INTENTIONAL FROM THE START
GUIDING EMERGENT READERS IN SMALL GROUPS

CAROLYN HELMERS and SUSAN VINCENT
FOREWORD BY TANNY McGRégor

Professional development training for teachers provided by Stenhouse Publishers
# CONTENTS

**Dear Readers** .......................................................... 3  
**Introduction** .......................................................... 4  
**Chapter 1** .............................................................. 6  
**Chapter 2** .............................................................. 7  
**Chapter 3** .............................................................. 9  
**Chapter 4** .............................................................. 10  
**Chapter 5** .............................................................. 12  
**Chapter 6** .............................................................. 14
Dear Readers,

Welcome to the study guide for *Intentional from the Start*, where we hope to scaffold your reading and help you examine your small-group teaching practices! If you are reading this study guide with colleagues, you are a part of a learning community, just as our children are members of learning communities in our classrooms. Learning is social. Learners lift each other's thinking and sharpen each other's skills when they try things out together. The talking and interactions that happen in small groups are valuable for children and adults as well. We have designed this study guide to spark your thinking about small-group teaching and to inspire discussions that lift everyone's learning.

Our hope is that some of your learning, as you read, is hands-on. We want you to dig into your leveled readers, give them a critical look and get to know them well. We also hope you give some of the procedures a try. So, to help guide your learning and discussions with your learning community, be sure to grab

- a variety of Leveled readers ranging from A to D,
- some magnetic letters, and
- the high frequency word list you use with your emergent readers.

Of course, don't forget the tools you personally use as a learner that help you to learn best! We like to use sticky notes and colorful pens!

If you want to join us in a community of learning, post your thoughts on Twitter using the hashtag #intentionalstart. We hope to continue learning with you there!

~ Carolyn and Susan
Introduction

“However, though it will be our focus throughout this book, it’s important to note that small-group reading instruction is a smaller piece of a much larger literacy puzzle for the emergent readers you teach. Exposing students to a wide variety of print in a wide variety of ways is crucial.”—page xii

Reflective Questions

Take a moment to reflect on the larger literacy puzzle you have in place to support your emergent readers. How do you allocate time in your literacy block? Which of these puzzle pieces are you most comfortable with and which do you want to learn more about for your classroom?
Chapter 1
Emergent Readers: How They Learn and How to Teach Them

1. “Emergent readers deserve instruction from a skilled teacher who is responsive to their needs in the moment. Skilled teachers have a clear understanding of the emergent reader both academically and emotionally. They know what they need to teach and understand the theory behind their choices as they plan and deliver instruction. They also spend time getting to know the books they are introducing to the small group so their emergent readers can experience success. That success is what makes our readers want to return to our small group table again and again and again!” —page 2

Quick Write
Jot down ways you have learned more about the following:

- Your children
- Your teaching practice (pedagogy)
- Your theoretical knowledge of literacy acquisition
Share with a colleague. Can you think of more ways to improve your practice in the future? What other ways can you learn more?

2. Consider the definitions of reading on page 3.

Quick Write
Take a minute to write down your definition of reading and share with a colleague.

3. “Emotions are connected to all learning experiences, both good and bad. Emotion can motivate us to stick with a challenge or can deflate us to the point of giving up. When you’re learning something that you care about and are experiencing success, you feel great and want to keep at it. On the other hand, when you are faced with a challenge that you have no interest in or one that feels too difficult, it’s hard to stay engaged.” —page 5

Reflective Questions
Think of a time when something was easy for you to learn. Describe the feelings you were having at that time. Now, think of a time when it was difficult for you to learn. Describe the feelings you were having then and what would have made it easier.

4. “If you haven’t patted yourself on the back recently for being a professional educator, do it right now. Take a moment to acknowledge that your job as a teacher of young children requires an enormous amount of know-how. You have to know how young brains learn. You have to know how literacy develops. You have to know how to use the best instructional techniques. That’s a lot of know-how, but even that’s not enough. Every child that sits at your small group table has a different repertoire of literacy skills. They come to you with different experiences, different strengths, and different habits. You need to know each of them as individual readers. What can each child do on their own? What do they try at difficulty? What can they do with a little help? What areas need to be strengthened? Notice in Figure 1.2 where the expert teacher’s areas of knowledge intersect. We love guided reading because this format honors each area of the teacher’s knowledge.” —page 11
**Reflective Questions**

How does Guided Reading’s reliance on teacher professionalism differ from packaged programs that may seem simpler to implement? How do the teacher’s professional knowledge and judgment benefit the learner?
Chapter 2
Choosing Books Children Are Ready to Read

1. “If you follow the ever-swinging pendulum of which teaching practices are lauded and which are maligned in the education world, you’ll know the use of leveled books is currently taking some heat. We think that perhaps, like most good ideas in education, the use of leveled texts has, in some cases, been taken too far. Educators are rightly questioning if it’s harmful to restrict readers to books at their “just right” level. Are we decreasing engagement? Are we shaming children? Are we holding them back?”—page 13

Reflective Questions
Have you had these thoughts or conversations with colleagues? What are your experiences with leveled books? What benefits have you experienced using leveled books? What pitfalls have you experienced?

2. “Going on autopilot through text levels removes two of the factors we talked about previously—our knowledge of our children and our knowledge of literacy acquisition. We appreciate and seek out publishers that provide a range of texts within each level because these choices give us options that better address the needs of our groups.”—page 23

Activity
Take time now to dive into your leveled readers A–D baskets and become very familiar with the books in them. Look for the following:

• A range of difficulty within each level
• Quality of the print. Is the font easy to read? Are the words well-spaced? Are the words separate from the pictures?
• A match between the skills you want to teach your children and the text
• Books you can get rid of because they don’t have the qualities of a good, leveled reader.
3. “We also seek out publishers that offer books with diverse characters and families. We suggest taking an inventory of your guided reading library. Will your readers see characters with different skin tones, hair types, abilities, and family members? You may have already done this with your read aloud library and independent reading library but check out your guided reading library as well. As Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) taught us, books can offer children the chance to see themselves in the characters in books, as well as centering characters with differences from them. Both are critical. Book choice is about so much more than the level!” —page 24

Activity
Take a critical walk through all your Guided Reading book baskets. Every basket should have representation of diverse characters, so children at every point in their literacy journey are seeing the world as a diverse and welcoming place. This is a priority at the earliest stage of literacy.

Some publishers we like to use are: Handprints, Reading Reading, Townsend Press, Pioneer Valley, and Rigby.
Chapter 3
Learning Where to Look

1. “Try this. Look at the following story written in Wingdings font and notice what your eyes do. Did you carefully track the print from right to left or did your eyes wander haphazardly, as you might look at a picture or TV screen? Did you look for something familiar? Did you give up? If you look away now, could you write a letter or a word from the story? Most likely not.” —page 29

Activity
How does this inform you about where your children’s eyes may be during teaching time?
Here is a bit of print information that might help you read this nursery rhyme:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>☑ = a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☑ ☑ = the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☑ ☑ = and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☑ ☑ ☑ = all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☑ = on</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>* = $</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How did this information help you? What did your eyes do this time? What nursery rhyme is it?

2. See Figure 3.3 on pages 32–33. “Compare the following examples. Which ones are easier for the eyes to look at? Which ones have large print? Which ones will make practicing one-to-one voice print matching easier because the word boundaries are more evident?”—page 32

Activity
Discuss the differences in the charts in Figure 3.3. Check out some of your own teacher-made and purchased charts. Are they as helpful as possible in teaching children to learn to look at print?

3. Read through day 1 of the example lesson with a teacher-created Pre-A text on page 41.

Reflective Question
How does Mrs. Jones scaffold and support the learning for her emergent readers and writers so they experience and learn

- letter names and letter sounds,
- left to right directionality across one line of text,
- voice to print matching across one line of text, and
- to locate their name in print?
Chapter 4
Learning How to Look

1. “...your introduction to the new book should feed them (students) some information about the book topic and language structures and call their attention to print information.”—page 57

    **Activity**

    Choose a Level A or B text, and consider your introduction by answering the following questions:

    • What is the big idea?
    • How will you support meaning and language structure?
    • What visual information will you draw your emergent readers’ eyes to?

2. “Prompting and supporting follows a continuum from most to least supportive and a general guideline is to use the least supportive prompt you can, in order to give the most independence to the learner.”—page 61

    **Reflective Questions**

    In thinking about the goals of Levels A and B texts (left to right directionality, one-to-one matching voice to print, and noticing familiar words), what are some prompts you have used with your emergent readers? What prompts have been successful? Unsuccessful? Why?

3. After reading the book, “First, always first, say something about the content of the book. Have a little conversation. It could be about the plot, the character, what was funny, what was surprising, a connection they have, or anything that comes to mind about the book.”—page 63

    **Reflective Question**

    Why is this important?
4. “Recognizing some words automatically eases the burden of needing to solve every word, increases fluency, and gives the reader a sampling of various phonics patterns from which to build new words. The words that are most helpful in Levels A and B are the high frequency words found in the particular books you use. In general, a nice compromise can be found in teaching words from your guided reading books and teaching district-mandated words, which often come from the Fry Sight Word list or the Dolch list.” —page 64

**Activity**

Look through your Level A and B books. Make a list of the high-frequency words that appear most often. Look for words that overlap with your district’s word list. How can you plan for those words to “echo” through all components of your lesson? How will you teach high-frequency words so that you activate all areas of a reader’s brain? How will you teach them so that readers are noticing and using as many letter sounds as possible across these words (orthographic mapping)?

5. “Carefully constructed stories provide opportunities to work on phonemic awareness, phonics skills, letter learning, word learning, concepts of print and, of course, reading.” —page 67

**Activity**

Using a Level A or B book and the chart on page 69, use the following questions to help guide you in planning a possible writing component for a small-group lesson.

- What language from the book would be good to use?
- What word or words will my children be able to write fast?
- What high-frequency word do my children need to learn?
- What word would lend itself well to be analyzed with sound boxes?
- What letter do my children need to learn or practice?

6. "Sound boxes or Elkonin boxes (Elkonin 1971) are a tool to help children hear sound in words but should only be used on the clearest examples.” —page 70
Activity
Look through some Level A and B books. What are some clear examples of words to use in sound boxes? What are some poor examples? Why?

7. “. . . letter learning can be even more impactful if the letter happens to be in one of the high frequency words you practiced or in the new word you just learned.” —page 72

Activity
Cross reference your letter identification assessments and phonics scope and sequence with the high-frequency words you will be teaching from text Levels A and B. What letters overlap and would be good candidates to teach to your emergent readers?

8. Look at day 2 of the example lesson with a Level A text on page 82.

Reflective Question
How does Mrs. Jones scaffold and support her emergent readers so they can practice and begin to achieve the goals of

• moving across print from left to right,
• matching voice to print, and
• learning some letters and high-frequency words?
Chapter 5
Learning How to Monitor and Solve

1. “There’s no way to sugar coat it—the move out of patterned texts is a big one. The transition from Level B to Level C probably gives young children (and their teachers) the biggest challenges in the journey through early reading levels. Why is this so tricky?” —page 90

Reflective Question
Reflect on your own teaching with Level C books. What makes moving from Level B to Level C so difficult for many emergent readers?

2. “Guided reading instruction should meet children at the point where the text has enough challenge for them to need instruction and scaffolding. Staying in too low a level will not provide the challenge. We need to get them to their zone of proximal development and this may mean providing extra supports when moving to a tougher level. Don’t think of it as cheating. Think of it as a gradual release of responsibility, which is good teaching.” —page 91

Activity
Look at the suggested transition lesson format components on pages 92–93. Think about and discuss how these scaffolds and extra supports assist students as they attempt to read unpatterned Level C books.

3. In Level C texts “we’ll focus a great deal on helping children develop “strategic actions” (Clay 2001) around five areas for problem solving as students learn to check on themselves for accuracy and understanding and figure out words they don’t recognize in print.” —page 94
Reflective Questions
Which of these areas for problem solving would you use in reading? Writing? In both reading and writing? What is your rationale?

- Using what you know in print to monitor
- Using what you know in print to solve words
- Hearing sounds in language and matching sound to letters
- Learning words
- Practicing letters and sounds

How does learning about reading support writing? How does learning about writing support reading?

4. “Because of the new challenges at Level C, your first book introductions will likely need to offer quite a bit of information. Then once your group adjusts to the complexity, you'll be able to pull back a bit on this level of support.” —page 97

Activity
Grab a Level C text from your collection. Again, answer these questions to compose your book introduction:

- What is the big idea?
- How can you support meaning and language structure?
- What print information will you draw your emergent readers’ eyes to? Why?

5. When reading a Level C text for the first time, “Keep a dry erase marker and some magnetic letters handy for any on-the-spot teaching you may need to do for an individual child.” —page 100

Reflective Questions
How can these tools help you to teach so children achieve the following Level C goals:

- Learning high-frequency words?
- Gaining automaticity with letter names and sounds?
• Using known high-frequency words to monitor and self-correct?
• Decoding 2 and 3 letter words with a short vowel?
• Monitoring and solving using meaning and language structure?

6. “... high frequency words build a child's confidence when they look at a page filled with print. At this point, it becomes an especially high priority since the learning focus at this level is monitoring and learning to monitor depends on having something to monitor.” —page 104

Activity
Peruse your Level D books. What new high-frequency words pop up most often? Cross check those words with the words your district mandates. Which words have high priority and need to be taught first?

7. “Beginning around Level C, we add a word study component to our guided reading lessons that goes beyond learning high frequency words. This component helps readers explore how words work (Bear et al. 2019) so they can solve new words in their reading. ... Word work should help support your learning goals for the texts your children are reading, so in text Level C, we want children to begin to: 1. Blend the sounds of CVC words to solve in reading and writing. 2. Monitor mismatches using first letter and sound in words that are not simple CVC words.” —page 107

Activity
Using a Level C text, select some appropriate words and then use some magnetic letters to practice the “procedures” that support Learning Goal #1 (page 109) and Learning Goal #2 (page 111).

8. “Since writing stamina is being built alongside becoming more fluent with linking sounds, writing letters, and high frequency words, the stories you craft while reading Level C texts will gradually get longer. Depending on your small group’s ability, you might even want to consider crafting a story with two sentences.” —page 113
Activity
As you did in Chapter 4, choose a Level C text and consider these questions from Figure 5.17 on page 114. Be sure to keep your emergent readers’ strengths in mind.

• What language from the book would be good to use?
• What word or words will my children be able to write fast?
• What high-frequency word(s) do my children need to learn?
• What words would be good in sound boxes?

9. Look at the day 1 of the example lesson with a Level C text on page 121.

Reflective Questions
How does Mrs. Jones scaffold and support her emergent readers so they achieve the goals of

• learning high-frequency words,
• gaining automaticity with letter names and sounds,
• using known high-frequency words to monitor and self-correct,
• decoding 2 and 3 letter words with a short vowel, and
• monitoring and solving using meaning and language structure?
Chapter 6
Learning How to Integrate Information in Print

1. "Effective readers hold onto meaning as they decode." — page 131

**Activity**
Discuss why this is important as readers become more strategic as text becomes more complex. Using Level D texts, look for examples where readers will have to decode as they maintain meaning.

2. "Phrasing involves both the eyes and the ears. The reader has to be able to see which groups of words to read together before pausing and has to be able to hear which groups of words sound right together." — page 131

**Activity**
Discuss the difference between reading rate and phrasing. Which is more important?

3. When introducing a Level D book, “give a quick heads-up about what this story will be about, with perhaps a hint about how the story will work if necessary.” — page 134

**Activity**
Choose a Level D text and consider the following questions:
- What is the big idea? How will you convey it?
- How will you scaffold meaning and language structure?
- What print information will you draw your emergent readers’ eyes to?
4. “Solving words in text needs to be done quickly to maintain meaning. The child’s first plan should be to start the word without taking their eyes off the print.” —page 137

**Activity**

Look through a Level D text and pull an unfamiliar word from it. Take some time to practice taking it apart by

- modeling explicitly (page 137),
- sharing the task (page 138),
- prompting (page 138).

5. In Level D texts, “We’ll call on these young readers to pull together everything they know about print and letters and sounds to solve print. At the same time, however, we want them to use the text’s meaning to (1) propel their solving, (2) monitor their attempts, and (3) provide the enjoyment that makes them love stories.” —page 141

**Activity**

Why is it beneficial for a reader to focus on both at the same time rather than only using visual information (letters and sounds) or only using text meaning?

6. “In Level D, readers are continuing to expand the number and types of high frequency words they recognize automatically. Sight words, or words known by sight, serve a couple of important functions here.”

—page 145
Activity

Define “high-frequency words” and “sight words”. How are they the same? How are they different? How are they interconnected?

Again, repeat the process you used from Chapters 4 and 5. Look for high-frequency words in Level D texts. What new words are popping up and need to be taught? What words could be considered high utility and lead to the learning of new words?

7. “As we progress into Level D texts, we shift our learning goals in word study to match the texts the children read. So, we start including digraphs, consonant clusters, and simple analogies into the work with magnetic letters and sound boxes.” —page 146

Activity

Return to your basket of Level D texts. Look for some more complex words you can lift from the text to practice the following:

- Learning Goal 1: Use Digraphs and Consonant Blends to Solve Words in Reading and Writing (page 146)
- Learning Goal 2: Use Analogy to Solve Simple Words (page 147)

8. “The writing focus in text Level D shifts to comprehension. Instead of a carefully teacher-crafted text, as in the earlier text Levels Pre-A to C, what a child decides to write about will evolve from the conversations the small group has after reading the book.” —page 148
Activity

Grab a variety of fiction and nonfiction Level D books from your collection. As you peruse the fiction texts, would they lend themselves better for a ‘beginning, middle, end’ type of writing or ‘problem and solution’ writing? Why?

With the nonfiction books, do they lend themselves more to ‘writing facts’ about the topic or writing a ‘how to’ about a topic? Why?

9. Look at day 2 of the example lesson with a Level D text.

Reflective Questions

How does Mrs. Jones support and scaffold her emergent readers so they achieve the goals of

- using meaning and print information together to solve words in texts,
- reading with phrasing, and
- learning about long vowel sounds in sound boxes?