

Effective Teaching Strategies
for Struggling Readers
in the Elementary Grades

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to better understand how classroom reading instruction can be improved to address the needs of struggling readers in the intermediate grades. The measurement tool was a questionnaire. This study involved use of descriptive study design to understand how elementary teachers address the needs of struggling readers in the classrooms. The participants were 12 elementary teachers ranging from kindergarten through third grade. Findings showed that classroom teachers employ a range of strategies adjusted for the primary goals of their grade level's reading program. However, further teacher training in literacy development and reading strategies could be beneficial to address struggling readers, especially as they move into the intermediate grades.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

One of teachers main responsibilities in the primary grades of school is to teach students how to read. The early intermediate grades teachers are then tasked with the job of shifting students from learning to read to reading to learn. The primary grade reading classroom structures itself around phonemic awareness, phonics, short stories, comprehension instruction and guided reading. Time is spent reading stories as a whole group, with the teacher as a model. Students are taught fun reading strategies such as “Lips the Fish” and “Eagle Eye.” Teachers model how students can use the images to understand and predict the words on a page. Time is spent phonetically tapping out unknown words with the comfort of a teacher up front leading the way.

The intermediate grades focus on building entirely different skill sets, working with the presumption that basic reading skills were mastered in kindergarten through second grade. The intermediate reading classroom requires students to independently read texts, process what they have read and create new meanings with what was presented. They are expected to be able to compare and contrast multiple texts, synthesize, and build off prior knowledge. Students actively make new meaning and create new understandings with texts. They become experts in examining text feature and genres, finding an author’s purpose and main ideas, identifying the theme, understanding symbolism, and other comprehension skills. This more advanced reading classroom is bursting with ways students can unlock knowledge by reading a text.

However, not every student comes to the intermediate grades as a reader, or proficient enough as a reader, to make this shift. Some students still have deficits in the fundamental skills needed in order to use what they are reading as a means of learning new content. This researcher became interested in this topic when making the shift from being a special education teacher in kindergarten and first grade to becoming a third-grade teacher. The massive differences in the reading classroom and instruction became immediately apparent. Teachers are given a curriculum that no longer includes phonics instruction time. Modeling of reading texts no longer includes how to identify sight words or decode unknown words, but includes ways to determine the central idea and combine multiple sources to support an idea. Students are taught to independently research and develop their own conclusions, and then to use that knowledge in writing pieces. Strategy instruction no longer has techniques with cute names, but includes ideas like annotating a text and finding the author's deeper meaning within a text.

This researcher noticed there was a significant portion of third-grade readers who still had not mastered fundamental reading skills and also did not have special education services. Reading interventions were quickly filled and not every student who had needs was given the chance for the extra support outside of the general education classroom. There were also not enough supports or flexibility built into the curriculum to help the classroom teacher address the needs of this group of learners. This researcher began to wonder how teachers can improve reading instruction inside the general education classroom to better target the needs of these struggling readers while maintaining true to the curriculum.

Statement of Problem

The purpose of this study is to investigate how educators instruct struggling readers in the primary and intermediate grades in order to close the achievement gap and bring these students closer to grade-level expectations.

Hypothesis

Due to the research being a descriptive study, there is not a hypothesis. The objective is to gain information about how teachers plan for and support struggling readers in order guide further teacher development.

Operational Definitions

For the purposes of this study, the following terms will be used and defined as they used in this paper:

- *Struggling Reader*: a reader who, despite being given appropriate reading instruction and putting forth adequate reading effort, is not meeting age-expected norms.
- *General Education Classroom*: classroom run by a general education teacher where the majority of students do not receive special education services. Classroom could include students with special education services and co-taught with a special education teacher.
- *Guided Reading*: Guided reading is a reading instruction technique that involves the teacher and students in small groups, sharing differentiated texts while the teacher models and coaches reading strategies.

- *Achievement Gap*: An achievement gap is the gap between student performance and standard grade-level expectations.
- *Instructional Level Text*: Text that is selected based on student reading performance on informal and formal assessments. This text presents some challenges to the reader where the reader is required to implement reading strategies and have supports from the teacher to read accurately.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview

The ability to read is a critical life skill, and this ability begins to develop as soon as a child is born and continues through their academic career. However, some students, despite receiving regular instruction, struggle to develop sufficient reading abilities in order to reach grade level expectancies. Reading instruction in the primary grades focuses on the development of phonemic and phonological awareness, phonics, and comprehension. Instruction is usually delivered in guided reading groups or through direct instruction using a variety of instructional approaches. Guided reading is often delivered in small groups where the teacher coaches students to apply knowledge and learned strategies on an instructional level text. Comprehension strategies focus on questioning of explicit information, developing connections, inferring, and synthesizing information. Vocabulary instruction is often embedded along the way and used as a means to deepen students' comprehension of a text or content knowledge.

As students shift into intermediate grades, reading instruction itself also makes a shift. Less focus is centered on phonics, and comprehension in terms of making higher level inferences is the main goal of reading instruction. Ability to connect multiple texts, determine central ideas and themes, recognize symbolism, and think deeply about a text and the authors' purpose are what students are often asked to do with a text. However, what about the students who did not master sufficient phonics skills to fluently apply them to grade level texts?

If students are entering the intermediate years without sufficient decoding and comprehension skills, then instruction being provided needs to address these learners and find ways to fill the gaps in these learners' abilities. The purpose of this literature review is to determine research-based methods that best suits this group of learners, and to prepare teachers on how to best instruct in order that they hopefully make strides towards grade level expectancies. Section one will discuss struggling readers and which areas students typically struggle the most with in terms of what is inhibiting their reading abilities. Section two overviews research-based instructional strategies for fluency, comprehension, and motivation, three key areas for struggling readers. Section three summarizes the best approaches to help struggling readers improve.

Struggling Readers and Their Areas of Need

A struggling reader is a reader who, despite being given appropriate reading instruction and putting forth adequate reading effort, is not meeting age-expected norms. Being identified as an at-risk or struggling reader is a key step for these students to receive appropriate instruction. Teachers gaining awareness of concepts of early literacy can help better identify students and provide a framework to think about individual students in order to identify strengths and weaknesses. Having a framework may even help teachers notice areas of weaknesses that might not have been caught when they are thinking more anecdotally about students (Bailey & Drummond, 2006). Early literacy instruction can be thought of as comprised of phonemic awareness, literature (sight words, word walls, vocabulary, reading buddies, access to various texts, etc.), phonics, oral language, drawing (interpreting illustrations), desire to read, and ongoing assessment. This framework gives a checklist for teachers to garner evidence from a

variety of sources to identify students who may have been unnecessarily selected due to biases, or not selected, and therefore helps to narrow down in which areas a student may be struggling (Bailey & Drummond, 2006). By identifying struggling readers, teachers can take appropriate measures to remediate the students.

Struggling readers may struggle in a variety of areas that impact their overall reading abilities, ranging from word identification skills and fluency to comprehension. As students approach the intermediate grades, generally their word identification skills (word recognition, phonics, word attack skills, etc.) impact their reading comprehension. “Word recognition automaticity is the ability of readers to decode words with so little cognitive effort that they can direct those cognitive energies to comprehension.

If readers have to invest too much of their cognitive energy in decoding words, less will be available for comprehension” (Rasinski, 2017, p. 520). Students who struggle to decode quickly and identify sight words often struggle with having the working memory to build comprehension while reading. Rasinski (2017) notes that 18% of students who are reading “below proficiency” were found to have good word identification and fluency skills. Additionally, 82% of students reading “below proficiency” were found to have difficulty identifying words and/or reading fluently. As students age into the fifth and sixth grade, word reading abilities still plague their overall reading abilities if their competencies were not developed.

Pearce and Gayle (2009) made similar conclusions in their study. Students who scored higher than benchmark norms in reading fluency measures had higher reading comprehension scores. They found predictive power in reading fluency to determine overall reading abilities (Pearce & Gayle, 2009). Chall’s (as cited in Little, Hart, Quinn,

Tucker & Taylor, 2017) reading stages move from learning to read to reading to learn. Stages 0-2 focus on the pre-reading and reading instructional stages. Stage 3 enters the phase where students begin to integrate new knowledge and information into what is being read. Stages 4 and 5 is where students reading comprehension goes deeper into making judgements about what is being read, integration of new ideas, and making understanding complex concepts. “Failure to reach proficiency by fourth grade suggests a failure to transition from Stage 2 to 3 of Chall's developmental model of reading. This failure puts students’ ‘reading to learn’ comprehension skills at risk and indicates severe challenges to future academic success” (Little et al., 2017, p. 934). While reading fluency does surely impact reading comprehension, reading comprehension strategies have been found to help increase reading fluency skills as comprehension provides a context for predictive word reading.

Reading comprehension involves a reader’s ability to make connections and develop coherence between information in the text and the reader’s prior knowledge (Hall, 2016). This ability is referred to as “inferencing.” A student’s ability to “inference” is highly predictive of their reading comprehension skills (Hall, 2016). Hall (2016) states that “There is increasing evidence to suggest that struggling readers have particular difficulty generating inferences and that inference-making difficulty is actually a cause of comprehension failure” (p. 2). Less proficient readers may actually benefit more from inferencing instruction than proficient readers (Hall, 2016).

Classroom Instruction Aimed at Struggling Readers

As previously mentioned, reading fluency directly impacts reading comprehension. Reading fluency is often impacted by poor phonological processing

skills, or decoding. Children who struggle with phonics tend to add, omit, substitute and reverse sounds and letters in words. This, in turn, impacts reading comprehension (Williams, 2008). To help improve reading fluency, multisensory phonics and word visualization instruction has proven to be effective in increasing reading abilities (Williams, 2008). Multisensory phonics is not typically an instructional strategy delivered in the intermediate grades but is vital for struggling readers to continue to develop their phonic skills. When phonics is taught in a multisensory fashion, having the student incorporate sound, sight, and movement, connections are forged in the brain that strengthens retention and synthezation of what is taught (Williams, 2008). Sight word visualization strategies help to increase recall times, improving fluency.

Inferencing strategies also aim to help increase overall reading comprehension. Inferencing strategies focus on the students developing the ability to connect prior knowledge to text information to create meaning (Hall, 2016). Inference instruction can be taught in a three-part method: identifying clue words and linking them together, question generating training and prediction training, hypothesizing what might happen in a text, and text-to-self connection training. Struggling readers also struggle with shifting away from looking at words as forms, such as when decoding, to meaning, as needed in comprehension (Zipke, Ehri & Cairns, 2009). Training students to have metalinguistic ambiguity abilities, essentially the knowledge that words and sentences can have more than one meaning, can help increase reading comprehension skills, thereby raising overall reading abilities. This allows readers as they read to gain understanding. For example, a little girl tickling a baby with a stuffed bear implies that either the little girl or the baby is in possession of the bear. Zipke et al. (2009) share that children who develop “an ability

to detect structural ambiguities...(have) scores that are significant predictors of their third-grade reading scores” (p. 301). To improve this ability, students can be taught to reprocess ambiguous words, sentences, and riddles until the second meaning became evident.

Metacognitive strategy instruction can also help increase reading comprehension abilities. The brain seeks patterns and heavily relies on visuals to create meaning (Diebold, 2011). Teaching students how to utilize thinking maps while reading can help create the patterns that the brain needs to make meaning and therefore boost comprehension. These thinking maps help employ cognitive and metacognitive strategies, such as realizing when the text is failing to make meaning. These strategies help increase comprehension as it gives a framework for students to understand when cognition has failed and how to remediate their understanding (Diebold, 2011).

Students who are struggling readers struggle not only with their fluency/decoding and comprehension. Struggling readers also struggle with finding the motivation to put toward the task of reading when previously they have only met with frustration and failure. If students do not have motivation to read, then the amount of time spent reading is decreased, which further impacts their deficits. Their self-efficacy is also generally also lower, resulting in decreased intrinsic motivation (Wigfield, Guthrie, Tonks, & Perencevich, 2004). “We believe that children's motivation for reading will be optimal when they are intrinsically motivated to read and they believe that they are efficacious at reading” (Wigfield et al., 2004, p. 303). Teachers can help improve motivation in their students by creating engagement in reading such as having hands-on activities paired with a text for students to employ their learning from the text, and working on increasing

the students' feeling of autonomy (Wigfield et al., 2004). Students who have stronger self-efficacy show greater motivation toward the act of reading and willingness to work longer on harder tasks (McCabe & Margolis, 2001). "Thus, it is critical to help struggling readers develop an accurate belief that they can do well in reading if they make the effort to learn and apply what they are taught" (McCabe & Margolis, 2001, p. 45). Teachers can foster this development by starting with smaller, more achievable tasks, helping students set short-term goals, privately conference with students, and using student models of reading, among others (McCabe & Margolis, 2001).

Summary

Struggling readers in the late primary and intermediate grades generally struggle with their decoding and fluency skills which, in turn, impact their reading comprehension. Instruction that provides phonics instruction through multi-sensory approaches and word identification skills paired with higher order thinking comprehension strategies can help these readers bridge the gap to grade-level expectancies. Essentially, classroom instruction should be balanced (Duffy-Hester, 1999). Instruction should provide a variety of methods or be eclectic. Teachers should pick and choose bits based on research that match the needs of their students (Duffy-Hester, 1999). It is important for teachers not to subscribe to any one method or reading program. Often commercial programs are not found to be effective by reliable studies (Allington, 2013). "...Of the 153 different reading programs reviewed by the WWC [What Works Clearinghouse], only one had 'strong evidence' that it improved reading achievement" (Allington, 2013, p. 522). Essentially, teachers employing various techniques and methods aimed in improving fluency and reading comprehension through

higher-order thinking for struggling readers is what is needed to improve the reading performance of late primary and early intermediate struggling readers.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Design

The purpose of this study was to identify ways in which reading teachers in the primary and early intermediate grades instruct struggling and at-risk readers within the general education reading classroom. The design of this study was descriptive. This study used a questionnaire sent out to teachers to identify ways in which they work with struggling readers and understand reading instruction. The results were then reviewed, and a summary of results will be presented in Chapter IV.

Participants

The population that is of interest for this study is American elementary teachers. The target population was teachers who taught kindergarten through third grade. The sample group was selected through non-random sampling. The sample that was used in this study were teachers in grades kindergarten through third from an elementary school in Harford County, Maryland. There were 12 teachers who participated in this study. Five teachers taught kindergarten, one taught first grade, three taught second grade, and three taught third grade. The participants ranged in teaching experience from two through 23 years of teaching experience.

Instrument

The instrument that was utilized in this study was an online questionnaire. This instrument was created by this researcher and their research advisor. The survey was created to gain information on how elementary teachers understand their reading program and ways in which they help struggling readers within their classroom. It contained five

open-ended questions and was piloted for clarity and to identify any leading questions prior to being sent to the research participants. The five open-ended questions are shared in Appendix A at the end of this paper.

Procedure

Once the sample group was selected and the instrument used was piloted, the survey was sent out to the research participants. All participants were given the same set of directions for completing the survey. They were instructed to reflect on their teaching practices in terms of reading instruction and then to answer the questions in the survey to the best of their abilities. Teachers were given two weeks to respond to the survey. Once the surveys were submitted, the results were reviewed by the researcher. A summary of the results will be shared in Chapter IV.

Chapter IV combined with Chapter V

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As mentioned prior, the purpose of this study was to determine how educators instruct struggling readers in the primary and intermediate grades in order to close the achievement gap closer to grade-level expectations. This was examined through an online questionnaire with free, open-ended responses. These two combined chapters will organize the information gathered for the reader based on each question in short sections. All participants are from the same school.

Question One

The first question was, “What is the basic thing underlying the reading program for your grade assignment? (sight words, phonics, multisyllabic word decoding, comprehension, synthesizing information from multiple texts, etc.)” Responses fell into four main categories: comprehension, phonics/phonemic awareness, reading fluency, and in-text decoding strategies. Five of the participants shared that reading comprehension was the basic thing underlying their reading program. The teachers who had this response, interestingly, were second and third-grade teachers, with one outlier in kindergarten. The kindergarten teachers discussed phonemic awareness, phonics, and decoding strategies as the basic thing. One kindergarten teacher shared that their reading program was Wilson’s Foundations, which focuses on phonemic awareness, phonics, and sight words.

Question Two

Question 2 was, “Students come with various strengths; what do you do to differentiate for these students?” Ten out of the twelve responses involved some sort of

discussion of providing leveled or differentiated texts or assignments. Assessing student strengths and needs, and using information gathered from such to plan for instruction was mentioned in three different responses. Teachers also discussed how they regroup their students as a grade-level based on strengths and weaknesses. Another common response was also using small group instruction to accommodate for students. Also, differentiated reading strategies or word lists instruction were shared as a popular response. One teacher discussed pairing stronger readers with struggling readers for peer modeling. Reading interventions were also discussed as another means for differentiating based on student needs.

Question Three

The third question teachers were presented was, “What reading strategies do you try to embed into your classroom instruction for struggling readers? (struggling readers= a reader that, despite appropriate reading instruction and adequate reading effort, is not meeting age expected norms.).” Five teachers had responses that included utilizing some sort of visual or picture cues with the text to help build reading skills for struggling readers. Teachers in kindergarten all discussed using reading strategies such as “Stretchy the Snake,” “Eagle Eye,” and “Lips the Fish.” Two of the third-grade teachers discussed how they use buddy reading for struggling readers with students from the upper grades, and small group instruction. One third-grade teacher shared she makes sure to chunk the text, stops them more frequently to ask clarifying questions, gives opportunities for repeated readings, and pairs all of this with metacognition strategies. Another third-grade teacher shared how they try to incorporate ways for the student to learn alternative strategies to access text, such as text-to-voice features online and giving students more

verbal opportunities to share their learning. One second-grade teacher shared more advance reading comprehension strategies such as story-mapping, locating the main idea, and using text features to aid comprehension of longer, more difficult texts. There is a clear difference in teaching techniques for struggling readers from kindergarten to third grade, which also matches up with the different “by end of year” goals of their reading classroom.

Question Four

“If you work with a special educator(s), how do you divide duties and what is your approach to doing this?,” was presented as the next question. Three of the 12 participants do not work with a special educator. For the nine who do co-teach reading with a special educator, four had similar responses involving some sort of small-group or station teaching with the special educator. Two revealed that they try to see the classroom as equal shares, and that regardless of educational status of the students, both teachers work with and are responsible for the learning of all students. Two others shared that they see themselves as the standards/curriculum expert while the special educator is the accessibility expert. They try to tackle lesson planning as such and make it an equal, collaborative process. Two other participants shared that they lesson plan while the special educator focuses on modifying and accommodating the materials for the struggling readers.

Question Five

Question five had the widest range of responses and was, “If you were giving a recommendation(s) (if you were asked to be a mentor) to a brand new teacher at the beginning of the year about teaching reading, what would it be?” One teacher stressed

the importance of analyzing and understanding reading assessment to best understand and plan for the needs of your students. Another teacher shared to constantly consult the Career and College Readiness Standards frequently, and use that to help plan your instruction. The importance of planning and collaborating with your grade is important to be an effective reading teacher was common among teacher responses. Utilizing small groups, differentiated texts and guided reading were also commonly discussed. Four teachers mentioned finding texts that are motivating and interesting to students is important. One teacher shared it's important to listen to your students read as much as possible. Two teachers mentioned frequent reviews of phonics and reading comprehension strategies is important. Lastly, two teachers mentioned the need for constant positive praise to help build confidence and motivation.

Implications of Results

The implications of this study show that teachers have some great strategies and ideas on how to meet the needs of struggling readers. However, more teacher development in the areas of literacy development and teaching strategies for struggling readers who have not mastered the basics in primary grades is a possible area of need. Learning to read is a complex process, and understanding that process in all its stages is vital for knowing how to target and deliver effective instruction to help close achievement gaps. Having further professional development on understanding the stages of literacy development in the early primary grades and how to pair that knowledge with the given curriculum could produce enhanced targeted instruction at struggling readers to aid in preventing an achievement gap before it even occurs. Intermediate grade teachers may benefit from having phonics instruction professional development. None of the

third-grade teachers discussed incorporating phonics instruction into their strategies for struggling readers. For students who have not mastered these skills in the primary grades, it is imperative they receive instruction in their reading classroom and reading instruction to best benefit, not just from a pull-out intervention with no carry over into the general education classroom.

Threats to Validity

There are possible threats to the validity of this descriptive study. There is an external and internal threat to validity with how this study was presented due to the restrictions of Covid-19 pandemic. The sample that was sent the survey used for this study was a group of teachers that this researcher knew and worked with previously. An internal threat to validity could be the small sample size. One can fairly assume that answers were truthful though, so we can assume generalizability of the findings of this study.

Connections to Existing Literature

Many of the strategies the third-grade teachers mentioned are evidence-based and were outlined in Chapter II such as metacognitive strategies and building motivation. There are others that could be paired in to benefit struggling readers, as explored in Chapter II. Instruction in identifying metalinguistic ambiguities morphology, and improving word recognition automaticity could be added to intermediate teachers' arsenals to help close the gaps. Metacognitive strategies such as thinking maps were found to improved reading comprehension skills in fourth graders (Diebold, 2011). Similar strategies could be employed in third grade. Building motivation and student self-efficacy is another key factor in helping these struggling readers. Based on this

researcher's experience, students who struggle to read by the time to enter third grade with proficiency tend to develop negative self-views about their abilities. Efficacy is low amongst these students and they already display learned helplessness tendencies. If teachers can improve the motivation for these students, they could reroute these students to success. Students must also be motivated before any true learning for other strategy instruction can occur.

Implications for Future Research

Due to Covid-19, the research for this study was unable to be completed as plan. Possible future research could involve, and not be limited, to classroom observations and in-person discussion. Classroom observations could include observing the real-time teaching behavior of teachers and the learning behaviors of struggling readers to see how teachers attempt to overcome the challenges a struggling reader may face. In-person discussions may be beneficial as teachers might provide more information and insight than to a free-response questionnaire. An experimental study could also be implemented to discover which teaching and reading strategies are most effective within the general education classroom for struggling readers, which was originally planned for this study.

Conclusions

This study shed light into how real classroom teachers approach the needs of struggling readers and attempt to close student achievement gaps closer to grade-level standards. Teachers bring different strategies to the table and adapt strategies towards the primary purposes of their grade's reading programs. Further teacher training addressing literacy development, and how to specifically aid struggling readers behind differentiated

texts could be an area of focus for schools who would like to see reading scores improved.

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Appendix A

ED 606 Action Research

Questionnaire for Elementary Teachers about Reading

* Required

Name/School: *

Your answer _____

Grade taught last school year *

- Kindergarten
- 1st grade
- 2nd grade
- 3rd grade

What is the basic thing underlying the reading program for your grade assignment? (sight words, phonics, multisyllabic word decoding, comprehension, synthesizing information from multiple texts, etc.) *

Your answer _____

Students come with various strengths; what do you do to differentiate for these students? *

Your answer _____

What reading strategies do you try to embed into your classroom instruction for struggling readers? (struggling readers= a reader that, despite appropriate reading instruction and adequate reading effort, is not meeting age expected norms.) *

Your answer _____

If you work with a special educator(s), how do you divide duties and what is your approach to doing this? *

Your answer _____

If you were giving a recommendation(s) (if you were asked to be a mentor) to a brand new teacher at the beginning of the year about teaching reading, what would it be? *