

Examining Reading Comprehension: Implementing the Close Reading Strategy with General
Education and Special Education Students

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assist students enrolled in a high school special education English class to improve their reading comprehension skills and reading stamina to enable them to perform satisfactorily on achievement exams as well as on class assessments.

Study participants were students enrolled in general education and special education students in the co-taught setting. The Performance Series Assessment was administered as both a pre and post-test assessment. The intervention used was the Close Reading Strategy and was implemented into four lessons throughout the year and assessed with a standardized Maryland Comprehensive Assessment Program (MCPA) rubric. The results of the study, when considering the growth of students' Lexile Scores in general and special education groups, suggested that the Close Reading Strategy was not the most effective strategy for helping students improve their reading achievement. However, when breaking down students' writing assignments from the Close Reading Strategy lessons, there was significant growth in both groups.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

Every subject that students study in school offers unique specialized content and background knowledge. This specialized content can create challenges for students in making connections across the different curriculums they study. For example, frequently it is assumed reading comprehension skills influence student performance only in the English and Language Arts classrooms. However, reading comprehension is an essential skill students need to enable them to be successful in all school subjects. Without proper reading comprehension skills, students lack the ability to understand what they read. Eichelberger (2010) explains that not only is reading comprehension a skill to help students improve academically, but it also can help students improve their lives professionally, influence their personal lives, and increase the enjoyment and effectiveness of reading.

A study by Gulla and Fink (2012) concluded that when students struggle and have deficits with reading comprehension, reading becomes a frustrating and unpleasant experience. This unpleasant experience causes students to “shut down” and refuse to continue reading. When students do not read, they lose necessary skills, not only in comprehension but in areas such as reading stamina, fluency, and phonetics. Gulla and Fink reflect that low reading comprehension paired with the lack in reading stamina affects students’ achievement exams, classroom grades, and overall behavior in the classroom.

As a grade 10 English teacher, the researcher had the unique opportunity to teach in a co-taught classroom, with a special educator. In the co-taught class, the researcher worked with students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs), 504 plans, and Behavior Interventions Plans

(BIPS), along with general education students. During her work with students, she observed that her students who received special education services as well as some of her lower performing general education students, have difficulty referring back to the text and analyzing it to find answers, as well as staying focused while reading chapters of a story, unless the reading was accommodated to meet their needs in understanding.

Observing struggles in reading comprehension experienced both by students with disabilities and by general education students prompted the researcher to find strategies that would help her students achieve success with both reading understanding and reading stamina. The researcher considered that an improvement in reading comprehension also would help improve the classroom environment, as well as the students' overall academic success, as observed in Ness's study (2016). She decided to use the reading comprehension tool of the Close Reading Strategy and to test the reading strategy on general education and special education students, to learn if this strategy would help to improve students' reading comprehension and stamina.

Statement of Problem

The purpose of this study was to assist students enrolled in a high school special education English class to improve their reading comprehension skills and reading stamina to enable them to perform satisfactorily on achievement exams as well as on class assessments.

Hypothesis

General education and special education students participating in the instructional settings will improve in reading comprehension when introduced to and given an opportunity to practice the Close Reading Strategy.

Operational Definitions:

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions were used for the terms listed below:

- ***Close Reading Strategy*** is a strategy that asks students to carefully and purposefully read and reread text. Students are required to annotate and focus on what the author has to say, the author's purpose, what words mean, and what the structure of the text tells them.
- ***Achievement Exams*** are assessments of developed knowledge or skill. The most common type of achievement exams are standardized tests, such as the ones required by a state department of education. The scores often are used to determine the level of instruction for which a student is prepared.
- ***Class Assessments*** refer both to a teaching approach and a set of instructional techniques. Classroom assessments differ from standardized tests because their purpose is improved performance at the classroom rather than for purposes of grading or benchmarking. Results are used to assist teachers to understand students' learning to enable them to improve their teaching.
- ***Reading Comprehension*** is the act of understanding and interpreting what one is reading.
- ***Reading Stamina*** refers to students having the energy and the concentration to focus on reading for at least thirty continuous minutes a day.
- ***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.

- ***General Education Classroom*** is a classroom conducted by a general education teacher in which the students do not receive special education services.
- ***Co-taught Classroom*** is a general education classroom, where the student body is comprised of both general education students and students receiving special education services. The classroom is a co-taught setting where both a general educator and special educator are present to meet the needs of the students.
- ***An Individual Education Plan or IEP*** is a legal document or plan that lays out the program of special education instruction, supports, and services a child needs in order to make progress in the classroom.
- ***A 504 plan*** covers students who do not meet the criteria for special education but who still require some accommodations in the general education setting in order to be successful.
- ***Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPS)*** are three part plans put in place for students who misbehave to help them stay on track in the classroom. The first part lists the problem behavior, the second part describes what is occurring in the classroom, and the third part of the BIP puts in strategies and supports to help the student.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to present issues that occur when students with disabilities struggle with reading comprehension and stamina. The review explores both the positive and negative effects of reading comprehension. The review highlights the effects of low reading comprehension on both negative student behavior in the classroom as well as poor self-perception. However, in turn, the review also explores how growth in students' reading comprehension and stamina can be impacted through metacognitive strategies, professional development for teachers, teachers changing their beliefs in the classroom, as well as teachers working to help change students' own perceptions of themselves. Part one offers a context for the study. Part two explains the importance of reading comprehension. Part three explains reading stamina, and part four describes effective strategies for improvement.

Reading Comprehension and Stamina

Reading comprehension is the act of understanding what one is reading. While the definition can be stated simply, the act is not simple to teach, learn, or practice. Learning Point Associates (2004) offers a detailed description of the five essential pillars of reading; reading comprehension is one of the pillars, along with phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and fluency. When one of these pillars is affected, or being built slowly, it in turn can affect other pillars and aspects of reading, such as reading stamina. Robb and Robb (2016) indicated that reading stamina is having the energy and the concentration to focus on reading for at least 30 continuous minutes a day. When students struggle and have deficits with reading comprehension, reading becomes a frustrating and unpleasant experience, affecting the stamina to read as well. With low reading comprehension and stamina, students' performance on achievement exams and

classroom grades are affected.

Importance of Reading Comprehension

Eichelberger's research (2010) stresses the benefits of reading comprehension for individuals, explaining that reading provides the gateway for many opportunities in life. To facilitate understanding for learning and constructing meaning, students must utilize active reading skills. Eichelberger states that students often are told, the more you read, the smarter you are, which in turn, strengthens your voice when making a choice for yourself. Simply stated, reading is a necessity. Eichelberger further reflects that having both low reading comprehension and frustrations while reading have affected students' post-secondary options, causing many students to lack college readiness skills.

Among common challenges affecting reading comprehension are factors that involve emotional behaviors, learning disabilities, and issues related to self-perception. Brock (1996) states that students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) score lower in reading comprehension than do their general education peers. The statistics from Brock's study indicated that the more severe the ADHD symptoms students exhibited, the lower their reading comprehension scores were. In a study published by Vaughn (2015), the researchers recognized that students with disabilities were more likely to achieve at lower levels in reading comprehension than their regular general education students. The researchers noted that students who met the criteria for low reading comprehension, improved significantly when receiving reading interventions, when compared to students with disabilities in the business-as-usual and dropout-prevention-without-reading conditions, (Vaughn et al., 2015). Finally, studies such as those reported by Gulla and Fink (2012) suggest that students' self-perceptions were another obstacle to achievement, and for student who were aware of their disability, it the obstacle was

even greater.

Gulla and Fink (2012) explain that when students have low perceptions of themselves, this negative perception affects their behavior in the classroom because they do not consider themselves as members of the “literacy club.” The poor self-perception students have of themselves cannot be addressed simply by simply persuading them that becoming a fluent reader is worth the effort needed to acquire important skills. These students most often make a deliberate effort to distance themselves from the classroom environment, the expectations and behavior that coincide with school, and the people within the school setting as well, (Gulla & Fink). In this study they noticed low level and struggling readers also demonstrated low levels of on-task behavior. In this study, students with lower levels of reading comprehension were likely to exhibit signs of frustration and to act out with negative behavioral issues. Convincing these students that they can do well in school without losing their identities requires patience, understanding, and the ability to build relationships (Gulla & Fink).

It is important that teachers reflect on their beliefs and perspectives regarding students who exhibit behavioral problems, and instead, consider these students’ learning struggles, their self-perception, and their low reading comprehension. One strategy that has been used to help raise reading comprehension has been to allow for more student choice. A study reported by Taylor (2005) revealed a direct correlation between student/text interest and reading comprehension. Taylor was able to change her perceptions of the students, and instead, find fault in the curriculum. Taylor concluded that if students had choice in selecting some works and felt in control and connected to the material, they were more willing to try to be successful. Gulla and Fink (2012) emphasized patience in persuading students that becoming a fluent reader is worth some effort. These researchers focused on building relationships in which students would

feel understood and cared for. Their research emphasized what students' reading comprehension can accomplish when a teacher has the skill and background knowledge to create and offer an environment that promotes acceptance, self-worth, and learning. Ness (2016) demonstrated that by adjusting and informing teachers' knowledge and perception of reading comprehension, teachers were more willing to change and restructure their instructional decisions to benefit their students. The researcher concluded that when teachers are willing to change their attitudes about instruction, the students benefit, and reading comprehension improves. Positive attitudes among teachers enable students to feel more comfortable in the classroom setting and become willing to learn and grow in reading comprehension (Ness).

Reading Stamina

A limiting factor in development of students' reading skills and an impediment to classroom management for teachers is the ability for students to read independently for significant periods of time. This task is considered reading stamina. Building reading stamina improves students' attention span, trains-muscle memory, and supports students' ability to read for extensive periods of time (Trainin et al., 2015). When building students' reading fluency, educators also are building students' reading stamina. Increasing students' reading stamina enables them to feel successful as independent readers, as well as helping them prepare for and be successful with achievement exams during which they may have to read for lengths at a time.

Difficulties with reading stamina appear to be evident among many individuals with learning disabilities in reading, in part because students with disabilities tend to struggle with reading comprehension and reading fluency. Reading fluency is the ability to read text not just accurately, but also quickly and effortlessly. Costello (2016) describes two patterns of reading difficulties among students who experience reading disabilities. The first pattern occurs when a

student struggles with word accuracy and has a slower and more labored reading pace. The second pattern reflects that after remediation in phonemic awareness and phonics, the student has success at achieving accurate word decoding but still reads slowly when compared with their peers (Costello).

As is the case with students' reading comprehension, Gulla and Fink (2012) recognize that students' perceptions of themselves correlate with their poor reading stamina. For students with disabilities, especially students with ADHD, building stamina is a trying task. However, Gulla and Fink suggest the teacher's perception and will help change students' self-perceptions and motivate them to building their reading stamina. Common problems associated with students who lack reading strategy are off task behavior and class disruptions, resistance, and frustration, as well as refusal to complete work. However, despite the problems in the classroom, and the disabilities regarding learning, Gulla and Fink state that there are strategies that can improve reading comprehension and stamina, thereby helping to alleviate poor classroom behavior and disruptions.

Effective Strategies for Improvement

The studies cited above highlight correlation between reading comprehension and stamina and issues faced by students with disabilities. However, these studies also have presented effective strategies for improving both reading comprehension and stamina, as well as the importance of metacognitive strategies.

Metacognitive strategies refer to methods used to help students understand the way they learn. In other words, it means that educators teach students to think about their thinking. In Gannaio's study (2017), the researchers used two strategies with two different groups of English Language Arts (ELA) students. One group received daily enrichment instruction dealing with

verbal metacognitive strategies, while the second group received instruction in verbal, as well as written strategies. The research findings suggested that regardless of the method or strategy used, metacognitive strategy instruction is effective and resulted in a more significant increase in student reported use of strategies as well in their improved performance on reading tasks, (2017).

With regard to changing teachers' beliefs and perceptions regarding students' reading performance, the importance of which is described above, a study in the journal *Language Arts* (2002) discusses the success of an approach in which teachers apprenticed students. The apprenticeship begins when teachers allow students into their own personal worlds of reading by sharing the reading comprehension strategies, they do subconsciously (Gebhard et al.). This strategy is based upon teaching students the metacognitive strategies, by having teachers model how they themselves think about thinking while reading. Finally, in order to help teachers become experts in metacognitive strategies, Gebhard's study, as well as that of Rains (2016), advise that teacher professional development be part of the approach to assisting students.

Summary

Having the ability to read independently for an extended time, as well as the ability to comprehend what one is reading, are two necessary skills for academic success in both the secondary and post-secondary environment. Students with disabilities are more likely to achieve below grade level in both of these areas of reading. When students experience lower levels of reading achievement, they often experience frustration, and exhibit other emotional behaviors that result in acting out within the classroom environment. With the help of metacognitive strategies, professional development for teachers, teachers changing their beliefs regarding students' behavior and achievement in the classroom, as well teachers working to help change students' own perceptions of themselves, growth in student reading comprehension and stamina will follow.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Design

The purpose of this study was to implement the reading comprehension strategy, the Close Reading Strategy into the curriculum, to improve student reading comprehension, stamina, and overall success in the classroom and on achievement assessments. This study had a quasi-experimental design. The study included two treatment groups. These groups were special education students and general education students. The Performance Series Pre-test was administered to students at the beginning of the year. Following the pretest, the Close Reading Strategy was administered to students in four lessons throughout the year. Following the implementation of the Close Reading Strategy where students were assessed using a Maryland Comprehensive Assessment Program (MCAP) standardized rubric, students were given another Performance Series Post-test. The classroom lessons during which the Close Reading Strategy was used mirrored the Performance Series test in that it gave students a story to read and annotate, presented reading comprehension questions, required written responses, and then were graded by a standardized rubric.

Participants

The participants in this study were students in the researcher's 10th grade, 2019-2020 co-taught English classes. There was a total of 56 participants that ranged in age from 15-18 years. Twenty-two of the participants were Caucasian. Thirty were African American. The remaining two participants were Hispanic. Seven of the students participating were juniors repeating their English 10 course, and seven were second year high schoolers who were still at freshmen status, meaning they did not pass enough classes during their previous school year to be a credited

sophomore.

Instrument

In this study, the independent variable used to improve the students' reading comprehension scores was the Close Reading Strategy. The Close Reading Strategy was implemented in the same four lessons to each of the groups of learners. The lessons included the readings of Ovid's *Daedalus and Icarus*, Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter's from Birmingham Jail", Kurt Vonnegut's *Harrison Bergeron*, and Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery*. Each lesson included a model of the Close Reading Strategy offered by the teacher or through video from the HMH Collections series; the tools to allow student access to making annotations; a set of integrated reading comprehension questions; and a written response requiring students to use text evidence to support their response. Each lesson was graded for annotations, correct multiple-choice answers in reading comprehension, and used the MCAP standardized rubric for the written response.

To determine if the Close Reading Strategy had been successful in helping students improve their comprehension, their growth was measured through the use of a pre and post-test. Both tests were completed with Scantron, Performance Series Assessment. The Performance Series Pre-test is a Maryland State and Harford County Public Schools requirement that students complete in September and May of each school year. The assessment presents students with several different types of readings, paired with reading comprehension questions and written responses, and at the conclusion of the assessment, gauges their Lexile Reading Level to track and monitor their growth. It provides a fixed form, highly target assessment, as it measures core subject benchmarks, standards tracking, and growth.

Procedure

The research study procedures needed to be adapted to meet COVID-19 guidelines and testing protocols. Ideally, the researcher would have preferred to be in person and use the same pre and post-test in order to have a more accurate measure of growth. When administering the pre-test, the Performance Series Assessment was administered online to in-person learners. The directions were scripted, meaning that they needed to be read verbatim, and the test administrator could not deviate from or elaborate upon the directions. Test administration required following the script, adhering to test protocol, and certain student questions could not be answered. Students were lead through the directions, provided with a scripted test example, and then allotted 90 minutes to complete the test.

The Close Reading Strategy was implemented in four different lessons throughout the year. Each lesson had a warmup, a model of the proper use of the Close Reading Strategy, a discussion on the strategy, and completing one reading comprehension question as a class. Then, students were guided to finish reading, annotating, and answering questions. To respond to accommodations for special education students, the reading was chunked, or broken up, by integrating the questions within the passage, instead of having all the questions listed at the end of the reading. The accommodation was made for all students participating in the study. Finally, students were given a closure. At the end of each lesson students were asked to write a prose constructed response (PCRS) using evidence from their reading. These PCRS were graded using the MCAP standardized argument essay rubric for grades 9-10. Students' responses were charted after each lesson to map growth.

For the posttest, students were administered another Performance Series Assessment test

used previously as the pre-test. The post-test occurred at the end of the year for students; however, it was completed completely virtual from the students' homes. While the questions differed from that of their pre-test students had to read several passages, were given reading comprehension questions between each passage, and then asked to do a PCR using references to two of the three readings.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

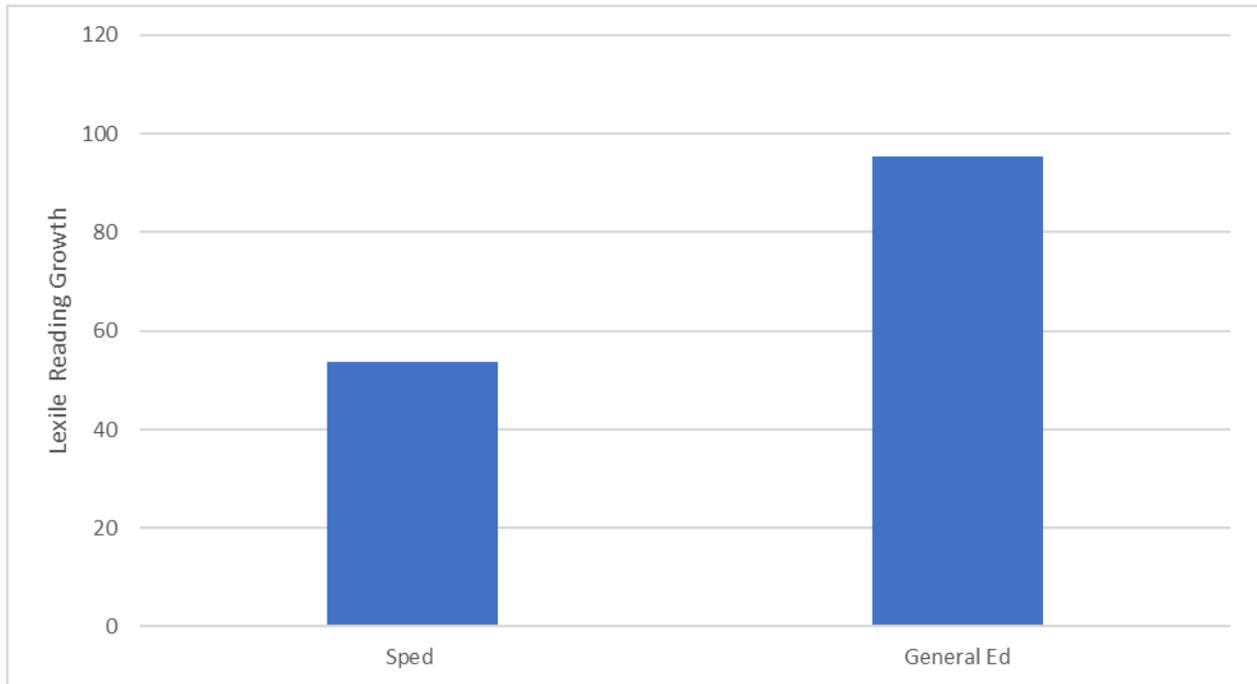
Design

The purpose of this study was to implement the reading comprehension strategy, the Close Reading Strategy, within the curriculum to improve students' reading comprehension, stamina, and overall success in the classroom and on achievement assessments. Pre and Post Performance Series Assessment Lexile Scores were compared to find students' individual Lexile Growth Scores in order to learn if the Close Reading Strategies implemented throughout the year helped students improve their reading comprehension. An independent groups *t*-test revealed that there was not a statistically significant difference in Lexile Growth Scores between students in special education ($M = 53.66, SD = 78.20, n = 35$), as compared to students in general education ($M = 95.26, SD = 173.18, n = 19$), with a small effect size, $t(52) = -1.22, p > .05, d = .31$, as depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Bar Graph of Lexile Reading Growth between Special Education and General Education

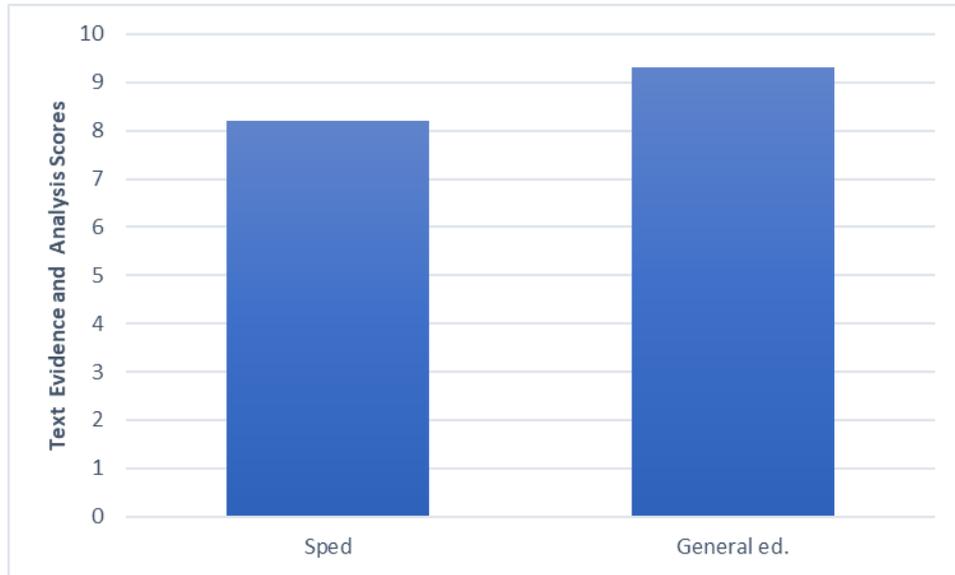
Students using the Performance Series Assessment (N = 55)



Because the standard deviation was much larger than the mean, indicating that there was large variability between students, the research also tested for differences between special education and general education students in their growth during the four Close Reading Activities using the Maryland Comprehensive Assessment Program (MCAPP) standardized argumentative writing assessment rubric. The researcher evaluated Reading Comprehension by comparing growth in students' scores in the text evidence/text analysis section of the MCAPP writing rubric. The second independent groups' *t*-test revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in reading comprehension scores for special education students ($M = 8.19$, $SD = 2.36$, $n = 36$), as compared to general education students ($M = 9.32$, $SD = 1.70$, $n = 19$), with moderate effect size, $t(53) = -1.83$, $p < .05$, $d = .54$, as depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Bar Graph of Reading Comprehension Growth between Special Education and General Education Students using the MCAPP Rubric (N= 55)



CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to implement the reading comprehension strategy, Close Reading, into the curriculum to improve student reading comprehension, stamina, and overall success in the classroom and on achievement assessments. The original hypothesis, that general education and special education students participating in both instructional settings would improve in reading comprehension when introduced to and given an opportunity to practice the Close Reading Strategy, was not supported. There was no significant difference found in students' Lexile Scores. However, the original hypothesis can be supported when using students' Text Evidence Analysis Scores from the activities utilizing the Close Reading Strategy assessed using the standardized Maryland Comprehensive Assessment Program (MCAP) writing rubric.

Implications of Results

The results of this study, when considering the growth of students' Lexile Scores in general education and special education groups, suggest that implementing the Close Reading Strategy is not the most effective strategy for helping students improve their reading achievement. However, when breaking down students' writing assignments from their Close Reading Strategy lessons, there was significant growth in both general and special education students when analyzing the text analysis portion of the rubric. One might assume that the mentality that a student holds for assignments in the classroom is different from that held for tests administered by the school system. The students' willingness to perform well, feel motivation, and produce work is correlated to the rapport they have with their teacher as well as their desire to succeed in the classroom. Assignments that show relevancy to the material learned and have influence on students' grades can be assumed to be a greater priority for to students than a test they take at the

beginning and end of the year for purposes of determining their academic progress. It also can be assumed that by the end of the school year, when students learn that they have passed the course, and a test they are taking is not a graduation requirement, the students may be motivated to achieve and may not put forth the same amount of effort as they had offered for classroom assignments. When examining the level of growth among students between the four Close Reading Strategy lessons, there was a substantial evidence that the students were, in fact, improving and applying feedback.

Theoretical Consequences

When considering the growth in students' Close Reading Strategy scores, the results of this study support the theories addressed in Chapter II that when a teacher is given support, background knowledge on material, and able to create a classroom of respect and rapport, the impact on students' achievement will be positive. Ness (2016) demonstrated that by adjusting and informing teachers' knowledge and perception of reading comprehension, teachers were more willing to change and restructure their instructional decisions to benefit their students. Ness concluded that when teachers are willing to change their attitudes about instruction, the students benefit, and their reading comprehension improves. The researcher was able to develop background knowledge for the Close Reading Strategy, was able to model and share with the students how they think as they read and build relationships with students to show them that they, as students, were valued. The resulting growth in students' achievement, as the Close Reading Strategy lessons progressed, supports this evidence.

Threats to the Validity

All studies suffer from threats to validity. Threats to the validity of this study included both threats to external validity and threats to internal validity. In terms of external validity, major factors are situational factors and sample features. Because the researcher is a classroom teacher and utilized her students as the study participants, the sample size was relatively small. Among this small sample, there were multiple factors of variability that included student attendance, students' IEPs and the varying severity in students' disabilities, and moving to remote learning at the end of the year for the post-test. Furthermore, the sampled participants were not aware of the study, meaning their responses to tests and activities resulted in additional variability. In this specific demographic of students, there were several students with more than 12 absences in a school year; several students had both short-and-long-term suspensions during which time they did not receive the lesson from the intervention. Some students were from low economic households, and days these lessons, and pre and post-tests were scheduled some students were worrying about meals and other stress factors at home. While respect for the instructor was present, student focus could not always be expected.

The external factors brought into the school by the students also affected the internal validity factor of testing. Students who missed a lot of school or who were aware of their failing status may not have continued to put forth effort on assessments or class lessons. The same can be assumed for most students who bring problems and concerns from outside the school into the classroom with them.

Connection to Previous Studies and Existing Literature

This current study on strategies to improve reading comprehension in both general and special education students stemmed from Eichelberger's research on the benefits of strategies to reading comprehension. Eichelberger's study in 2010 draws the connection between low reading comprehension and the frustrations while reading to the willingness to read in the classroom and post-secondary readiness skills.

While this study focuses on helping high risk students feel more comfortable reading in the classroom, it based the use of growth through Close Reading Strategies by Vaughn et al. (2015). These researchers recognized that students with disabilities were more likely to achieve at lower levels in reading comprehension than general education students, and they noted that students who met the low reading comprehension criteria improved significantly when receiving reading interventions (Vaughn et al.) Because of the relevance of the Vaughn et al.'s study to her classroom setting, the researcher chose to study the co-taught classroom that included both general and special education students, as well as implement the Close Reading Strategy and a reading intervention strategy to help students improve their achievement. Finally, as stated above, Ness (2016) demonstrated that by adjusting and informing teachers' knowledge and perception of reading comprehension, teachers were more willing to change and restructure their instructional decisions to benefit their students. Ness concluded that when teachers are willing to change their attitudes about instruction, the students benefit, and their reading comprehension improves.

Implications for Future Research

The results of this research provide data that suggest extra practice and support for students helps improve their reading comprehension whether they are struggling at lower levels or achieving at level in reading. This study was conducted without the benefit of having a large sample from which to draw data and did not have a large bank of data to analyze. Incorporating the Close Reading Strategy in future studies could help validate the effectiveness of the strategy in both groups of students and help validate the improvement of classroom behavior.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to find a way to help the researcher improve her students' reading comprehension scores and provide them with skills and strategies that would enable them to be successful on classroom assignments and on assessments. The results of the study indicated that while some students may not have demonstrated growth in their Lexile scores, they still were able to demonstrate growth in their reading and writing abilities within the classroom. Not only was there improvement in students' learning but in their classroom behavior as well. It will be beneficial for future research to continue to focus on ways to improve students' reading comprehension, with the possible focus on a longitudinal study incorporating the Close Reading Strategy in all four years of high school to give structure and support to those students who need this type of intervention.

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