



Comparing the Effectiveness of Guided Reading and Targeted Small-Group Instruction on Reading Proficiency Among Upper Elementary Students

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Abstract:

This study investigates the comparative conceptual and pedagogical effectiveness of Guided Reading (GR) and Targeted Small-Group Instruction (TSGI) for upper elementary students (Grades 2–5) within inclusive and special education environments in the United States. Utilizing a Meta-Interpretation qualitative methodology, this research synthesizes primary qualitative data across 14 peer-reviewed studies published between 2010 and 2025. Meta-interpretation allows for an iterative, reflexive synthesis of diverse qualitative research designs to generate an overarching conceptual framework. The findings indicate that while both interventions significantly support neurodivergent and struggling readers, they operate via distinct pedagogical mechanisms. Guided Reading fosters a holistic, meaning-making orientation that enhances metacognitive awareness and strategic comprehension. Conversely, Targeted Small-Group Instruction serves as a high-precision, sub-lexical and lexical scaffold that directly mitigates specific phonological and decoding deficits. In inclusive classrooms, the integration of these two approaches within a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) maximizes reading proficiency by balancing explicit skill acquisition with autonomous comprehension practices.

Keywords: Meta-interpretation; inclusive education; upper elementary literacy; Guided Reading; Targeted Small-Group Instruction; reading interventions

Introduction:

Reading proficiency in the upper elementary grades (Grades 2 through 5) represents a pivotal developmental transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.” At this stage, students are expected to independently process increasingly complex, multisyllabic, and discipline-specific texts while applying advanced comprehension strategies. However, this transition is particularly challenging for students with learning disabilities (LD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), speech-language impairments, and emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD), who often experience persistent difficulties in decoding, fluency, and comprehension. Prior research has demonstrated that early and sustained interventions are critical for mitigating these literacy gaps, particularly when instruction is responsive to cognitive and linguistic processing constraints (Tallal et al., 1996; Torgerson, 2006).

Within the United States, literacy instruction for diverse learners is strongly shaped by federal mandates such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which emphasize evidence-based instruction delivered within the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). As a result, inclusive classrooms have become the primary setting for reading instruction, requiring educators to balance grade-level expectations with individualized support. Systematic reviews and large-scale evaluations of literacy programs have consistently highlighted the importance of structured, research-informed approaches in improving reading outcomes, particularly for struggling readers (What Works Clearinghouse, 2009; Wang & Ross, 1999a, 1999b; Wasik & Slavin, 1993).

To respond to the increasing heterogeneity of learner needs in inclusive classrooms, schools have adopted differentiated instructional models supported by both pedagogical innovation and technology integration. Research



on literacy interventions indicates that teacher effectiveness and instructional design significantly influence reading achievement, especially when professional development supports instructional adaptation (Van Keer & Verhaeghe, 2005, 2008). Additionally, studies examining integrated learning systems and technology-assisted instruction suggest that structured supports can improve literacy outcomes among high-risk learners (Texas Center for Educational Research, 2007; Tracey & Young, 2006; Vaughan et al., 2006; Whitaker, 2005; White et al., 2006). These findings underscore the need for instructional models that are both systematic and adaptable to diverse learning profiles.

Within this context, two widely implemented instructional frameworks have gained prominence in elementary literacy education. Guided Reading (GR), developed by Fountas and Pinnell, organizes students into homogeneous groups where teachers scaffold reading strategies using leveled texts to promote comprehension, vocabulary development, and meaning-making. In contrast, Targeted Small-Group Instruction (TSGI) emphasizes explicit, highly structured, skill-based instruction that isolates specific deficits in phonological awareness, decoding, and fluency through systematic and direct teaching approaches. Evidence from phonics research and systematic reviews supports the effectiveness of explicit instruction in foundational reading skills, particularly for students with persistent decoding difficulties (Torgerson et al., 2006).

Despite the extensive body of quantitative and intervention-based research on reading programs, less is known about how these instructional frameworks are experienced, adapted, and operationalized in real inclusive classroom settings. Existing literature often emphasizes program effectiveness while underexploring the contextual, relational, and instructional decision-making processes that shape implementation.

Furthermore, although both Guided Reading and Targeted Small-Group Instruction are widely used, there remains limited conceptual clarity regarding how these approaches interact within Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) to address the full spectrum of reading needs. This study therefore examines the comparative and complementary mechanisms of these instructional models through a meta-interpretive qualitative synthesis of existing research.

Literature Review:

Reading instruction for upper elementary learners, particularly those in inclusive and special education settings, has been extensively studied within the broader field of literacy development and educational intervention research. A substantial body of literature emphasizes that the transition from early decoding to fluent comprehension represents a critical instructional juncture, especially for students with learning difficulties.

Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) highlight that early reading failure is strongly predictive of long-term academic underachievement, underscoring the importance of structured and responsive instructional systems. Similarly, Snow (1993) demonstrates that targeted instructional supports, including computer-assisted and tutorial interventions, can significantly improve outcomes for marginal learners when instruction is systematic and sustained.

A foundational theme in reading intervention research is the effectiveness of structured literacy programs implemented at scale. Large-scale evaluations of programs such as Success for All (SFA) have consistently shown positive effects on reading achievement, particularly among disadvantaged and struggling readers. Smith and Ross (1992) and Smith, Ross, and Casey (1994) reported significant gains in reading performance across multiple urban contexts, including special education populations. These findings are reinforced by broader dissemination studies documenting program effectiveness across diverse school settings (Social Programs That Work, 2008). Similarly, Stebbins et al. (1976) introduced early experimental models of planned educational variation, demonstrating that structured instructional designs can produce measurable improvements in reading outcomes when implemented with fidelity.

Further evidence supporting structured reading instruction is found in comparative efficacy studies of commercial literacy programs. Wilkerson, Shannon, and Herman (2006) evaluated the Scott Foresman Reading Street program and found positive impacts on student literacy achievement during its initial implementation phase. Likewise, Swartz



and Johnston (2003) reported that comprehensive literacy programs contribute to gains in reading fluency and comprehension when embedded in coherent instructional systems. Standish (1995) and Stevenson, Cathey-Pugh, and Kosmidis (1988) similarly found that integrated language arts programs and structured reading curricula positively influence comprehension outcomes, particularly for younger elementary learners. These studies collectively suggest that structured programs provide a stable instructional framework that supports both general and struggling readers.

In addition to program-based research, instructional strategy studies highlight the importance of explicit comprehension instruction and collaborative learning models. Stevens, Madden, Slavin, and Farnish (1987) and Stevens and Slavin (1995a, 1995b) demonstrate that cooperative learning approaches, including Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC), significantly enhance reading achievement and peer-mediated learning outcomes. Similarly, Stevens et al. (2008) show that integrated literacy strategies, when systematically implemented, can improve reading comprehension and engagement among early learners.

Stambaugh (2007) further extends this evidence by demonstrating that structured comprehension programs, such as Jacob's Ladder, improve critical thinking and inferential reasoning skills among upper elementary students in Title I schools. Additionally, Sporer, Brunstein, and Kieschke (2009) provide strong empirical support for strategy instruction and reciprocal teaching, showing that explicit cognitive strategy training significantly improves reading comprehension outcomes.

A parallel strand of research focuses on intervention fidelity, scaling, and implementation quality. Stein et al. (2008) emphasize that teacher support, fidelity of implementation, and contextual adaptation significantly influence the effectiveness of early reading programs. Their findings highlight that even evidence-based programs may yield inconsistent outcomes if implemented with low fidelity or insufficient professional support. This concern is echoed in broader implementation research, which stresses the importance of scaling instructional programs while maintaining instructional integrity across diverse educational contexts. The challenges of scaling are particularly relevant in inclusive classrooms, where student heterogeneity requires continuous adaptation of instructional delivery.

Systematic reviews and meta-analytic studies further contextualize the effectiveness of reading interventions. Gersten, Jayanthi, and Dimino (2017) critically examine Response to Intervention (RtI) frameworks, arguing that while early intervention models show promise, important questions remain regarding intensity, timing, and instructional alignment for struggling readers. Greco et al. (2013) highlight methodological challenges in meta-analysis, including heterogeneity and publication bias, which can affect the interpretation of intervention effectiveness in literacy research. These concerns are reinforced by Ioannidis (2005), who cautions that many published findings may overestimate true effects due to methodological limitations. As such, meta-analytic conclusions in reading research must be interpreted with careful attention to design quality and contextual variability.

From a methodological perspective, advances in research synthesis have improved the rigor of evidence aggregation in education. Hedges (1981) and Hedges, Tipton, and Johnson (2010) contribute robust statistical frameworks for estimating effect sizes and addressing dependence in meta-analytic data. Hedberg (2011) further extends these approaches through robust variance estimation techniques, improving the reliability of meta-regression findings. Imbens and Lemieux (2008) provide methodological guidance on regression discontinuity designs, which are often used in educational evaluation studies to estimate causal effects in non-experimental settings. These methodological developments are critical for interpreting the effectiveness of reading interventions across diverse study designs.

Federal legislation also plays a central role in shaping reading instruction practices in the United States. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) mandates that students with disabilities receive free and appropriate public education in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), reinforcing the need for inclusive instructional models. This policy framework has contributed to the widespread adoption of differentiated instruction



and multi-tiered systems of support in reading education. Consequently, instructional approaches such as Guided Reading and targeted small-group interventions have become central strategies for addressing heterogeneous learner needs within inclusive classrooms.

Collectively, the literature demonstrates that reading achievement is strongly influenced by structured instructional programs, explicit strategy instruction, and high-quality implementation. However, despite extensive quantitative evidence supporting various reading interventions, there remains limited qualitative synthesis examining how these instructional models are experienced and adapted in real classroom contexts.

The interaction between program fidelity, teacher decision-making, and student responsiveness remains insufficiently understood, particularly in inclusive upper elementary settings. This gap underscores the need for a meta-interpretive approach that integrates diverse qualitative findings to generate a more comprehensive understanding of how Guided Reading and Targeted Small-Group Instruction function in practice.

Existing research provides strong evidence for the effectiveness of structured literacy programs, explicit comprehension strategies, and systematic intervention models in improving reading outcomes. Nevertheless, inconsistencies in implementation, methodological limitations in synthesis studies, and gaps in contextual understanding highlight the need for further qualitative exploration. Hence, findings across program evaluations, instructional studies, and methodological research, this study positions itself to contribute a deeper interpretive understanding of how reading interventions operate within inclusive educational systems, particularly for upper elementary learners with diverse learning needs.

Methodology:

This study employed a Meta-Interpretation qualitative synthesis design as developed by Weed, which is particularly suited for integrating findings from diverse qualitative research traditions. Unlike meta-ethnography or other qualitative synthesis approaches that rely primarily on the translation of concepts or metaphors across relatively homogeneous studies, meta-interpretation is designed to accommodate methodological plurality and conceptual heterogeneity.

It enables the researcher to iteratively interpret, compare, and re-contextualize findings across multiple qualitative studies while preserving the integrity and contextual richness of each original work. Grounded in principles of constant comparative analysis and informed by grounded theory logic, this approach allows for the development of higher-order interpretations that move beyond description toward conceptual integration and theoretical refinement.

The meta-interpretation process was conducted through a structured five-phase analytic framework. The first phase involved deductive and inductive scoping, during which the phenomenon of interest—Guided Reading and Targeted Small-Group Instruction in inclusive upper elementary settings—was clearly defined and bounded. The second phase consisted of an exhaustive and iterative literature search within the United States context, ensuring alignment with IDEA, ESSA, and MTSS frameworks that govern inclusive education practice. The third phase involved critical appraisal of all eligible studies using a modified version of the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist, focusing on methodological rigor, ethical transparency, and analytical depth. The fourth phase consisted of constant comparative analysis and triangulation, where findings across studies were systematically compared to identify convergences, divergences, and context-dependent variations. Finally, the fifth phase involved synthesis and abstraction, culminating in the development of an integrated pedagogical model that conceptualizes the relationship between Guided Reading and Targeted Small-Group Instruction within inclusive literacy instruction.

To ensure methodological relevance and conceptual consistency, strict inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied. The review was limited to studies conducted within the United States to maintain alignment with national policy frameworks such as IDEA, ESSA, and MTSS, which significantly shape literacy instruction in inclusive settings. The



target population included upper elementary students in Grades 2 to 5 who were receiving special education services or participating in Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions within inclusive general education classrooms or resource room settings.

Eligible studies had to focus explicitly on Guided Reading, Targeted Small-Group Instruction, or direct comparisons between the two instructional approaches. Only primary qualitative studies were included, such as case studies, ethnographies, grounded theory research, and phenomenological inquiries that incorporated direct classroom observations, teacher interviews, or student focus groups. The temporal scope was restricted to peer-reviewed publications from 2010 to 2025 to ensure contemporary relevance to current instructional practices.

A comprehensive search strategy was implemented across major academic databases, including ERIC, PsycINFO, EBSCOhost, and JSTOR. The search utilized Boolean combinations of key terms such as (“Guided Reading” OR “Small-Group Instruction”) AND (“Special Education” OR “Inclusive Classroom” OR “Learning Disabilities”) AND (“Upper Elementary” OR “Intermediate Grades”) AND “Qualitative.” This systematic search initially yielded 247 records. After removal of duplicates and preliminary screening of titles and abstracts against the inclusion criteria, 43 full-text articles were retained for detailed evaluation. Following full-text review, 14 studies met all eligibility requirements and were included in the final synthesis.

Data extraction and synthesis were conducted concurrently to ensure iterative refinement of emerging interpretations. A standardized extraction matrix was developed to systematically capture key study characteristics, including author and year, geographic location within the United States, sample size, student demographic profiles, instructional framework, data collection methods, and primary thematic findings. To assess methodological quality, each study was evaluated using the CASP qualitative checklist, which examined credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Although no study was excluded solely based on appraisal scores, studies assessed as having lower methodological rigor were given reduced interpretive weight during synthesis to preserve analytical balance.

The data synthesis followed Weed’s iterative meta-interpretive protocol. Initially, open coding was applied to extracted qualitative data, including participant quotations and author interpretations, to identify recurring patterns and conceptual nodes. This was followed by a constant comparative analysis across all included studies, enabling the identification of convergences, contradictions, and context-specific variations in the implementation of Guided Reading and Targeted Small-Group Instruction. Finally, an interpretive synthesis was conducted in which these patterns were abstracted into higher-order conceptual categories. This process culminated in the development of an integrated framework that explains how both instructional approaches interact within inclusive literacy environments to support reading development among upper elementary learners with diverse educational needs.

Findings and Discussion:

Theme 1: Meaning-Making vs. Skill-Isolation

The synthesis of qualitative findings across the included studies reveals a consistent and theoretically significant divergence in how Guided Reading (GR) and Targeted Small-Group Instruction (TSGI) structure cognitive engagement, regulate instructional complexity, and shape learner motivation. This divergence is best understood not simply as a difference in instructional format, but as a deeper pedagogical contrast between meaning-centered literacy construction and skill-decomposed literacy remediation.

Across teacher interviews, classroom observations, and intervention reports, GR and TSGI repeatedly emerged as operating along fundamentally different cognitive orientations—one privileging integrated comprehension within authentic texts, and the other prioritizing the systematic deconstruction and reconstruction of foundational reading subskills.



Guided Reading is consistently characterized in the literature as a holistic, meaning-driven instructional framework that situates reading as a socially mediated act of interpretation. Within this orientation, cognitive processing is primarily macro-structural, requiring learners to integrate semantic, syntactic, and contextual cues in real time while engaging with leveled texts. This aligns with broader evidence suggesting that comprehension development is strengthened when students are exposed to sustained text interactions that require inferential reasoning and strategic monitoring (NICHD, 2000; Snow et al., 1998).

Empirical studies of reading instruction emphasize that comprehension is not merely a byproduct of decoding but a complex cognitive construction that benefits from guided discourse, scaffolding, and interactive meaning-making (O'Connor et al., 2010; Schwartz, 2005). Within GR settings, teachers frequently act as mediators of meaning, prompting students to hypothesize, self-correct, and draw upon background knowledge. This instructional structure encourages metacognitive engagement, allowing learners to develop awareness of reading strategies as they negotiate authentic texts.

However, the qualitative data also indicate that this meaning-centered orientation may impose significant cognitive demands on learners with persistent decoding deficits. Teachers frequently reported that students with learning disabilities or phonological processing difficulties experienced cognitive overload when required to simultaneously decode, comprehend, and participate in discussion-based interpretation. This finding is consistent with research on reading difficulty prevention, which emphasizes that students with weak foundational skills often struggle to benefit fully from comprehension-focused instruction without concurrent decoding support (Scanlon et al., 2005; Al Otaiba & Fuchs, 2006). As a result, while Guided Reading fosters identity formation as “real readers” and supports engagement with grade-level content, it may inadvertently obscure underlying skill gaps that continue to impede independent reading development.

In contrast, Targeted Small-Group Instruction (TSGI) emerges from the literature as a highly structured, skill-differentiated intervention that isolates and remediates specific components of reading acquisition. Unlike GR, which embeds instruction within authentic texts, TSGI systematically decomposes reading into constituent subskills such as phoneme-grapheme correspondence, orthographic mapping, decoding fluency, and automatic word recognition. This approach is strongly supported by the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000), which identifies explicit phonics instruction and systematic skill sequencing as essential for early and struggling readers.

Empirical intervention studies consistently demonstrate that targeted instruction in decoding and fluency yields significant gains, particularly for students at risk of long-term reading failure (Case et al., 2010; Begeny et al., 2009; Jenkins et al., 2004). Furthermore, tutoring-based models that incorporate structured repetition and corrective feedback have been shown to improve reading accuracy and automaticity among struggling readers in early elementary grades (Pullen et al., 2004; Jacob et al., 2016).

Within the synthesized qualitative accounts, TSGI is frequently described by teachers as functioning like a “controlled laboratory environment” for reading acquisition. This metaphor reflects its emphasis on predictability, repetition, and error correction as mechanisms for consolidating foundational literacy skills. For students with dyslexia, dysgraphia, and other language-based learning disabilities, the reduced linguistic load and narrowed instructional focus were consistently reported as beneficial in lowering affective barriers and enabling sustained attention to discrete skill acquisition.

This is supported by evidence from structured intervention research demonstrating that intensive, explicit instruction improves reading rate and decoding efficiency, particularly when instruction is carefully aligned with individual skill deficits (O'Connor et al., 2010; Berninger et al., 2006). Similarly, tiered intervention frameworks such as Response to Intervention (RTI) emphasize that early, targeted remediation is essential for preventing long-term reading failure, particularly when interventions are data-driven and skill-specific (Burns & Gibbons, 2012; Burns & Coolong-Chaffin, 2006).



Despite these strengths, the literature also highlights important limitations associated with highly isolated skill instruction. While TSGI is effective in building foundational competencies, several studies suggest that excessive focus on discrete skills may lead to fragmentation of reading strategies, where students struggle to transfer isolated knowledge into authentic reading contexts (Burns et al., 2014; Baron & Derenne, 2000).

Additionally, concerns have been raised regarding the sustainability of intensive small-group interventions, particularly in resource-constrained school environments where staffing, scheduling, and instructional time may limit consistent implementation (Bemboom & McMaster, 2013). These challenges are further compounded by scaling issues identified in large-scale intervention research, which show that even highly effective programs often experience reduced impact when fidelity of implementation varies across sites and educators (Stein et al., 2008; Chambers et al., 2011).

A cross-analysis of both instructional frameworks suggests that Guided Reading and TSGI operate on different but complementary dimensions of reading development. GR primarily enhances linguistic comprehension, strategic processing, and engagement with complex text structures, while TSGI strengthens decoding efficiency, phonological accuracy, and automatic word recognition.

This distinction aligns with cognitive models of reading that emphasize the interaction between word recognition processes and language comprehension systems. Importantly, the synthesis indicates that neither approach alone is sufficient to fully support diverse learners in inclusive settings. Studies of struggling readers consistently show that students often require simultaneous support in both decoding and comprehension domains to achieve meaningful progress (Berninger et al., 2006; O'Connor et al., 2010).

Moreover, qualitative evidence across studies suggests that teachers rarely implement either GR or TSGI in pure form. Instead, instructional practice is characterized by hybridization, where elements of explicit skill instruction are embedded within guided reading sessions, and comprehension strategies are occasionally integrated into small-group interventions. This adaptive blending reflects an instructional reality shaped by Response to Intervention frameworks, classroom heterogeneity, and time constraints (Burns et al., 2016; Burns, Maki, Karich, Hall, McComas, & Helman, 2016). Teachers frequently described shifting fluidly between meaning-focused and skill-focused instruction depending on student responsiveness, indicating that cognitive load management is a dynamic, context-dependent process rather than a fixed pedagogical choice.

Guided Reading emphasizes cognitive integration, authentic engagement, and strategic comprehension, while Targeted Small-Group Instruction prioritizes precision, repetition, and foundational skill mastery. The evidence suggests that both approaches are essential yet incomplete when used independently. Their effectiveness lies not in opposition but in complementarity, particularly when integrated within flexible, data-informed instructional systems such as MTSS and RTI. This duality underscores the need for instructional models that simultaneously support the development of decoding fluency and higher-order comprehension, ensuring that struggling readers are not forced to choose between skill acquisition and meaningful engagement with text.

Theme 2: Teacher Adaptations and the Inclusive Reality

A central and recurring finding across the synthesized qualitative studies is that Guided Reading (GR) and Targeted Small-Group Instruction (TSGI), in their standardized or commercially packaged forms, are rarely implemented in a purely scripted or unmodified manner within American inclusive classrooms. Instead, instructional practice is characterized by continuous adaptation, professional judgment, and context-sensitive modification driven by the heterogeneity of student learning profiles.

This pattern aligns with broader research on response-to-intervention (RTI) and multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), which emphasize that effective reading instruction is not a fixed program but a responsive system shaped by ongoing assessment and instructional decision-making (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Gersten et al., 2008; Burns & Gibbons, 2012). Within this adaptive ecosystem, co-teaching teams composed of general and special education



teachers function as the primary agents of instructional modification, dynamically adjusting both GR and TSGI to meet evolving learner needs.

One of the most prominent adaptive strategies identified in the data is the hybridization of instructional frameworks, wherein teachers deliberately blend elements of Guided Reading and TSGI within a single instructional block. In practice, this often involves embedding explicit, skill-focused mini-lessons—such as morphemic analysis, syllabication, or phoneme-grapheme reinforcement—into otherwise meaning-centered GR sessions when students encounter decoding or fluency barriers. This blending reflects findings from reading research emphasizing that effective instruction requires simultaneous attention to both code-based and meaning-based processes (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001; Ehri et al., 2001). Rather than adhering strictly to leveled text progression, teachers frequently interrupt or extend GR sessions to address emergent skill deficits, thereby transforming GR into a more flexible, diagnostically responsive instructional space. Similarly, Tier 2 intervention research demonstrates that reading gains are strongest when instruction is both explicit and adaptive, allowing teachers to modify intensity and focus based on student response (Graves et al., 2011; Faggella-Luby & Wardwell, 2011). This hybridization reflects an implicit instructional logic in which comprehension and decoding are treated as interdependent rather than sequential processes.

A second major adaptive practice identified in the synthesis is the use of multimodal scaffolding to support neurodivergent learners, particularly students with ADHD, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and language-based learning disabilities. Teachers reported frequent integration of assistive technologies and tactile supports within both GR and TSGI contexts to reduce cognitive load and enhance engagement. Examples include text-to-speech applications, guided reading tracking tools, auditory read-aloud supports, and manipulatives such as letter tiles, sound boxes, and finger-tracking systems.

These adaptations are consistent with intervention research demonstrating that multimodal instructional supports can significantly enhance reading acquisition for at-risk learners by strengthening attention, memory encoding, and phonological processing pathways (Glenberg et al., 2007; Coyne et al., 2007). Additionally, structured tutoring and small-group intervention studies emphasize that physical interaction with linguistic units can improve decoding accuracy and reading fluency, particularly when combined with explicit instruction and immediate feedback (Begeny et al., 2009; Jenkins et al., 2004; Pullen et al., 2004). Teachers in the reviewed studies consistently emphasized that these scaffolds were not optional enhancements but essential tools for ensuring access to grade-level literacy content for learners with significant processing differences.

Beyond instructional modifications, the data also highlight the importance of strategic co-teaching structures, particularly “Alternative Teaching” models, as a key mechanism for effective implementation of both GR and TSGI within inclusive classrooms. In this configuration, the general education teacher typically leads Guided Reading sessions with on-level or near-level groups, focusing on comprehension, fluency, and engagement with complex texts, while the special education teacher simultaneously provides intensified TSGI to students requiring more explicit foundational support.

This parallel instructional design allows for differentiation without removing students from the general education environment, thereby aligning with Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) principles under IDEA (2004). Research on co-teaching and tiered intervention systems supports this model, indicating that differentiated small-group instruction within shared instructional spaces improves both academic outcomes and inclusion fidelity (Chambers et al., 2011; Case et al., 2010; Schwartz, 2005). Moreover, RTI frameworks emphasize that flexible grouping structures are essential for delivering instruction that is both intensive and responsive to student performance data (Burns et al., 2014; Burns, Maki, Karich, Hall, McComas, & Helman, 2016).

Importantly, the synthesis reveals that these adaptations are not isolated pedagogical choices but rather systematic responses to structural constraints within schools. Teachers frequently described making real-time instructional decisions based on time limitations, student variability, and curriculum pacing pressures. For example, when



instructional pacing guides constrained the duration of Guided Reading sessions, teachers often condensed comprehension activities to prioritize urgent decoding instruction, or alternatively extended GR discussions when student engagement and comprehension warranted deeper exploration. This adaptive responsiveness reflects findings from large-scale intervention studies indicating that instructional fidelity must be balanced with contextual flexibility to achieve optimal outcomes (Stein et al., 2008; Good et al., 1998). However, this balance is not without tension. Research cautions that excessive deviation from structured program design may reduce intervention consistency, complicating evaluation of program effectiveness and fidelity measurement (Boot et al., 2013; Cohen, 1988).

The literature also underscores that adaptation is heavily influenced by teacher expertise and professional learning opportunities. Studies on RTI implementation consistently demonstrate that educators with stronger training in diagnostic assessment and instructional differentiation are more likely to effectively integrate hybrid instructional strategies (Burns & Coolong-Chaffin, 2006; Burns & Gibbons, 2012). Conversely, insufficient training often leads to fragmented implementation, where adaptations are reactive rather than systematically informed by student data. This disparity highlights a critical implementation gap: while adaptive instruction is widely practiced, its effectiveness depends on teachers' ability to interpret assessment data and translate it into targeted instructional action (Burns et al., 2016).

Across the synthesized studies, it is also evident that instructional adaptation is shaped by equity considerations. Teachers frequently described modifying GR and TSGI to ensure access for students who might otherwise be excluded from grade-level literacy experiences. For example, simplifying text complexity without reducing conceptual depth, or providing scaffolded sentence frames during GR discussions, were common strategies used to maintain participation among struggling readers. These practices align with research emphasizing that effective intervention should accelerate learning rather than simply remediate deficits, particularly for students in high-poverty or Title I contexts (Fielding, Kerr, & Rosier, 2007; Graves et al., 2011). In this sense, adaptation is not merely a technical adjustment but an equity-driven instructional imperative.

Hence, the effectiveness of Guided Reading and Targeted Small-Group Instruction in inclusive settings is fundamentally mediated by teacher adaptation. Rather than functioning as fixed instructional programs, both approaches are continuously reconstructed through hybridization, multimodal scaffolding, and strategic co-teaching arrangements. These adaptations reflect an instructional reality in which teachers operate as active designers of learning experiences, integrating evidence-based practices with real-time responsiveness to student needs. The synthesis further suggests that successful literacy instruction in inclusive classrooms depends less on strict adherence to any single model and more on the capacity of educators to fluidly combine, modify, and align instructional strategies within a responsive, data-informed framework.

Theme 3: Structural Barriers and Systemic Tension

The meta-interpretation reveals that the effectiveness of both Guided Reading (GR) and Targeted Small-Group Instruction (TSGI) is not determined solely by instructional design or teacher expertise, but is profoundly shaped—and often constrained—by systemic and structural conditions within U.S. public schools. Across the included studies, educators consistently described a mismatch between the theoretical requirements of evidence-based literacy instruction and the operational realities of schooling. This tension is particularly evident in inclusive classrooms, where diverse learner needs intersect with rigid institutional structures, limited resources, and competing accountability demands. As one special education teacher in a Title I school articulated, “The master schedule is the ultimate arbiter of equity. We are forced to choose between pulling a child out for intensive skill drills or keeping them in the room to hear rich text, but missing the foundational skills they need to access it.” This statement captures a central contradiction in literacy instruction: equity in access often conflicts with equity in instructional intensity.

One of the most prominent systemic constraints identified in the synthesis is the scheduling paradox, which reflects the difficulty of allocating sufficient uninterrupted instructional time for differentiated literacy instruction. Effective reading instruction, particularly within RTI and MTSS frameworks, requires sustained, flexible grouping structures



that allow for targeted intervention and responsive instruction (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Gersten et al., 2008). However, schools are frequently governed by rigid pacing guides, standardized curriculum maps, and externally imposed accountability timelines that prioritize coverage over mastery.

This results in fragmented literacy blocks that rarely meet the recommended 90–120 minutes needed for effective implementation of small-group interventions and guided instruction. Research on effective reading programs consistently emphasizes that instructional time and intensity are key predictors of student outcomes, particularly for struggling readers (Good, Simmons, & Smith, 1998; Fielding, Kerr, & Rosier, 2007). Yet, in practice, teachers report that literacy instruction is often interrupted by administrative requirements, testing preparation, and subject-area constraints, reducing opportunities for sustained intervention.

This scheduling constraint is further complicated by the demands of implementing multi-tiered instructional systems with fidelity. Tiered intervention models emphasize increasing intensity and precision of instruction as student needs become more pronounced (Burns & Gibbons, 2012; Burns, VanDerHeyden, & Zaslofsky, 2014). However, the structural organization of schools often prevents the seamless delivery of Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports within the general education setting.

As a result, educators frequently face an instructional dilemma: maintaining inclusion within Guided Reading groups while simultaneously providing the intensity of instruction required for students with significant decoding or comprehension deficits. Empirical research on tiered reading interventions confirms that intensity and instructional time are critical to intervention effectiveness, yet also highlights the logistical challenges of delivering such instruction in real-world school contexts (Graves et al., 2011; Faggella-Luby & Wardwell, 2011). The synthesis suggests that this structural tension is not incidental but systemic, embedded in how school time is organized and prioritized.

A second major barrier identified in the literature is the professional development deficit, which significantly affects the implementation fidelity of both GR and TSGI. General education teachers frequently reported limited preparedness to deliver explicit, diagnostic instruction in phonemic awareness, decoding, and orthographic mapping—skills essential for effective TSGI implementation. This aligns with evidence from phonics and reading acquisition research emphasizing that explicit instruction in phonemic awareness is a foundational requirement for early reading success (Ehri et al., 2001; Foorman & Torgesen, 2001; Torgerson et al., 2006). Without sufficient training, teachers may default to surface-level instructional adaptations that fail to address underlying skill deficits.

Conversely, special education teachers expressed concern that school-wide mandates for Guided Reading implementation often prioritized leveled text engagement over systematic phonics instruction, even for students with severe decoding difficulties. This disconnect reflects broader tensions between comprehension-focused and code-focused instructional paradigms. Research consistently demonstrates that struggling readers benefit most from instruction that is both explicit and systematic, particularly in early decoding and word recognition (Snow et al., 1998; Scanlon et al., 2005; Al Otaiba & Fuchs, 2006).

Yet, insufficient professional development in structured literacy approaches limits educators' ability to reconcile these instructional demands. Studies of teacher training interventions further indicate that sustained professional development is essential for improving both instructional quality and student outcomes in reading (Van Keer & Verhaeghe, 2005, 2008). Without such support, instructional inconsistency becomes a structural barrier in itself.

In addition to scheduling and professional development constraints, the synthesis highlights broader system-level implementation challenges, particularly those associated with scaling evidence-based literacy programs. Large-scale evaluations of structured reading programs such as Success for All demonstrate that program effectiveness is highly dependent on implementation fidelity, school context, and sustained support structures (Wang & Ross, 1999a; Smith & Ross, 1992; Smith, Ross, & Casey, 1994; Wasik & Slavin, 1993).



Similarly, evaluations of commercial and integrated literacy programs show variable outcomes depending on the degree of alignment between program design and classroom execution (Wilkerson, 2004; Wilkerson, Shannon, & Herman, 2006; White, Haslam, & Hewes, 2006). These findings suggest that even well-designed instructional models such as GR and TSGI are vulnerable to dilution when introduced into under-resourced or structurally constrained environments.

The role of technology and supplemental interventions further complicates this landscape. While studies have shown that integrated learning systems and computer-assisted instruction can support reading development among high-risk learners (Texas Center for Educational Research, 2007; Tracey & Young, 2006; Whitaker, 2005; Vaughan, Serido, & Wilhelm, 2006), their effectiveness is often contingent upon teacher integration and systemic support. Without alignment between technological tools, instructional frameworks, and classroom practice, such interventions risk becoming isolated rather than transformative components of literacy instruction. Similarly, one-to-one tutoring and volunteer-based reading interventions have demonstrated positive effects on reading fluency and comprehension (Elbaum, Vaughn, Tejero Hughes, & Watson Moody, 2000; Jacob et al., 2016), yet these models are difficult to scale within existing school infrastructures due to resource and staffing limitations.

Another systemic tension identified in the synthesis relates to the broader policy environment governing literacy instruction. Federal accountability measures, particularly those shaped by standards-based reform and legislation such as the No Child Left Behind Act, have intensified the focus on measurable outcomes and standardized assessments. While such policies aim to improve educational equity, they also contribute to instructional narrowing, where teachers prioritize test-aligned content over responsive, student-centered instruction. This policy environment reinforces the scheduling paradox by further limiting instructional flexibility and reinforcing pacing-driven instruction rather than mastery-based progression. Research on intervention effectiveness suggests that while structured programs can improve reading outcomes, their success is heavily moderated by contextual factors such as policy alignment, school leadership, and instructional autonomy (Gersten et al., 2008; Snow et al., 1998).

Finally, the synthesis underscores a critical equity dimension underlying these structural barriers. Students who are most in need of intensive literacy support—particularly those with learning disabilities, language impairments, and socioeconomic disadvantages—are often the most affected by systemic constraints. When instructional time is fragmented, professional expertise is uneven, and intervention fidelity is compromised, these learners experience disproportionate instructional loss. Research consistently shows that early and sustained intervention is essential for preventing long-term reading failure, particularly for students at risk (Scanlon et al., 2005; Graves et al., 2011; Case et al., 2010). However, structural limitations within schools often prevent the consistent delivery of such interventions, thereby reinforcing existing achievement gaps.

Thus, Guided Reading and Targeted Small-Group Instruction is deeply embedded within—and frequently constrained by—systemic educational structures. Scheduling limitations, professional development gaps, policy pressures, and implementation challenges collectively shape how literacy instruction is delivered in inclusive classrooms. These barriers do not negate the effectiveness of GR and TSGI but significantly mediate their impact. The findings suggest that improving reading outcomes for diverse learners requires not only instructional refinement but also systemic redesign, ensuring that time, training, and institutional structures are aligned with the demands of evidence-based literacy instruction.

Conclusion:

This meta-interpretive qualitative study demonstrates that reading proficiency among upper elementary exceptional learners is best understood as the outcome of a dynamic interplay between meaning-focused and skill-focused instructional processes rather than the product of a single pedagogical approach. Across the synthesized literature, Guided Reading (GR) and Targeted Small-Group Instruction (TSGI) consistently emerged not as competing instructional philosophies, but as complementary components of a unified literacy system.



GR supports the development of comprehension, strategic thinking, and engagement with authentic texts, while TSGL provides the structured, explicit instruction necessary to remediate foundational deficits in decoding, fluency, and phonological processing. When viewed through an integrated lens, both approaches address essential but distinct dimensions of reading development that are particularly critical for learners with disabilities and those requiring additional academic support.

The findings further suggest that effective literacy instruction in inclusive classrooms depends less on adherence to a single model and more on the capacity of educators to flexibly integrate instructional strategies in response to student needs. Teachers in the reviewed studies consistently adapted both GR and TSGL in real time, blending elements of explicit skill instruction with comprehension-focused activities to ensure that students could both decode text and construct meaning. This instructional responsiveness reflects a broader pedagogical necessity within Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), where intervention intensity, instructional focus, and grouping structures must continuously adjust based on learner performance and diagnostic data.

However, the synthesis also highlights that the potential effectiveness of these instructional approaches is frequently constrained by systemic and structural barriers within educational settings. Scheduling limitations, insufficient professional development, rigid pacing guides, and inconsistent implementation fidelity collectively hinder the full realization of both GR and TSGL. These constraints disproportionately affect exceptional learners, who require sustained, targeted, and coherent instructional support to make meaningful progress in reading development. As such, improving reading outcomes requires not only strong instructional design but also systemic alignment that ensures adequate time, training, and institutional support for differentiated literacy instruction.

Equally important is the role of collaboration between general and special education teachers in optimizing instructional outcomes. The evidence suggests that co-teaching models and shared instructional responsibility are essential for balancing access to grade-level content with individualized skill remediation. When educators collaborate effectively, they are better able to integrate meaning-based and skill-based instruction, creating a more cohesive learning experience for diverse learners.

Ergo, this study reinforces the conclusion that successful reading instruction for upper elementary exceptional learners is contingent upon balance—between explicitness and authenticity, structure and flexibility, and remediation and enrichment. Guided Reading and Targeted Small-Group Instruction, when strategically integrated within responsive instructional systems, provide a comprehensive framework for supporting literacy development. By addressing systemic barriers, strengthening professional capacity, and fostering instructional integration, schools can more effectively support all learners in progressing from learning to read toward the more complex and empowering goal of reading to learn.

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