Worthy & Sailors, 2001). In their work with schools around guided reading, Ford and Opitz (2008b) also noticed such a focus: “One of the most disconcerting trends from our experiences in supporting teachers implementing guided reading has been a near obsession with the devotion of staff development time to the leveling of texts and learners” (p. 317).

Although the district’s professional development seemed carefully planned and structured, there was limited focus on ongoing support and on intensive, ongoing, hands-on practice with students. We suggest that these components could be integrated with a focus on building district and school environments conducive to social enactments. When implementers have sustained opportunities over time to talk with each other about reforms, they have the potential to voice their own interpretations, hear the interpretations of others, negotiate meanings, and settle on “shared understandings about what they need from outsiders (e.g., the district or state) to do their work well” as they prepare to revise practice (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 406). With regular opportunities to be observed in their classrooms with their own students and to discuss their students’ progress—especially those that they are troubled by—teachers may find more success both in implementing new instructional approaches and in modifying them as appropriate.

### ***Differentiated (Unequal) Instruction within Groups***

Some educators assert that it is not the presence of ability grouping that should be of concern but rather how groups are structured and how instruction is implemented within groups, and this contention makes intuitive sense. In both Ellen's and Pamela's classrooms, we found qualitative differences in instruction and materials such that, as in the past, only the high groups in both classrooms received instruction focused on critical thinking and responding rather than word-level features and literal comprehension (Allington, 1980; Gambrell, Wilson, & Gantt, 1981). In the higher-level groups in both classrooms, students read and responded to chapter books and conducted research with informational materials. In lower and middle groups in both classes, students answered mostly literal comprehension questions and focused mainly on word-level skills. The format and content of instruction we observed in these groups was not conducive to development of independent reading strategies. According to Ford and Opitz (2008b), "Repeated instruction at the micro-level may lead some readers to believe that is the primary purpose of reading and they may not be well equipped to handle text when they need to move beyond that" (p. 314). Lower and middle groups also read mostly fiction stories and seemed to spend as much time perusing pictures and making personal connections as they did reading. The argument can and has been made that, if the quality of materials and instruction across groups were equivalent, the issues with homogeneous grouping would be neutralized. However, Pallas and colleagues (1994) suggest this is not so; instead, they found, mere *placement* in low-ability groups can negatively affect parent and teacher expectations, which in turn can negatively affect achievement:

The symbolic meaning of instructional group placement may be an important mechanism for increasing educational stratification. Children in higher ranked reading groups were perceived by their parents and teachers as more competent than were similar children in low-ranked groups, *often independent of actual performance*. These perceptions may structure the educational opportunities that parents and teachers subsequently make available to children, as well as the social-psychological resources they extend to children. (p. 43, emphasis added)

### ***Final Words***

In light of the study presented in this paper, along with previous research, we believe it is important to *re-consider* the potential long-term negative effects of homogeneous grouping on students who start out as lower achievers. As in the past, these students may continue to be especially vulnerable to losing academic ground when their classrooms include structures based on ability grouping. We call for more examinations of the widespread practice of guided reading and other current instantiations of achievement-based instructional practices. At the same time, we hope this study sheds light on the ways in which teachers actively make

sense of and enact recommended practices, drawing on their previous experience, their understandings of their present context, and their district professional development, among other things. As such, any investigations of classroom practice should include a situated understanding of the ways in which teachers are making sense of their practice. As we come to better understand teachers as sense-makers and designers of instructional practice, we are better able to understand their instruction and the influences on it. In turn, we are more likely to engage in dialogue about these practices in ways that grow teachers' and students' educational opportunities and futures.

### AUTHOR NOTE

The research reported here was supported by a Spencer Foundation Small Grant. No endorsement by the Spencer Foundation is implied.

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