Thirty-Five Years of the Gradual Release of Responsibility: Scaffolding Toward Complex and Responsive Teaching

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> Since Pearson and Gallagher published the landmark framework of the gradual release of responsibility, how has this scaffolding routine changed, and how can it be implemented in adaptive ways?

Since Pearson and Gallagher (1983) published the landmark framework of the gradual release of responsibility (GRR), literacy educators have adopted this scaffolding routine for a range of instructional purposes and in very different ways. Consider the following examples:

- *Classroom 1:* In Melinda's (third author) first-grade classroom, students are paired based on interest and peer support to research famous Americans. Students explore books and write questions on sticky notes that they then attach to an anchor chart. The teacher has not explicitly modeled how to read and ask questions of the text. She visits each group and takes anecdotal notes to inform beginning instruction as students become immersed in learning about their individual. She forms a loose outline for future lessons based on students' questions, deciding which lessons should be delivered to the whole group and which lessons will be targeted for small groups.
- *Classroom 2:* In a video example explaining Cleveland's Citizens Academy approach to GRR, the teacher explicitly models how to write using vivid verbs by showing examples from other writing. Then, he creates a written example in front of students. Next, students work together in small groups to write. Finally, students write independently, all within a single class.

In this article, we argue that both of these classroom teachers are using GRR, although with very different implementation styles. More than 35 years after GRR was published, our purpose in this article is to revisit GRR by exploring these questions: What is GRR, and how has its meaning evolved over time? What is the role of GRR in the reading process? What does GRR look like in classroom implementation?

What Is GRR, and How Has Its Meaning Evolved Over Time?

Defining GRR is not as easy as it might seem. Is it a model or a teaching framework? Does it have three phases or four phases? Is it only used for explicit instruction, or can it be used with discovery-based approaches? We explore the evolution by focusing on GRR within literacy instruction to describe how the understanding of GRR has evolved over time.

Initially, Pearson and Gallagher (1983) presented GRR as a theoretical model rather than an explicit process for lesson planning. In their landmark work,

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they started by reviewing the research on instructional processes in comprehension. They noted that Durkin's (1978) study of comprehension instruction was the starting point for a flurry of research on comprehension because her work spotlighted how little educators knew about how to teach (as opposed to assess) comprehension. Durkin's work contributed to a shift from behavioral models of instruction focused on observable student performance to cognitive models focused on understanding and developing student thinking.

According to McVee, Shanahan, Hayden, Boyd, and Pearson (2018), Pearson and Gallagher's (1983) work was further influenced by work on scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) and the rediscovered works of Vygotsky (1978). Wood et al. (1976) used the term *scaffolding* to describe a supported learning context where a more expert learner provided appropriate support to a novice. Vygotsky's (1978) work included the principle of the zone of proximal development, a sweet spot where learners had the support of a more knowledgeable other, enabling them to do something out of their reach independently. These influences helped Pearson and Gallagher move away from the dichotomy of knowing or not knowing. Instead, they asked, "Under what conditions of scaffolding can a child do X?" (McVee et al., 2018, p. 3). The ultimate goal was that the scaffolds were removed, as stated by Pearson and Gallagher (1983):

> The hope in the model is that every student gets to the point where she is able to accept total responsibility for the task, including the responsibility for determining whether or not she is applying the strategy appropriately (i.e., self-monitoring). (p. 338)

Following their review of research on comprehension, Pearson and Gallagher (1983) summarized key ways of thinking that older and better readers use when reading, including engaging relevant background knowledge, making inferences, summarizing, and monitoring their understanding. These ways of thinking were in direct contrast to what Durkin (1978) found was being taught, leading Pearson and Gallagher (1983) to ask "whether one ought to bother to offer explicit training to improve either comprehension or monitoring strategies" (p. 336). They concluded with "a model of explicit instruction" (p. 337) that would help teachers

PAUSE AND PONDER

- How would you explain GRR to someone who is not an educator?
- How are you currently implementing GRR routines in your classroom literacy instruction?
- What about GRR seems to be working well, and what are the challenges?
- Have you modified or adapted GRR to better serve your students, your instruction, or your curriculum?

include explicit instruction of comprehension strategies in classroom practice. When describing the model, they noted that GRR provided a balance between the extremes of teacher responsibilities and student responsibilities. They posited that explicit comprehension of strategies was valuable for accelerating stronger reading performance while acknowledging that there has been little research to support that conclusion.

Originally, Pearson and Gallagher (1983) envisioned three stages for GRR. The first stage was the teacher model, the second was guided practice, and the third was student application and responsibility. In the first stage, the teacher models a comprehension strategy. The teacher takes responsibility for doing the work of comprehension. Often, teachers make cognitive processes visible by explaining the strategy, demonstrating through think-alouds, and providing explicit instruction. In the second stage, the teacher helps students apply the strategy in guided practice. The teacher guides students' attempts at using the strategies through prompts, noticing the approximations that learners are making and flexibly and responsively providing additional modeling and demonstrations when needed. The teacher may find it necessary to model a particular strategy again, recapturing some responsibility if students are not understanding or applying the strategy effectively. Finally, in the third stage, students assume the responsibility for using the strategy in practice.

As the body of research on teaching comprehension grew, the GRR model changed (Dole, Duffy, & Pearson, in press). GRR was appropriated as a practice-based instructional model, creating multiple opportunities for variations in GRR in form and pacing (Duke & Pearson, 2002). Fisher and Frey (2008) suggested an instructional model that added a fourth stage to GRR: the collaborative stage, in which students work together. Additionally, Fisher and Frey emphasized that teachers could move flexibly among four components: focus and guided, collaborative, and independent work. Fisher (2008) noted that "the gradual release of responsibility model is not linear. Students move back and forth between each of the components as they master skills, strategies, and standards" (p. 2). Additionally,

"gradual release may occur over a day, a week, a month, or a year" (p. 1). In some cases, the cycle of teacher modeling, collaboration, guided instruction, and independent work might all occur in a 15–20-minute lesson and begin with independent work, after which the teacher identifies an area where students need greater instruction and provides a model with some guided instruction. Then, students might again work independently and share their independent work within collaborative groups (Fisher, 2018). Ongoing assessment guides the teacher in making decisions about how to use GRR in flexible and authentic ways (Fisher & Frey, 2013).

In the past 15 years, the increasing demands of accountability, including Response to Intervention and the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), as well as numerous teacher evaluation protocols, have influenced the application of GRR. GRR was popularized with the catchphrase "I do, we do, you do" (Archer & Hughes, 2010; Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2009). Professional development materials and lesson plan templates offering teachers quick how-to formats aligned GRR with the Common Core and a variety of content standards. One unintended outcome has been the simplification of GRR to a series of strict sequential moves expected to be accomplished in a single class period. Teachers who are evaluated on such rigid implementation of teacher modeling, whole-class work, and independent work can easily seek to implement a format rather than respond to student needs, a guiding principle of GRR.

In sum, GRR has evolved to mean many things to different educators across K–12 classrooms and teacher education courses and has been appropriated in a wide range of educational contexts. These contexts include supporting reading comprehension (Duffy, 2014), developing writing through guided instruction (Fisher & Frey, 2013), and preparing new teachers and literacy coaches (Collet, 2012; McVee, Shanahan, Pearson, & Rinker, 2015). In the next section, we argue that reading comprehension and students are too complex to fit into a narrow implementation of GRR that departs from its theoretical and practice-based roots. Instead, we call for a renewed commitment to the complexities of reading that require teachers to make ongoing decisions (Hammond & Nessel, 2011).

What Is the Role of GRR in the Reading Process?

Comprehension is a complex process that is not easily reduced to discrete skills (Duke & Pearson, 2009;

Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). Educators and researchers have conceptualized comprehension as composed of the task, the text, the reader, and the sociocultural context surrounding all three components (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). We argue that each component (task, text, reader, and context) is individually and interactively complex, and each one should influence when and how a teacher releases responsibility to students.

Complexity of Task

Consider the complexity of the task. Educators often break comprehension into smaller tasks, such as finding the main idea, identifying the text structure, summarizing the text, and inferring unknown words. These smaller tasks may not require specific teacher modeling, particularly if students have practiced the skills in previous years or months. Further, being able to accomplish these discrete tasks does not automatically result in comprehension of a text. For example, a reader may be able to infer what *concatenation* means in the sentence "A concatenation of stages represents the metamorphosis of frogs during their life cycle" but still be unable to understand the context within a longer passage. In this instance, modeling how to make an inference if the task is familiar to students would not be helpful. However, students may require sustained modeling of how to orchestrate the use of multiple skills, such as making an inference, creating a summary of the larger context, and monitoring overall understanding.

The challenges of the tasks of comprehension are magnified by the assessment of comprehension. Assessing a reader's comprehension is not as simple as noting that the reader can identify a main idea. Pearson (2009) observed,

> Comprehension, or understanding, by its very nature, is a phenomenon that can only be observed indirectly....People tell us that they understood, or were puzzled by, or enjoyed, or were upset by a text. Or, more commonly, we quiz them on the text in some way. All of these tasks, however challenging or engaging they might be, are little more than the residue of the comprehension process itself. (p. 280)

Thus, a rigid GRR framework does not allow for the feedback that learners may need for ongoing development.

Complexity of Text

The complexity of text is evident when considering the variations available for students to read. Texts

come in multiple structures, from narrative to a blending of multiple structures such as in a history textbook. The length of sentences, specificity of vocabulary, and writing style all contribute to the complexity of texts. In addition to complexity from sentences and word choices, texts can be challenging based on the ideas presented. For example, the theme of a hero's quest is generally more familiar than scientific explanations of quarks and leptons.

Text complexity is a multidimensional construct that has been ushered into the forefront of the Common Core and its goal of increasing students' reading abilities by graduation from high school. Demands of text complexity presented by the Common Core in terms of qualitative, quantitative, and reader and task criteria offer a heuristic for understanding the many ways that text is challenging for readers (e.g., Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012; Pearson & Hiebert, 2014). Along with readability factors, a cognitive dimension, this broader definition of text complexity also recognizes the experiential dimension of background experiences and the more affective dimension of reader interests and motivation as contributing to what makes a text a challenging one for readers.

Technological evolution further demonstrates complex text through many possible modalities. We can look at a website, supported by both audio and video clips, and click through multiple texts looking for, or being distracted by, information. Although texts are frequently assigned Lexile levels and students are urged to read more and more complex texts as part of the Common Core, the text itself is not static and one-dimensional. Thus, reading challenging text requires the reader to access a range of knowledge and skills, such as knowledge about text, background knowledge about the topic, strategies for constructing meaning from unfamiliar text, text structure, and academic and technical vocabulary.

For GRR to be most effective, teachers must discover what readers know and are able to do with the text at hand and then enter GRR at the level that is responsive to learners' needs. For example, some texts will require teacher modeling, but others will not. In other words, a text is not inherently complex or simple. Such responsive teaching acknowledges the teacher as a decision maker who considers the complexity of text within the context of student capabilities.

Complexity of the Reader

The multidimensional process and interpretations of the reader add additional layers to reading. The reader brings a unique network of resources—cognitive skills, background experiences, and preferences—to a reading of a text. As a result, no two readers will experience and derive the same meaning from any one text. The interactive and responsive nature of reading requires a reader to engage all accessible resources to construct a meaning of the text and achieve a purpose for reading (Rosenblatt, 1994).

Whereas the cognitive components of reading are well represented in reading instruction, the experiential (e.g., background knowledge, prior learning, connections) and affective (e.g., motivation, purpose for reading, cultural resources) are equally important considerations. Students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may experience challenging language demands from a text, influencing the experiential and affective dimensions. In contrast, dual-language learners may lack the cultural knowledge and experience for meaning construction and require additional support and scaffolding. For example, when reading about fishing and the character learning to use a pole, one Latino student was confused and could not understand fishing with a pole because his family fished with nets in his country of origin. Lack of background knowledge renders a text incomprehensible, confusing, and often frustrating.

In addition to the cognitive complexity of comprehension, the act of comprehending occurs within a sociocultural context (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000; Gee, 2001; Lewis, 2001). Readers require sufficient background knowledge and experience to bring to the interaction of reader and text (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). This interaction does not occur in a vacuum but in the context of a social environment of norms, expectations, and conditions of reading. In the growing diversity of public school classrooms, sociocultural practices and resources can support comprehending during reading. GRR that is responsive to all learners and flexible in responding to the funds of knowledge and distinctive needs of diverse learners considers what the readers bring to the reading process, rather than adhering to a strict format or sequence.

Embracing Complexity

In sum, making meaning from text is a complex process. Responding to such complexity with a strict sequence of "I do, we do, you do" oversimplifies the complexity of learners, learning tasks, and texts.

Little (1995) noted that most learning is "messy and indeterminate" and that it is "impossible to escape the insecurities and uncertainties that such recognition brings" (p. 180). GRR offers a model for helping teachers make comprehension accessible to students through ongoing scaffolds. The teacher orchestrates the transactions among the reader, the text, and the task in ways that help all students make meaning. Explicit teaching is provided at the point of need, rather than indiscriminately. Over time, the explicit teaching of particular areas is removed so students gain independence. Such teaching requires a teacher who can make decisions and adapt instruction based on particular contexts and needs.

What Does GRR Look Like in Classroom Implementation?

As curricula and teachers interpreted Pearson and Gallagher's (1983) initial model of GRR, two primary implementations of GRR have emerged. One way of implementing GRR in the classroom is as a linear stage model of explicit teaching. In this implementation, the teacher leads students through a strict "I do, we do, you do" format, often within a single 20–40-minute lesson. Complex tasks must be broken down into discrete skills that can be measured and evaluated to accomplish the full cycle of GRR within a single lesson. The assumptions in this approach are that students must have an explicit explanation of each skill before they try it and that approximations are not sufficient—a contemporary tabula rasa approach.

Many researchers and practitioners are countering with a different type of implementation of GRR. In this second view, educators challenge the idea that students cannot do complex thinking and reading without first having a model or following a structured release of responsibility with a strict "I do, we do, you do" frame (Beers & Probst, 2017; Johnston, 2018; Miller, 2012). Amid concerns that a rigid approach to GRR may actually disrupt thinking and the learning process for some students and fall too short for others (Beers & Probst, 2017), this second view of GRR suggests a contextualized, flexible implementation of GRR. GRR is grounded in observation, learning, assessment, and decision making and emphasizes multiple entry points along a continuum of learning.

We advocate for this flexible view of GRR for many reasons. First, if we return to the theoretical underpinnings of GRR, specifically the notion of scaffolding, offering an explicit explanation prior to students' trying is one of a variety of ways that learning can be scaffolded. Consider teaching students to make inferences, a Common Core standard. Modeling how to make an inference, then asking students to make inferences as a group, collaboratively, and then independently provides a scaffold. Asking students to read a text independently and then discussing their thinking about the text also offers a scaffold. The first scaffold explains what they should do. The second scaffold labels what they have already done. Students may need further scaffolds with both approaches.

Second, a flexible interpretation of GRR considers that explicit teaching comes in response to student difficulty rather than as a way to try to eliminate students' struggles. Duffy (2014) noted that explicit instruction should not be provided on a routine basis but only "when students are struggling" (p. 5) and when students are not ready to meet a standard. Further, explicit instruction takes place within a larger activity of purposeful reading. Involving students within the larger task of purposeful reading that is important to them motivates students to continue to read. Additionally, they learn, and they come to view reading as a tool necessary to accomplish desired tasks (Duffy, 2014).

Third, a flexible view of GRR values teacher professionalism, knowledge, and decision making. GRR relies on adaptive teachers who use declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge (Duffy, 2014; Paris, Cross, & Lipson, 1984) to make decisions. The teacher's first responsibility is to respond to student needs. GRR is not about highlighting the teacher's expert status; instead, it offers a path for apprenticing students toward deeper understanding (Johnston, 2012, 2018).

What does a flexible implementation look like? As we revisited GRR in the previous sections, we were reminded that GRR represents processes along a continuum with possible entry pathways. We emphasize entry points in a reconceptualized approach referred to as a flexible release of responsibility (see Figure 1). Teachers begin with an invitation to learning that allows them to observe and informally assess what their students know and their development, confusions, and misconceptions. By gaining knowledge of the learner, teachers begin instruction based on students' strengths, demonstrating resources from their experiences and prior learning. From a point of development, confusion, or

Figure 1
Flexible Response to Responsibility
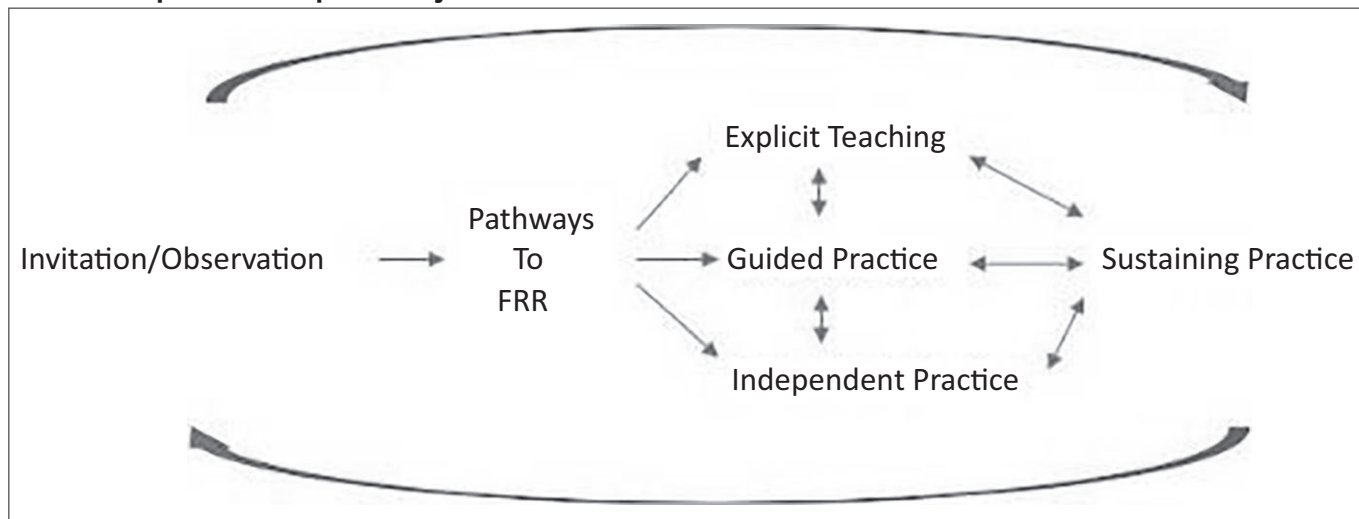
misconception, teachers can more effectively design the scaffolds that approximate the zone of proximal development.

Close observation, or kidwatching (Owocki & Goodman, 2002), affords teachers windows into additional influences that shape learning experiences, agency, and identity, such as levels of engagement, motivation, and funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2006). Teachers are often told that they must know their students to design effective teaching supports and that knowing students involves screening and benchmark assessments. Although we do not minimize the importance of assessment data to inform instruction, we suggest that it is not sufficient. Teachers must thoughtfully observe the whole child in the context of more authentic literacy events. "Assessment that is intended to inform instruction requires careful descriptions of how different aspects of the instructional environment influence learning in general and how they match the needs of particular students" (Lipson & Wixson, 2013, p. 145). Once cognitive, experiential, and affective information is at hand, teachers have a stronger basis for making decisions regarding the pathways of instruction. Ultimately, teachers are the most effective assessment instrument in the classroom if their clinical capabilities are nurtured and valued.

GRR: Multiple Points of Entry

In Table 1, we outline processes along a continuum of GRR as possible entry pathways and include exam-

ples of questions teachers could pose to inform entry along pathways and learning experiences designed for students to open opportunities and access. The examples for responsive instruction are not exhaustive and present a starting point for professional conversations and exploring classroom practices.

As we work with teachers, we encourage them to think about where their students will enter the GRR continuum. We began this article with a window into Melinda's classroom as she used this approach in a unit called the living museum. Her first graders collaboratively researched American heroes, a social studies standard, to create a script for their living museum presentation. Although Melinda began with a plan for instruction, she launched the project by offering invitations to her students and provided them with tools for researching their heroes (e.g., sticky notes, books, chart paper). She capitalized on students' excitement to let them explore rather than giving them a great deal of explicit instruction. As students worked together, she noted what they could do and what instruction was still needed. The minilessons that followed changed from year to year. She responded to students' learning needs and skill levels by pulling small groups for targeted instruction. There were times when small groups received explicit instruction that began with teacher modeling, such as when Melinda noticed that some students did not know how to use an index to find answers to their questions. She used one of their questions to model before students worked together to use an index. Some students never asked to use

Table 1
Anchor Chart for Operationalizing Gradual Release of Responsibility in Authentic Learning Experiences

Process	Guiding question	Responsive instruction (teacher decision making)
Guided practice	What joint activity would encourage participation and involvement?	■ Guided reading ■ Interactive writing ■ Small-group activity ■ Co-constructed anchor charts
Independent use	What practices are learners ready to assume, and with what type of support?	■ Project-based learning ■ Literature circles/book clubs ■ Inquiry groups ■ Learning contracts
Ongoing practice	What embedded opportunities are available to monitor ongoing practice?	■ Reading and writing workshops ■ Conferring ■ Literacy stations ■ Embedded assessments ■ Observations during activity ■ Student self-assessments

an index independently. A few students needed her to model repeatedly.

This approach is in contrast to modeling how to use an index, asking students to practice using an index, and then asking them to demonstrate index use independently. As Duffy (2014) noted, Melinda's instruction described in the opening vignette came within a larger frame and helped students move closer to a broader goal. It came based on close observations of students and an understanding of what students needed, as opposed to coming as the next lesson in a sequence of discrete skills.

When considering where to enter the GRR continuum and what sequence to follow through the GRR components, questions to consider include the following: Do students need a model? If so, which students need the model? When will the model be most effective—at the beginning, to avert some frustration, or after students have had a chance to try it, gain some experience, and realize that they do not know how to do something? These questions form the backbone of planning for scaffolding and open a landscape for effectively differentiating learning opportunities and experiences for students. Whole-class, small-group, and assisted learning experiences based on the cognitive, motivational, and experiential learning needs and interests of students can make GRR a responsive framework for differentiated instruction (Watts-Taffe et al., 2012).

Sustaining Practice: Ongoing Monitoring and Support

In the learning process, it is not unusual to notice regression to an earlier point of learning, especially at times when learners encounter new, notably complex skills and strategies. Thus, it is important for teachers to practice regular and ongoing monitoring of literacy practices, avoiding assumptions about where the entry to GRR will fall for new, complex tasks. By intentionally sustaining practices, teachers support young learners in developing the capacity for independence and mastery of literacy skills and practices later in their educational trajectory. For example, consider a higher order, more challenging anchor standard such as comparing and contrasting.

Early in the elementary grades, teachers introduce and repetitively model comparing and contrasting across a range of picture books and genres of text of increasing complexity. As teachers sustain this practice in guided reading and small-group activities, students develop increased understanding and ability in using this strategy for a range of purposes. These practices can be maximized by the collaborative support in grouping structures. When students are called upon to analyze different genres and compare and contrast across multiple texts, in middle and high school, they will have a stronger foundation for achieving these learning objectives.

Conclusions and Implications: The Urgency of Embracing Complexity

This article offers an opportunity for educators to engage in conversations and further investigate the practices and expectations for GRR in their classrooms and school curricula. Rather than viewing GRR as a lesson plan format that must be accomplished in daily lessons, we called for an expanded view of GRR as one of a variety of scaffolds. Certainly, we value providing students with concrete models of individual skills as they are needed, but we push back against sequenced instruction that is decontextualized from the overall complexity of reading or that is applied without first understanding the needs of individual readers, something that Pearson and colleagues (Dole, Duffy, & Pearson, in press) labeled a misuse of GRR. As we have explored the spaces of GRR, significant implications become evident in implementing this practice for literacy instruction.

First, student-centered learning emerges as a driving force in GRR. Students' needs should drive how much of GRR we use and when we use it, instead of letting the framework itself determine what we teach and how and when we provide needed support. This flexible, teacher-facilitated approach echoes the original intent of GRR. When accountability controls learning and instruction, it narrows the curriculum, limits potential learning, and often disengages learners. We remind ourselves that our job is not to be the all-knowing narrator in the classroom. Instead, our job is to learn along with our students.

Second, we embrace challenges. Unfortunately, teachers can end up doing too much of the work for students, exercising control that disables and often disrupts students' own thinking and learning processes (Beers & Probst, 2017). We must be cautious about removing difficulty entirely. Students will not become skillful, strategic readers if they do not encounter complexities and problems as they read.

In addition, we reject a one-size-fits-all philosophy and favor differentiated approaches to instruction. As teachers create conditions for assessing students through invitations and engaging content, opportunities for assessing students and designing flexible grouping become possible. Equally importantly, no one sequence of GRR fits all learners, and expanding the possible application of a flexible response presents authentic purposes for learning. In order for GRR to be useful for instruction, it must remain responsive to the complexity of readers and of the reading process. When students lead their learning, they acquire agentive practices and shape literate identities (Johnston, 2018).

Finally, considering the ways that GRR has been manipulated over the past 35 years and the inconsistencies that we discovered in the current education landscape, revisiting the theoretical and research foundations of this widely used instructional framework may be an important focus of research and professional conversations. Especially immediate are discussions between practitioners and administrators about the effective practice of GRR and the potential for responsive support that this instructional approach can offer in developing independent, competent, and confident learners.

TAKE ACTION!

1. Consider your own use of GRR with students. Would you say it is flexible and adaptable to student learning needs? Or is it a rigid protocol? What changes could you consider?

2. Use Table 1 to consider pathways to GRR for an upcoming lesson. Reflect on possibilities for inviting students and what the ultimate goals are for independent use of the strategy or skill.

3. Pay close attention to how students respond to a lesson. What are the logical next steps in the learning pathway?

4. Design learning pathways in GRR to differentiate learning experiences for students based on observations and formative assessments.

5. Discuss with grade-level colleagues the learning progressions of grade-level curriculum and the opportunities for collaborative activities.

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