

The Impact of Guided Reading Instruction on Students'
Reading Achievement in First Grade

by

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Table of Contents

List of Tables	i
Abstract	ii
I. Introduction	1
Overview	1
Statement of Problem	1
Hypothesis	2
Operational Definitions	2
II. Review of the Literature	2
Introduction	2
Components of Early Literacy	3
Independent Reading Ability	8
Guided Reading	10
Effects of Guided Reading on Independent Reading Ability	12
Conclusion	13
III. Methods	14
Design	14
Participants	14
Instrument	15
Procedure	16
IV. Results	17
V. Discussion	19
Implications of Results	19

Theoretical Consequences	20
Threats to Validity	21
Connections to Previous Studies/Existing Literature	22
Implications for Future Research	23
Conclusion	23
References	24

List of Tables

1. Scoring Table Used For Analysis	17
2. Descriptive Statistics for Pre- and Post-Intervention Scores	18

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact that guided reading has on first grade students' reading levels. The students' reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension were assessed by using the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment Kit. These three components were then used to determine the students' independent reading ability. Using the pre-test data that was collected in September, targeted small-group instruction was implemented within the classroom setting over a period of 22 weeks. Each of the four small reading groups that were created met five times per week for twenty minutes during the classroom's literacy block. The Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment Kit was administered again in February to collect post-test data. Findings show that guided reading had a positive impact on students' reading achievement.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

According to Anita Iaquina (2006), research over the past two decades has shown that students who have reading difficulties in their early childhood years rarely catch up to their grade-level peers. In fact, it is estimated that a child who is an at-risk reader in first grade is 88% more likely to remain an at-risk reader in fourth grade (Iaquina, 2006). Reading is a skill that is necessary to not only be successful academically in school, but also is important to meet the demands of our ever-changing society. Thus, it is essential for early childhood educators to provide a high-quality, balanced literacy program in their classrooms that will enable their young learners to be successful through their school years and beyond.

As an early childhood educator in the Baltimore County school district, the researcher became interested in this study due to the increase in the number of students in her classroom that exhibit reading difficulties. In order to help prevent reading failure in the early grades, Baltimore County Public Schools encouraged elementary teachers to use guided reading instruction in their classrooms. According to Jan Richardson (2009), guided reading is a small group reading instructional strategy that supports all students in becoming confident and proficient readers.

Statement of Problem

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact that guided reading has on first grade students' reading levels.

Hypothesis

The null hypothesis for this study is that guided reading will have no effect on student reading levels.

Operational Definitions

The dependent variable was *student reading level*. Students' *independent reading level* is measured using Fountas & Pinnell, and measures a student's reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. Accuracy is the percentage of total words that the reader has read correctly in a given passage (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017). The accuracy rate is used to determine whether the text level could be given to the student to read during independent reading time, appropriate to use during small-group instruction, or too difficult for the reader (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017). Fluency is the ability to read with using appropriate expression and smoothly (Richardson, 2009). Comprehension is the ability of the reader to understand and connect to what they are reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 2007).

The independent variable in this study was *guided reading instruction*. Guided reading instruction was implemented by providing students structured small group instruction based at their instructional level as defined by the Fountas and Pinnell benchmark assessment. Guided reading is one part of a balanced literacy framework, and was implemented with small groups of students four to five times per week.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This literature review seeks to explore the topic of how the guided reading instructional program affects primary students' independent reading ability. Section one provides an overview

of the components of early literacy, defining the five components necessary for the development of independent reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Section one also explains how the five components are interrelated and how each component helps children to learn to read. Next, section two highlights how independent reading ability is determined through Fountas and Pinnell leveling. Additionally, section three discusses the essential elements of the guided reading instructional model. Finally, section four discusses how implementing guided reading can affect students' independent reading abilities.

Components of Early Literacy

Over a decade ago, the Report of the National Reading Panel identified five components necessary for the development of independent reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Konza, 2014). Each of the five components are interconnected, and work together to make up the components of successful reading instruction. As children learn to read, they must develop skills in all five areas in order to become confident and fluent readers (Konza, 2014).

Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness refers to the ability to hear, manipulate, identify, and substitute the sounds of spoken language (Konza, 2014). According to Çakıroğlu (2018), phonemic awareness involves the understanding that words are made up of phonemes, which are small units of sound in language. Phonemic awareness is often learned before a child until they begin to read because it is based on the sounds of language rather than written words (Çakıroğlu, 2018). In order to learn to read print, children must understand how to manipulate the 44 different phonemes in the English language, as well as have an understanding that how sounds in a word can make a difference in a word's meaning (Zeece, 2006). Essentially, phonemic awareness is one of the

most fundamental skills children need to acquire in order to learn how to read, as students begin by learning individual phonemes, then joining phonemes to build words.

According to Konza (2014), a student's performance with phonemic awareness is a strong predictor of long-term reading and spelling success. Children who possess a strong phonemic awareness are likely to become good readers, and can be a powerful predictor of success with learning to read (Kardaleska & Karovska-Ristovska, 2018). If children cannot discriminate the separate sounds they hear in words, they cannot make the link between the sounds of speech and print symbols (Konza, 2014). In addition, it is estimated that more than ninety percent of students with significant reading problems have a core deficit in their phonemic awareness ability (Konza, 2014). It is also important to note that students with strong phonemic awareness abilities have a greater chance of learning to read than those with low IQ factors and low reading comprehension ability (Kardaleska & Karovska-Ristovska, 2018).

Phonics

As children progress in their phonemic awareness skills, they begin to become more aware of the sounds that they hear in words (Dukes & Ming, 2010). With this growth, children begin to develop an understanding of the alphabetic principle, or the relationship between phonemes (sounds) and graphemes (the letters that represent them (Konza, 2014). This is where students begin to decode unknown words while reading, which is an important step that children make to become independent readers (Konza, 2014). Phonics is typically taught explicitly in primary classrooms with a synthetic approach. This approach teaches single letters and letter combinations in a systematic and explicit manner, and teaches students to blend individual sounds together when decoding words (Konza, 2014). With this approach, students learn that letters blend together to make words and help them to understand that decoding requires

blending sounds together to pull apart the sounds of the language (Konza, 2014). Teaching phonics in an explicit manner is especially important, as the English language is filled with irregular spelling rules and exceptions. Students need to be explicitly taught ways to read words so that they can read, decode and spell even irregular words.

When learning the relationship between sounds and letters, it is important that students are given the opportunity to practice their decoding and blending skills by reading decodable books (Konza, 2014). Decodable books are comprised of words that children can decode based on the letter-sound relationship that was taught during the lesson, as well as high-frequency sight words (Konza, 2014). When students read the decodable books, they are able to practice their new skills to build fluency and confidence (Konza, 2014).

Fluency

According to Ray Reutzel (2009), reading fluency is defined as reading that demonstrates automaticity, a grade-level appropriate reading rate, an appropriate use of volume and expression, and an acceptable use of text phrasing. Fluency is something that develops as a student strengthens their phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and phonics skill. Essentially, fluency is the ability to read a text accurately, rapidly, and expressively. When students read fluently, they should not only be reading smoothly and with expression, but also should be able to understand what they read (Reutzel, 2009). Non-fluent readers may read slowly, may not be able to read with appropriate expression, and/or make many mistakes while reading. Students who are non-fluent may not have strong phonic skills, difficulty with decoding, or may need more practice in reading with smoothness and expression (Konza, 2014).

According to Dukes & Ming (2010), by the time that students reach the third grade, they should be moving away from learning to read and should be reading to learn. If students do not

have strong prereading skills in place by the time they get to third grade, they not be able to meet the reading demands of their grade level due to the complexity and amount of reading that is required in the upper elementary years (Dukes & Ming, 2010). It is of utmost importance that students are given many opportunities to read in daily reading practice, as the more they read, the better they are at comprehending and reading with accuracy and speed (Reutzel, 2009).

Vocabulary

According to Konza (2014), vocabulary knowledge is a key component of reading comprehension, as being able to manipulate sounds to make words is useless if those words do not have meaning. There are two different types of vocabulary knowledge: oral vocabulary and reading vocabulary. Oral vocabulary is the words that students understand and use in their daily conversations, while reading vocabulary is words that they recognize while reading print. In order to comprehend reading, a child must be able to read words and make sense of them within a sentence (Konza, 2014).

Students typically gain vocabulary knowledge through repeated exposures to new words in conversations, listening to stories, and through the media (Konza, 2014). According to Dukes & Ming (2010), students who read for 25 minutes each day decode approximately one million words in text each year. Further, if students only learn 0.1% of the words read, that would mean that students could add approximately 1,000 new words to their vocabularies each year (Dukes & Ming, 2010). Additionally, it is important to note that there is a correlation between the exposure of a broad and rich vocabulary at home to a student's success at school (Konza, 2014). Studies have shown that if children are being read to regularly at home, they are more likely to absorb new words easier and acquire reading skills early (Konza, 2014). It is also important to note that direct instruction of vocabulary is effective for vocabulary learning, as studies have shown that

direct vocabulary instruction adds to the vocabulary growth of all children (Konza, 2014). Konza (2014) also adds that elementary-age children should be exposed to an extensive content-rich vocabulary using other methods than looking up words in a dictionary or using them in a sentence. Research suggests that vocabulary instruction helps children to learn five to six new words per day, which adds up to 38 words per week, 2,000 new words per year, and 10,000 words by age six (Jalongo & Sobolak, 2010).

Comprehension

Reading researchers suggest that comprehension is a complex process where meaning is constructed through making connections between the reader's prior knowledge and the text they are reading (McLaughlin, 2012). Comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading due to it requiring the reader to engage with a text, including making predictions, connections, and inferences (Konza, 2014). Comprehension allows for readers to understand that writers write for different reasons, and can access their prior knowledge to assimilate new information (Konza, 2014). Readers who comprehend text can visualize characters, use imagery, and use strategies to support their understanding and retention of information (Konza, 2014). Regarding nonfiction text, comprehension involves learning new vocabulary, gaining new information, and determining the main idea of the text. According to Çakıroğlu (2018), reading comprehension requires cognitive and metacognitive skills such as purpose, motivation, and the ability to use a strategy.

It is important to note that even before children become fluent readers, they begin to develop comprehension skills through books being read-aloud to them. Young students are able to construct meaning in read-alouds through activating their schemas, making connections, visualizing, asking questions, and making inferences (Gregory & Cahill, 2010). Even though

comprehension instruction looks different in the primary classroom than those lessons you would see in the upper elementary grades, primary students are able to engage with text and begin to construct meaning (Gregory & Cahill, 2010).

Independent Reading Ability

According to Fountas and Pinnell (2011), there are three components that contribute to a student's reading success: accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. Fluency is defined as the ability to read text with phrasing, appropriate pausing, intonation, and stress (Fountas & Pinnell, 2011). Determining how many words per minute a reader can read at is only one aspect of fluency, as a fluency rating should also reflect how children interpret the meaning of the text through their voices (Fountas & Pinnell, 2011). Fluent readers should be able to read in word groups (phrase), stop at punctuation, and to use expression while reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 2011). Accuracy is defined as the ability to correctly read words throughout the text (Fountas & Pinnell, 2011). Having a strong knowledge of the alphabetic principle, the ability to blend sounds together, and knowledge of countless high-frequency words is required for a high accuracy percentage (Hudson, Lane & Pullen, 2005). Comprehension is the reader's ability to make meaning by interacting with text through using prior knowledge and information presented in the text (Fountas & Pinnell, 2011). Comprehension also involves the reader being able to share to think and engage in a conversation about the story (Richardson, 2016).

The components of accuracy, fluency, and comprehension can all be assessed through using the Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System. This system accurately identifies the instructional and independent reading levels of students through one-on-one running record assessments (Fountas & Pinnell, 2011). The running record assessment data provides teachers the ability to plan responsive instruction to help each student grow in their reading ability.

When assessing students using the Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System, teachers are able to record data about each student's accuracy, self-corrections, comprehension, and fluency (Fountas & Pinnell, 2011). In addition, comprehension is measured at every text level and provides teachers details and data about how the student thinks within, beyond, and about the text (Fountas & Pinnell, 2011).

According to Richardson (2016), running records are the most valuable assessment tool when teaching emergent and early readers. To complete a running record, teachers mark student miscues on a recording sheet as the student reads aloud. After the student has read, teachers are able to check for comprehension by asking students to retell and answer comprehension questions about the passage. Running records can determine a student's instructional and independent reading levels, shows which reading strategies students use, and gives teachers insight into which reading strategies still need to be learned (Richardson, 2016). After the running record and comprehension is scored, a student can then be leveled using the Fountas and Pinnell scale, ranging from letters A to Z. A reader's benchmark independent level is found when they have 95-100% accuracy with excellent or satisfactory comprehension (Fountas & Pinnell, 2011). A reader's benchmark instructional level is found when they have 90-94% accuracy with excellent or satisfactory comprehension (Fountas & Pinnell, 2011).

It is important to note that the student's independent reading level is expected to increase by several levels throughout each grade level. For example, students in first grade should begin at a level D and end the year at a level J (Fountas & Pinnell, 2011). But, as the text complexity goes up throughout the reading levels, students begin to make less and less growth per school year. For example, students in fourth grade are expected to begin at a level P and end the school year at level S.

Guided Reading

The guided reading instructional model is a component of a balanced literacy program that has three main purposes: to meet the needs of all students in the classroom, to enable students to expand their reading ability, and to teach students to read instructional-level text with understanding and fluency (Iaquinta, 2006). With guided reading, a small group of four to six students with similar instructional needs meet with the teacher to explicitly learn comprehension strategies while reading a book that is on their instructional level. This approach to reading instruction provides teachers the opportunity to focus on what students need to learn in order to move forward (Iaquinta, 2006). Guided reading groups are formed to be flexible, and students are grouped based on instructional needs and similar instructional reading levels. This type of grouping allows students to support one another as readers and to feel part of the reading community (Iaquinta, 2006).

During an ideal emergent guided reading lesson, teachers start with reviewing sight words that were previously taught to students. The purpose of this is to build word automaticity in students, as well as to increase their visual memory (Richardson, 2016). Students are then introduced to the new text, where readers are able to preview and discuss pictures and are introduced to new vocabulary. The purpose of this is to help students make predictions while reading, as well as to build schema and extend their vocabularies (Richardson, 2016). After being introduced to the new book, students are then asked to read the book independently, while the teacher confers with individual students and prompts based on student needs (Richardson, 2016). The purpose of having students independently read is to help increase and extend student comprehension, as well as to reinforce reading strategies (Richardson, 2016). After students read the text, teachers model a new reading strategy based on anecdotal notes taken during the

independent piece (Richardson, 2016). During this time, teachers make explicit points that teach students a new word-solving or comprehension strategy to use in future independent reading time (Richardson, 2016). Students are then taught a new sight word during the word study activity where they are able to use letter manipulatives to develop phonemic awareness and phonics skills. Finally, students end the lesson with guided writing, where they are asked to write a sentence that is dictated by the teacher. The purpose of having students participate in a guided writing activity is to learn language structures, improve their formation of letters, and to practice spelling and conventions (Richardson, 2016).

The guided reading instructional model can be used in any classroom, as the reading lessons can be differentiated to reach all reading levels (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). While guided reading groups are occurring, the other students in the classroom should be participating in independent literacy activities. According to Richardson (2016), independent literacy activities give students an opportunity to engage in purposeful writing, reading, and listening practice while teachers work with individual students or small groups. In the primary classroom, an example of an independent literacy activity would be to have students draw pictures and write sentences retelling the important events that happened in the book that was read for the whole-class lesson. In order for students to be successful during this time, it is critical that they understand what is expected and the procedures for each activity (Richardson, 2016).

In order group students and pinpoint specific skills and strategies that students need to learn, teachers will need to use anecdotal notes and running record assessments. According to Richardson (2016), daily teacher involvement through listening, observing, and prompting is the key to reading acceleration. Since good assessment is the key for effective teaching, the assessments should help the teacher to tune in to how each student reads and comprehends text

(Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). In addition, a system for ongoing assessment is important when implementing the guided reading framework in a classroom (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012).

Typically, teachers use the book from the previous day's lesson to complete a running record to make decisions about future groupings and lessons (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012).

Effects of Guided Reading on Independent Reading Ability

Richardson (2016) states that guided reading is one of the “most important contemporary reading instructional practices in the United States”, and that the program has helped to “propel millions of children into successful independent reading” (p.8). One of the main goals of guided reading is to help readers to “confidently, proficiently, and independently process increasingly challenging texts” (p.8). Through the active learning that occurs during guided reading lessons, students can become better readers and move forward as independent readers.

Guided reading lessons can benefit an emergent reader's accuracy, fluency rate, and overall reading comprehension. Regarding accuracy, guided reading helps children to self-monitor, self-correct, and use word-solving strategies to decode challenging words (Iaquinta, 2006). In addition, teachers take running record assessments on individual students during the guided reading lesson. Through reading books on their instructional reading level, students can encounter challenges and use word-attack strategies to build automaticity and visual memory for words. In addition, guided reading helps students “learn to decode very well and read words with high accuracy” (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Guided reading also helps students with their fluency rates. Once students get to Level C instructionally, fluency instruction begins as part of the guided reading lesson. During the lesson, teachers can select a page to read with students and monitor if students pay attention to punctuation marks and read with expression (Richardson,

2016). Throughout the guided reading lesson, the central elements of accuracy, speed, and fluency are emphasized and become increasingly automatic with students (Jaquinta, 2006).

Regarding reading comprehension, the stories written at the emergent levels may not always lend itself to deep discussions (Richardson, 2016). With comprehension the goal of every guided reading lesson, teachers work with students on different comprehension strategies that will help them understand both fiction and nonfiction text. In regard to fiction text, teachers work with students to be able to retell the story, make connections to the story, ask and answering questions, and identifying the story elements (Richardson, 2016). With nonfiction texts, teachers help students identify main ideas and key details, make connections, and compare/contrast ideas (Richardson, 2016). In addition, while students read the new text, teachers can use effective questioning and prompting to gauge student understanding. Teachers also engage students in meaningful conversation about the story they read, which helps students to clarify and extend their understanding about the text.

Conclusion

Research suggests that one in three children experience significant difficulty learning how to read (Jaquinta, 2006). Further, research conducted in the past two decades concluded that children who fall behind in reading rarely catch up to grade-level by the time they reach fourth grade (Jaquinta, 2006). This literature review demonstrates that the guided reading instructional model provides each student, regardless of grade level or students' reading stage, the opportunity to become fluent, confident, and independent readers.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact that guided reading has on first grade students' Fountas and Pinnell benchmark performance levels.

Design

A quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design was used in this study to determine the effect of reading instruction on student first grade reading level. The pretest and posttest data were collected for this study in September 2019 and February 2020. The dependent variable for this study was the students' instructional reading level, which was measured using the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment. The independent variable was the explicit guided reading instruction. The researcher strategically placed students in small reading groups in order to have each participant read challenging books at their instructional reading level. In these small reading groups, the researcher was able to differentiate the instruction students were receiving, as well as be responsive and supportive to meet their reading goals.

Participants

The participants in this study were enrolled in a suburban public school in the Baltimore County school district. The school was identified as a Title 1 eligible school, and had a population of 612 enrolled students at the time of the study. Within the group of enrolled students, 58% are African American, 21% are Hispanic, 8% are White, 8% are Asian, and 5% are two or more races. In addition, 53% of the school's population is male, while 47% are female. Also, 9.5% of the school's enrolled population qualified for Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and less than 5% of students had 504 plans.

A convenience sample was used for the study, and participants were included in the intervention due to their low performance in reading. There were 23 first-grade students who participated in this study. Among the students who participated in the study, 48% were African American, 30% were Hispanic, 17% were Caucasian, and 5% were from two or more races. In addition, 74% of the students were male, and 26% were female. Within the group of students, there were also a range of academic abilities. In the sample, 87% of students were reading below grade level and 13% were on grade level. In addition, seven of the 23 students received special education services and had Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Also, among the students in the sample, 40% of students were receiving ESOL services.

Instrument

There was one instrument used in this study, which was the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System. The Benchmark Assessments are administered one-on-one as a student-teacher assessment conference. The classroom teacher typically delivers the assessment four times per year to document student progress across a school year and grade levels. The Assessment System consists of 26 level gradients, from the easiest at level A to the most challenging at level Z. Each gradient has two equivalent Benchmark Assessment books (one fiction and one nonfiction) for each of the levels from A to N. These Benchmark Assessment books are used to help teachers determine each student's Independent and Instructional reading level, plan effective and rigorous instruction, and identify children who need reading intervention. The assessment tool also gives the student a numerical score (0-3) for fluency and comprehension, as well as a percentage for their reading accuracy. The Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark system is mandated county-wide for all elementary teachers (K-5) to determine student's optimal reading levels.

According to the field study that was conducted by Heinemann Publishing, the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System is both a valid and reliable assessment that educators can use to assess students' reading levels (Heinemann Publishing, 2006). According to independent research teams, formative evaluations were conducted to ensure that the leveling of texts were valid, and that the Benchmark Assessment can reliably identify students independent reading levels. The research teams found that Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System books get progressively more difficult through the 26 level gradients, and that there was a strong association between the Benchmark Assessment System and other assessment measures (Heinemann Publishing, 2006).

Procedure

The researcher collected baseline data with the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment in September to determine students' current instructional reading levels. The data was analyzed to create four small reading groups of five to six students within the classroom. Each group met five times per week for 20 minutes during the classroom's literacy block. The groups were flexible, and changed as students progressed and met learning goals.

Over the course of 22 weeks, students received explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency. The students were exposed to both fiction and nonfiction texts, and the researcher chose books at students' instructional levels. Each lesson consisted of sight word review, an introduction to the new book, reading/discussing the new book, modeling a word-solving or comprehension strategy, word study, and guided writing. The researcher would take running records on students while listening to them read, and would confer with each student to help prompt students to use different fluency and word-solving strategies. The researcher also worked with students to be able to retell, ask and answer

questions, identify story elements, recall key details, and make connections to texts. Throughout the lessons, the researcher would provide the child with positive feedback, and would pick a “Rockin’ Reader” each lesson to help students build confidence in their reading abilities. At the beginning of February, post-test data was collected using the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System again.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact that guided reading has on first grade students’ Fountas and Pinnell benchmark performance levels. The Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark assessment was given to each student individually in September, and the researcher obtained an independent level for every student in February. Students were scored on the assessment using the Fountas and Pinnell Text Level Gradient (2016), twenty-six points starting at the easiest (Level A) to the most challenging (Level Z). As students progress through the levels, the A-Z gradient becomes a method to track student progress throughout their years learning to read. In regard to this study, the letters of the A-Z gradient were converted into numbers for analysis. Data relative to the students’ independent reading level growth is displayed in the figures below.

Table 1: *Scoring Table Used For Analysis*

A-Z Gradient Level	Number
AA	0
A	1
B	2
C	3
D	4
E	5

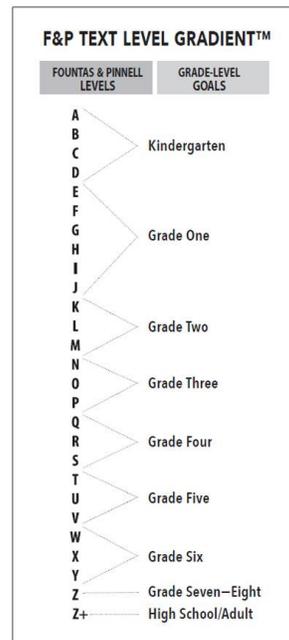


Figure 1: *Pre- and Post-Assessment Data*

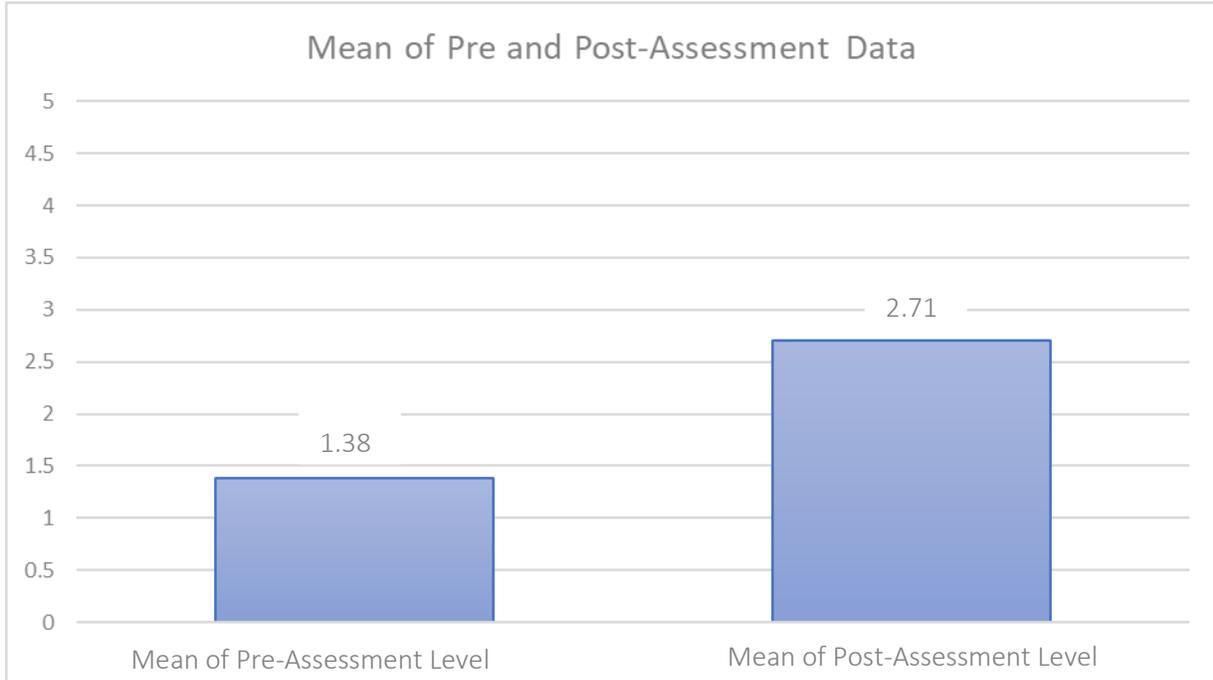


Table 2: *Descriptive Statistics for Pre- and Post-Intervention Scores*

Interval	N	Standard Deviation
Pre-Assessment	21	.973
Post-Assessment	21	1.309

This bar graph shows the mean on the pre-assessment data was 1.38, which significantly increased to a 2.71 on the post-assessment $t(20) = -4.93, p < .05$. The results indicated that 81% (n=17) of students demonstrated reading growth, while 19% (n=4) made no growth in their reading level. Students were identified as making growth if they moved at least one reading level on the Benchmark assessment. The results and their implications will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact that guided reading has on first grade students' reading levels. The data results indicated that 81% of students demonstrated at least one level of reading growth, while 19% of students demonstrated no growth in their Fountas and Pinnell level. Of the 81% of students that demonstrated at least one level of reading growth, 48% showed a growth of two or more reading levels. The study hypothesized that guided reading would have no effect on student reading levels. The null hypothesis is rejected, as the results indicated that the reading levels of students in the intervention group significantly improved over five months of daily guided reading instruction.

Implications of Results

The data implies that guided reading instruction had an impact on students' reading growth. This implication can be supported with the post-test data results, as 81% of students gained at least one level of reading growth. Seven out of the 21 students progressed one reading level when given the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark assessment, eight out of the 21 students progressed two reading levels, and two out of 21 students progressed more than three reading levels. Only four out of the 21 students made no progress on the Benchmark assessment. The pre-test data showed that nineteen out of 21 students were considered below grade-level expectations as defined by the Fountas and Pinnell Instructional Level Expectations (2012), while one student was meeting expectations, and one student was exceeding expectations. The post-test data showed that fifteen out of the 21 students were still considered below grade-level, five out of the 21 were approaching expectations, and one was meeting expectations.

The average reading level of students when starting the experiment was 1.36, or a Level A. Emergent readers who are at a Level A can identify uppercase and lowercase letters by name, can follow simple directions, and know at least eight letter sounds. Level A readers are also know the difference between printed words and pictures, and are beginning to learn that there is a relationship between letters and sounds. The post-assessment showed that the average had grown to a 2.71, which can be rounded to a Level C. By the time emergent readers can successfully read texts at a Level C, they know all the letters and their corresponding sounds, know how to track print from left-to-right, and are able to record consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) sounds in sequence. Also, students who are at a Level C are able to use meaning and structure to figure out unknown words, as well as are able to read and write about 30 sight words.

Theoretical Consequences

Chapter II discussed how guided reading was needed in a classroom's balanced literacy program, as it helps students to improve as independent readers. Findings in this study did suggest that guided reading instruction may have had an impact on students' reading growth. Although not all participants in the study made growth in their independent reading level, 81% of students moved at least one reading level on the Fountas and Pinnell scale. In addition, 23% of students moved from the emergent reading stage (Levels A-C) to the early reading stage (Levels D-I). Also, Chapter II discussed how the Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System measures each student's accuracy, self-corrections, comprehension, and fluency (Fountas & Pinnell, 2011). If further analysis was done on each of these components that contribute to a student's overall reading level, these students may have increased in these areas.

The literature review also noted that the guided reading instructional model could be used in any classrooms, as it can be differentiated to meet the needs of all reading levels (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). This study was conducted in a first grade, homogeneously grouped classroom. According to Fountas and Pinnell Text Level Gradient (2016), students are expected to start first grade at a Level D. When the subjects of this study were first assessed in September, 14% of the population was a Level AA (Pre-A Non-Reader), 48% were a Level A, 29% were a level B, and 4% were a level C. This leaves only 5% (1 student) to be meeting the grade-level expectancy of Level D at the beginning of first grade. As mentioned earlier, all but 1 of the students continued to be below the grade level expectancy for first grade in February which is E/F. The guided reading instructional model that was used in this study met the needs of the emergent readers in the classroom, which enabled the majority of participants to show significant progress by February's Benchmark assessment.

Threats to Validity

There were several threats to validity within this study. One threat to the validity of this study was the sampling methodology that was used. The researcher used a convenience sample when selecting the subjects of this study, which were the 21 students that were assigned to the researcher's classroom. There was no randomization when choosing the test subjects, which would have provided a wider range of results. In addition to this, a threat to the validity of this study was the sample size that was chosen. It is important to note that 19 out of the 21 students that were represented in the study were significantly below grade level expectations in reading. For the results of this study to be generalized for the population, the sample size would need to be randomly selected, be much larger, and academically representative of the entire first grade population.

Another threat to the validity of the results in the study would be that students could naturally improve their reading level just by being exposed to and engaged in literacy practices every day in the classroom. Students could improve their reading levels just by using the knowledge gained from their daily phonics and shared reading lessons. In addition to this, a threat to validity within this study was student attendance. Many of the participants in this study had attendance issues, which led them to be behind their peers in their guided reading group. This could affect student progress in reading, as regular school attendance plays a critical role in student learning.

Connections to Previous Studies/Existing Literature

According to Iaquita (2016), guided reading is an essential part of a balanced literacy program, and research over two decades has proven it to be an important strategy for emergent readers in their early years of language and literacy development. There have been many studies since the introduction of guided reading, with many focusing on how differentiating homogeneous, small-group instruction can help readers grow to be strong, independent readers. One comparative study conducted by Taylor, Short, Shearer, and Frye (1995) demonstrated how small-group instruction helped readers to proficiently read and comprehend challenging books that were at their instructional reading level. The study determined that the group receiving the small-group intervention did better than the comparison group, which did not receive any reading intervention. In addition, a study conducted by Chase Young (2019) concluded that guided reading instruction has a positive effect on primary students' independent reading levels. In the comparative study, the treatment group that received rigorous guided reading lessons each day increased from kindergarten reading levels to above grade level by the end of their second-grade year. This study suggested that small group guided reading instruction helped over 80% of the

subjects make growth in their independent reading level, and further validates claims that Guided reading improves the reading ability of emergent readers.

Implications for Future Research

Future research should continue to investigate the impact of guided reading instruction on students' independent reading levels, especially in primary classrooms. Based on the results of this study, additional research could be conducted over a longer period of time. Ideally, it would be beneficial to see how students performed on the Benchmark Assessments after receiving a full year of guided reading instruction, as this study only was conducted from September through February.

In addition, future research could enlarge the sample size from one first-grade classroom to all of the first-grade classrooms at the school. Researchers could also expand the sample size further by comparing first-grade classrooms at several schools that use guided reading as part of their literacy blocks. The results of this study cannot be generalized to the population of first-grade students, as it was only implemented to a homogeneously grouped classroom of subjects who were considered below grade-level in reading. But, if guided reading was administered to a larger sample size, then research could be conducted to determine if the reading program helped to enable all students of all reading stages to become more independent and skillful readers.

Conclusion

This study focused on the impact that guided reading has on first grade students' reading levels. With most of participants gaining at least one instructional reading level from the pre to posttest, it is evident that guided reading supports students in developing reading proficiency and is an essential component of a balanced literacy program in the primary grades.

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