

Reading support for older students: Decoding and comprehensions

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Introduction and Rationale

How can I support my students who struggle with reading? This was the question that guided my initial focus for research. Reading comprehension is a weakness that I have seen many of my fifth grade students struggle with over the years. Many of my students are diagnosed with dyslexia and receive great support for this learning weakness. Each year I have a group of struggling students who are good spellers, and many times are surprisingly good writers as they express themselves in a clear manner. What does not fit is their lack of ability to be successful on any type of reading passage, whether that is in my ELAR classroom, or other subject areas such as science, social studies, or with word problems in math. I began my journey to complete my master's degree with the hopes of finding the key to help these types of students who enter my classroom each year. There are many students who need support in learning, but because they were not diagnosed with a learning disability they are not qualified for support from the school district.

Procedures

I conducted this study to find valuable, study based strategies that I can use within my classroom with all of my students, especially students who are struggling with reading decoding and reading comprehension. My target audience I am looking to support is older students, third through eighth grade. I began my search on the TWU library website. Through the use of ERIC/Ebsco database, I was able to choose great peer reviewed research articles. I used many variations of keywords, but the following keywords provided me with rich articles to choose from: reading comprehensions; struggling readers; older students; supporting struggling readers; decoding strategies;

and proven methods to support reading. I found valuable studies that helped me answer my research question: How can educators support older students who struggle with reading decoding and reading comprehension?

Defining terms

While searching for articles, my criterion was to look for specific grade levels and reading support. I was searching for effective practices that are research based to support my students who struggle with reading. My target group I was looking to support is third through eighth grade. Below are my terms:

- **Blanket diagnosis:** Teachers identify students with learning needs or gaps without enough detailed assessment data to clearly define their true learning needs or gaps.
- **Older students:** 3rd through 8th graders
- **Reading comprehension:** The ability to read a text and make meaningful connections to the text and understand the text's meaning.
- **Reading decoding:** The ability to use knowledge of letters, sounds, and patterns of letter and sound relationships to correctly pronounce written words during reading.
- **Struggling readers:** Students who are reading below their current grade level and/or have not been successful on past state assessment reading tests.
- **Wide reading:** Reading a variety of genres and text for entertainment, educational knowledge, and real-world experience. Students that are exposed to different types of text structures, build vocabulary, and are able to develop connections between different types of text.

- **Word calling:** Students are able to put sounds together to read words, but do not understand, or fully understand, the meaning of the words being read.

Findings

There were three themes I kept seeing throughout the articles I read. One theme was the importance of using clear assessment data to identify students' levels and areas of needed support (Meisinger, 2010). When it comes to a diagnosis such as "word calling", the article by Meisinger found the importance of not simply using teacher observations and diagnosis to identify students in need. The second theme was the tools to be used to support and assist students to improve their reading and reading comprehension (Schwanenflugel, 2009; Kuhn, 2006). The tools that were recurring were rereading, wide reading, and the importance of focusing on fluency to support students' reading. The final recurring theme was specific strategies that could be used with students to support their reading in fun and interactive ways (Omer, 2011; Corcoran, 2005; Dowhower, 1987; Garrett, 2010).

Assessing students

Students begin to make the transition from learning to read to becoming fluent readers between second and third grade. There are some students who struggle with this transition, and encounter learning challenges from fourth grade on if they are not assessed and learning gaps are not filled by supported learning (Kuhn, 2006).

Meisinger's study shed a light on errors that occur often with teacher assessments. Teachers spend a great deal of time with their students. They get to know them well and feel confident in their assessments through their daily observations. Informal assessments can provide educators with a clearer picture of the whole child

and their strengths and weaknesses. Educators can identify a student who is in need in many ways and want only the best for their students as they look for ways to support their learning.

The errors occur when teachers place a blanket diagnosis on their students who are struggling with reading. If a student reads a passage, but makes little to no connections to the text, educators many times label these students as “word callers”. They then look for ways to support their student’s reading comprehension to move them beyond the basic word calling during reading.

It is vital for school districts to find and use assessment tools that provide teachers with clear and consistent data to guide their reading and learning support. For letter knowledge, Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) is a proven and popular assessment tool (Torgesen, 1998). For phonemic awareness, many schools use Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI), DIBELS, or Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) to assess their students. The TPRI is also used to examine a student’s decoding skills, reading comprehension, and fluency (Fuchs, 1992; Wren, 2004).

Dr. Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences is also a useful tool to assess students’ strengths and weaknesses. I was not able to find rigorous research to support the use of this assessment tool, but believe every student has a strong area for learning. Dr. Gardner specifies eight multiple intelligences in his theory: linguistic, logical mathematical, visual spatial, kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist. Finding a student’s strength and using it to help support their learning will increase their engagement and recall of their learning (Armstrong, 1994; Gardner, 1983).

Learning tools to support reading

Once clear data is collected for students, and their strengths and weaknesses have been clearly defined, lessons can begin to be created to support their learning. Building on students' prior knowledge and using their strengths will allow them to make connections and build upon their learning.

Repeated readings were one of the tools that were discussed in many of the studies. Providing multiple reading opportunities allowed students to increase their fluency. Their word recognition became more accurate as they were exposed to the words within the text and decoding became automatic. Their reading speed increased with each new repeated reading, and their reading expression became more expressive (Ari, 2011). Students are able to practice decoding of words within a text multiple times, and over time allowed them to have success with reading the more they reread a text.

Repeated readings are not a new practice as noted in the study conducted by Sarah Dowhower. Her study gives a clear history of studies conducted on this educational learning tool and shows its effectiveness. Through her very thorough research, the findings showed significant improvements of a readers' rate, accuracy, comprehension, and prosodic reading using repeated readings (Dowhower, 1987). Her study shows that repeated readings help students to read text faster, with more accuracy, and are able to comprehend what they are reading more effectively. All of this in turn supports the learning and increase in fluency. As their fluency increases, so will their decoding and reading comprehension.

Wide reading is the final tool that continued to be discussed in the research studies that I read. The importance of a balanced literacy program was discussed in

Ann Duffy's article. This study looked at the effects of a summer school literacy program, and the positive effects of this type of program on struggling readers. Her study laid out a program format that can be used as a guide for teachers to build upon students' learning as lessons connect and reinforce key topics throughout a given week's time. The use of fiction and nonfiction text to make connections and reinforce learning provided students with multiple opportunities to read different types of genres. This exposure provided them with experiences with different text formats, vocabulary, and deeper thinking as each are discussed individually and then compared and contrasted.

One of the main points that all educators can take from Duffy's research was the importance of being a "responsive teacher". Numerous times during the study she modified her initial program to better support her students. At times, she even modified how she would check students' homework since her initial plan was not time-efficient. Educators can be inspired by these types of modifications as they too adjust their lessons, instruction, and assessments to best meet the needs of their students, and know that it is okay to make adjustments to help ourselves as well (Duffy, 2001).

Omer Ari's study provides educators with data that supports wide reading over repeated reading. Comparing the two groups that were studied, the wide reading group gained 56 wpm while the repeated reading group experienced a 40 wpm gain. Both tools were discussed and show the effectiveness of each. In the end, this study suggests using both tools to help developing readers become successful fluent readers.

Strategies to support reading

Reader's theater is a strategy that was discussed and mentioned in many of the

research articles I read. Each study used this as a tool for repeated readings to improve students' fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary (Corcoran, 2005; Garrett, 2010; Keehn, 2008). The use of reader's theater helped students increase their fluency. With the repeated readings, the readers increased their reading speed and accuracy. The studies concluded that words will begin to have greater meaning with each reading as students gained further understanding of the words and the story structure.

All of the studies that used reader's theaters as a learning tool had a positive impact. The positive experiences with reading increased their attitudes towards reading. It is these types of positive experience that will inspire students to continue reading which will in turn continue to build their reading skills and overall reading comprehension. The studies suggested implementing reader's theaters for all grade levels, not just for students who struggle with reading. The positive experiences with this learning tool can be shared by all as it is very diverse and engaging.

Reader's theaters are very popular and readily available in stores, schools, and online. They are written for all subject areas, all genres, and can easily be used to reinforce learning in all subject areas. Students will enjoy learning about science and social studies as they interact with reader's theaters written to inform them about these expository topics.

Wide reading will take more effort on the teacher's part to implement into his or her classroom. There are resources, both fiction and nonfiction, that can be used in conjunction with one another to reinforce students' learning. Modeling is key for wide reading. To ensure students are exposed to as many different types of genres, teachers can include quick mini-lessons each day to read and discuss. Exposing, doing

think-alouds, and discussing these different types of genres will have a positive and long lasting impact on students' learning.

Discussion

I am taking so many things away from my research. It is exciting to have so much new knowledge that I can pass on and use to support my older students and their learning. I have learned there are things that I need to change and adjust about my own instruction. There are tools and strategies that I am anxious to begin using or using more often now that I see their proven effectiveness. I also feel like I can discuss and back up my reasoning for educational choices I make in a more effective manner.

Just like the teachers in Meisinger's study who gave a blanket diagnosis to students who struggled with reading comprehension, I too am guilty of identifying students as "word callers" without having clear data to back up that diagnosis. I will begin to research and practice giving assessments like the TPRI and DIBELS so that my diagnosis is clear and consistent for all students. I have a multiple intelligence survey I give to students at the beginning of each school year. My goal is to teach to several intelligences so that I am meeting the needs of most, if not all, of my students by the end of a lesson. I have seen first-hand the effectiveness of this tool and will continue to use it with confidence.

In my classroom, I design lessons that allow students to have opportunities to read a text two to three times during a week's time. I will continue to do this and will look for creative ways to increase their repeated readings. Reader's theaters are a great tool that I have used off and on. I would like to find a way to increase the use of this learning tool. It is supported by so much research that I feel like I need to use it

more than I currently am. Student love reader's theaters and now that I have research that backs up their effectiveness I can use this tool with additional confidence as well.

An article by Sheri Vasinda and Julie McLeod has given me great inspiration on a fun and creative way to put students in the driver's seat, using technology in conjunction with reader's theaters as a medium for repeated readings. In the article, students practiced their reader's theater parts all week in small groups. Then, on Friday the students performed their reader's theater as the teacher recorded their vocals. The recordings were posted onto the school's webpage. There are no privacy issues since it is only vocals and group numbers/names on the internet. This is a very student-led activity that would be very popular since the students and their parents would enjoy logging on to listen to the reader's theaters each week. This study was done with younger students, so I am sure the teacher had to do a great deal of work posting the podcasts each week. For me, teaching fifth graders and having several high level students each year, I think I could assign students to record and be responsible for posting each week after it has been modeled for them. This is definitely something I would like to implement into my classroom.

Wide reading is something that I will be making a conscious choice to implement into my classroom on a daily basis. This is a weak area for me and I will look for creative ways to do mini-lesson and quick reads to provide wide exposure to various types of genres to my students. Ari's study that showed its effectiveness, even over reader's theaters, has inspired this new passion of mine.

The option of choice is important as well. As I look for reader's theaters and a variety of text for wide reading, I will also consider options that will motivate my students

to want to read. It is important for reading support to allow students to have a variety of text to choose from. Finding subject matters that they are interested in reading will ensure the success of both reading support programs I am looking to add or increase within my classroom.

Overall, I feel like I have learned valuable information that I can use to support my older students who are struggling to make the transition to becoming fluent readers. The tools that I learned about during this research will give my students positive, fun, and engaging reading experiences with various types of text. My goal is to provide learning opportunities that are fun and interactive, but in the end, inspire a love for reading in each and every one of my students. By inspiring my student to have a love for reading, all areas of their lives will be affected. As Terry Salinger stated in his article, "Reading ability is central to students' learning, to their success in school, and ultimately success in their life ... serious disadvantages if they cannot read well. Competent readers, on the other hand, take charge of their learning, participate fully in society, and enhance their lives through the pursuit of new information and new experiences" (Salinger, 2003, p. 79). My goal is to support my older students and help them to become competent readers who can take charge of their learning, participate fully and successfully in society, and help enrich their lives by showing them how to pursue new information and have new experiences.

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