

The Effect of Direct Instruction of Reading Strategies  
On the Student Achievement in the Intermediate Grades

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine if the direct instruction of reading strategies has an effect on the achievement of intermediate students. The study consisted of a sample of ten fifth grade students who were directly instructed reading strategies using the scaffold model in a small group setting over a four month time period. The study involved the use of a pretest/posttest design to measure the achievement. The instrument that was used was the Qualitative Reading Inventory--4. The null hypothesis was rejected because the results were statistically significant that the direct instruction of reading strategies raised student achievement. Further research is necessary to uphold the finding that direct instruction of reading strategies is the most effective teaching method for influencing student achievement.

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### Overview

Literacy, or the ability to understand, interpret, use, create, compute, evaluate, and communicate information associated with varying contexts, is an essential life skill. Literacy represents a key determinant of academic, social, and economic success. These skills also represent an essential component to having a fulfilling life and becoming a successful employee and citizen (O’Cummings, 2010). Statistics show that poor reading achievement affects society and that one third of all juvenile offenders are reading below the fourth grade level. Youth with low literacy skills not only are more likely to be involved in the juvenile justice system, but also have a higher likelihood of negative outcomes in society (O’Cummings, 2010). Literacy, productivity, and effective reading start in the nation’s schools. Reading comprehension is a lifelong skill and it is needed for children to become effective problem solvers (McLaughlin, 2012).

The population of struggling readers is increasing at an incredible rate. Few students in the United States read at a desirable level (Allington, 2011). Approximately one third of the student population is struggling readers (Allington, 2011). The increase is becoming a common trend, especially in the intermediate grades, as students there may fall behind up to two grade levels. These struggling readers view themselves as unsuccessful to their peers and expect rejection (Vlach & Burcie, 2010). Struggling readers need to feel motivated and supported by their teachers as well as their peers. They need precisely what good readers receive which are many high success reading experiences (Allington, 2011).

Children at risk for reading failure acquire reading skills more slowly than other children, but they must acquire the same set of skills to become good readers. The primary difference

between instruction appropriate for all children and that required by children at risk for reading difficulties is related to the manner in which instruction is provided (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001). The importance of good instruction needs to be recognized in order to turn the trends around. A teacher needs to believe that all children can succeed. Good reading instruction for struggling readers needs to be more explicit, intensive, and supportive than it is for at grade level and above grade level readers (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001). The ability of a teacher to follow the five steps of direct teaching which are explain, demonstrate, guide, practice, and reflect, can make all the difference in the reading comprehension of a struggling reader (McLaughlin, 2012).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The study was designed to determine whether direct instruction of reading strategies has an effect on student achievement in the intermediate grades.

### **Hypothesis**

The null hypothesis states that directly instructing reading strategies to intermediate grade students will not have an effect on their reading achievement.

### **Operational Definitions**

The dependent variable was reading achievement. For the purpose of the study, reading achievement will be defined as the student performance on the Qualitative Reading Inventory--4. The calculation is determined by the student response to four implicit and four explicit questions for a total value of eight points.

The independent variable was direct reading strategy instruction. The teacher directly teaches one reading strategy at a time by means of explicit instruction using the gradual release

model with a small group. The teacher introduces each strategy by following the five steps of explaining, demonstrating, guiding, practicing, and reflecting.

## **Chapter II**

### **A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

This literature review seeks to explore poor reading comprehension at the elementary intermediate grade level and its affect on reading achievement. Section one is an overview of the importance of reading. Section two discusses the characteristics of struggling readers with poor reading achievement. Section three explores reading strategies and interventions as well as teaching techniques that can be put in place to promote academic achievement.

#### **Importance of Reading**

Learning to read is one of the most important things children accomplish in elementary school because it is the foundation for most of their future academic endeavors. From the middle elementary years through the rest of their lives as students, children spend much of their time reading and learning information presented in text. The activity of reading to learn requires students to comprehend and recall the main ideas or themes presented in expository text. Yet until recently, reading instruction has overemphasized instruction and practice on literal comprehension, such as answering detailed questions (Stevens, Slavin, & Farnish, 1991). It is important that all children learn to read properly using different strategies because reading is a lifelong skill. The question of the importance of reading is addressed by considering the ways in which experience itself is read through the interaction of the self and the world (Freire, 1983). The actual act of reading literary texts is seen as part of a wider process of human development and growth based on understanding both one's own experience and the social world (Freire, 1983). If teachers are able to teach specific skills to better children as readers then students will feel more successful about their education and quality of life.

A widespread goal of education in the elementary school is reading comprehension for all students because reading comprehension provides the basis for a substantial amount of learning in secondary school (Sporer, Brunstein & Kieschke, 2009). Children need to receive direct instruction on certain reading skills in order to become good readers. Such core reading skills include monitoring comprehension, self-questioning, visualizing, summarizing, and evaluating. Monitoring comprehension involves the ability to understand when a text doesn't make sense. Self-questioning involves the ability to generate questions to guide thinking. Visualizing is the ability to create mental pictures of the text and summarizing is the ability to recall and synthesize important information in a text (McLaughlin, 2012).

Good readers read both narrative and expository texts and know how to figure out unfamiliar words. They use their knowledge of text structure to efficiently and strategically process text. They are problem solvers who have the ability to discover new information on their own (McLaughlin, 2012).

Good readers read widely, monitor their understanding, and negotiate meaning. They know when they are constructing meaning and when they are not. Good readers know and use a variety of "fix up" strategies such as monitoring comprehension, questioning, summarizing, visualizing, evaluating, and making connections to the text. These good readers are able to select the appropriate strategies and consistently focus on making sense of the text so that they are not only reading, but learning as well (McLaughlin, 2012).

Good readers comprehend text and feel satisfied and productive when they are able to make meaning. Comprehension is a multi-faceted process and meaning is constructed when readers make connections between what they know and what they are reading. Comprehension is seen as a consuming, continuous, and complex activity (McLaughlin, 2012).

## **Characteristics of Struggling Readers with Poor Reading Achievement**

Few students in the United States read at a desirable level. According to National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores, roughly one-third of U.S. students read at or above the proficient level, one-third read at the basic level, and one-third read at the below basic level (Allington, 2011). Two of every three students in the U.S. schools have reading proficiencies below the level needed to adequately complete grade-level work (Allington, 2011). This alarmingly high number of below grade level readers is becoming a common trend. It is a teacher's responsibility to identify struggling readers and intervene when necessary in order to turn the statistic around.

Learning to read and write means creating and assembling a written expression for what can be said orally. The teacher cannot put it together for the student; that is the student's creative task (Freire, 1983). Some students lack the ability to complete creative tasks and are therefore unable to comprehend text, which then defines them as a struggling reader. "Failure in reading" was defined by performance in the lowest quartile on a nationally standardized test (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001). Many students lacking this creative task lack flexible reading strategies and don't monitor their own comprehension. These struggling readers understand the importance of reading but can't attain it and view themselves as unsuccessful learners compared to other peers in their classroom.

Researchers have written that poor readers and good readers behave differently. In a review of observed characteristics of poor readers included were restlessness, introversive or withdrawal tendencies, inadequate school relations, and conscious self-control bordering on rigidity (Wasson, Beare, & Wasson, 2001). Expressed hostility, negative emotional response to reading, lack of effort, passivity, distractibility or restlessness, and lack of attentive concentration

are also cited as characteristics of poor readers (Wasson et al., 2001). Struggling readers not only have a history of reading failure, they have developed attitudes and coping strategies that lead them to avoid, rather than fix, the problem (Rog & Krop, 2005). Poor readers tend to follow similar patterns and similarly do not perform well on standardized tests.

Many skills may contribute to a child's reading comprehension level. Taxonomies of comprehension abilities often categorize the component skills and processes as ones that occur higher or lower in the language processing chain (Cain, Bryant, & Oakhill, 2004). The risk for reading failure always involves the interaction of a particular set of child characteristics with specific characteristics of the instructional environment. Risk status is not entirely inherent in the child, but always involves a "mismatch" between child characteristics and the instruction that is provided (Foorman & Torgeson, 2001). Children need to feel that they have the ability to succeed in order to become successful readers.

Children at risk for reading failure acquire reading skills more slowly than other children, but they must acquire the same set of skills to become good readers. The primary differences between instruction appropriate for all children in the classroom and that required by children at risk for reading difficulties are related to the manner in which instruction is provided. Specifically, instruction for children who have difficulties learning to read must be more explicit and comprehensive, more intensive, and more supportive than the instruction required by the majority of children (Foorman & Torgeson, 2001). It has been proven that direct instruction and different instruction is required for struggling readers. Students lacking reading skills respond to differentiated instruction and have different needs than those students reading at grade level or above. Intensive and specific instruction is needed in order for struggling readers to be successful.

## **Teaching Strategies and Interventions**

The teacher has a unique opportunity to intervene in the narrative of the struggling reader. Before engaging with a struggling reader-or any reader – it is imperative that a teacher believes that every child can learn and can contribute to the learning community (Vlach & Burcie, 2010). Through direct instruction of reading skills, the teacher has the ability to help struggling readers. This requires that teachers use explicit instruction, which includes modeling, scaffolding, facilitating, and participating (McLaughlin, 2012). Teachers are able to introduce the text and encourage students to activate prior knowledge, make connections, and set purposes for reading (McLaughlin, 2012). Influential teachers are highly valued participants in the reading process. They know the importance of every student comprehending successfully and their role in the reading process is to create experiences and environments that introduce, nurture, or extend students' abilities to engage with text (McLaughlin, 2012).

Explicit instruction typically involves a multiple-step process, during which teachers gradually release responsibility to students. The five steps are: explain, demonstrate, guide, practice, and reflect (McLaughlin, 2012). By following these steps, teachers are able to help struggling readers increase reading comprehension. The strategies taught through the gradual release model are previewing, self-questioning, making connections, visualizing, knowing how words work, monitoring, summarizing, and evaluating. The strategies should be used in multiple levels of text and a variety of settings (McLaughlin, 2012). Research suggests that comprehension strategy instruction should begin in the primary grades (McLaughlin, 2012). It is never too late to teach a struggling reader comprehension strategies because the strategies increase students' comprehension.

Instruction that builds phonemic awareness and phonemic decoding skills, fluency in word recognition and text processing, construction of meaning, vocabulary, spelling, and writing skills is generally more effective than instruction that does not contain these components (Foorman & Torgeson, 2001). Explicit instruction in addition to the gradual release model needs to be put in place in order for struggling readers to become successful readers and score higher on standardized tests.

Although comprehension strategies have been extensively written about, they are just one aspect of helping students comprehend academic texts. The sociocultural context students operate in, along with their cognitive abilities, text difficulty, motivation to read, and purposes for reading, also influence how they approach interacting with texts and comprehending them (Hall, 2012). A student needs to feel motivated to read and to become successful.

Through explicit instruction of the core reading strategies using a gradual release model, teachers move from full support to providing support as needed, to providing little or no support and students take on more and more responsibility of the strategy (McLaughlin, 2012). Teachers should also assess formally throughout the instruction process in order to capture students' performance as they engage in learning and to direct where the differentiated instruction should go (McLaughlin, 2012). Assessment is necessary to decide whether the interventions are successful for the students. Assessment also prepares the students to showcase their thinking abilities on a standardized test.

### **Summary**

Reading is an essential and foundational part of life for all humans. In order to achieve reading success all students must be able to comprehend text. Differentiated instruction on reading comprehension strategies has been proven to raise reading achievement when readers are

struggling with comprehension. Through explicit instruction of strategies students can become independent readers and make sense of their own thinking and learning. Through this gradual release process students can raise their reading achievement and perform successfully on standardized tests.

## **CHAPTER III METHODS**

### **Design**

This research was conducted using a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design. This study assessed the achievement gain in students who received direct instruction of reading strategies. In this study, the dependent variable was reading comprehension measured with the Qualitative Reading Inventory. The independent variable in this study was small group direct instruction of a reading strategy. The students participating in the study were assessed using a pretest, received a weekly intervention session of direct instruction on a specific reading strategy, and then took a posttest. The study took place over a three month time frame.

### **Participants**

Participants were randomly selected from a population of 47 fifth grade Language Arts students enrolled at a large urban elementary school in Towson, Maryland. The elementary school is a central zone, Title I school, and its demographics are as such: 55% African American, 26% Caucasian, 10% Asian, 5% Hispanic, and 4% two or more races. The school has a high mobility rate with 16% entering and 9% withdrawing this year. The students in the fifth grade are between the ages of nine and eleven. The population is 67% male and 33% female. The students scoring basic on the Maryland State Assessment were selected from two different classes to participate in the study. The ten lowest scoring students who had the same Language Arts teacher were then the constituted population for the study. The students were all significantly below grade level in Reading. All participants lacked basic comprehension and monitoring skills. There were four boys and six girls in the study. All the participants were African-American, except for one girl who was from another racial group. The participants were all ten years old at the time of the pretest.

## **Instrument**

The main instrument used was the Qualitative Reading Inventory-4. The QRI is an individually administered informal reading inventory designed to provide diagnostic information about conditions under which students can comprehend text successfully. The QRI continues a long history of informal reading inventories (Leslie & Caldwell, 2006).

The QRI was used to measure the reading comprehension level of the participants by calculating a raw score. The test consisted of a short, fifth-grade level non-fiction reading passage and comprehension questions that followed.

The Qualitative Reading Inventory-4 measures consistency of scores in three ways: inter-scorer reliability, internal consistency reliability, and alternate-form reliability. Inter-scorer reliability showed that scoring of answers to comprehension questions was 98% for both explicit and implicit items (Leslie & Caldwell, 2006). Alternate-form reliability proves that over 70% of the time, the same instructional level would be obtained independent of the passage chosen, as long as the same genre was used (Leslie & Caldwell, 2006). Positive and significant test-retest reliability was reported (Leslie & Caldwell, 2006). The QRI can be used to determine a change in a student's instructional reading level as long as the pretest and post-test use the same genre. A number of published studies have used the QRI to document growth in reading based on a type of instructional program or intervention (Leslie & Caldwell, 2006).

The QRI has concurrent validity and the correlations between the two measures were all positive and statistically significant when another assessment was given close to the QRI in time (Leslie & Caldwell, 2006). The QRI also has construct validity when compared to similar tests for instructional reading levels.

## Procedure

The study began in February 2013 by locating the sample group that would be used. Students were randomly selected by analyzing the standardized test data from the previous year. Any student scoring Basic on the Maryland State Assessment was selected, and then the group was narrowed down to ten students with the lowest scores that were in one teacher's reading class.

The teacher met individually with each of the ten students in one week to administer the pretest. Each participant individually read the passage aloud to the examiner. The examiner then asked eight comprehension questions that the participants individually answered orally. There were four implicit and four explicit response questions total used to compile the raw score. Once the pretest was administered the teacher compiled the data of raw scores using a table.

The teacher then met with the students as a small group in a lunch bunch setting once a week for 30 minutes. During the small group setting the teacher gave direct instruction on reading strategies using the program outlined in the book, *Reading Strategies that Work* and allowed the students to practice the strategies using the activities provided in the book. The teacher taught the specific skills of monitoring comprehension and summarizing, modeled an example for the students, guided the students as they worked with a partner, and the students try the activities independently. The students were encouraged to practice their reading strategies at home as well as for class activities. The teacher kept anecdotal notes about the progress of the group as well as the tasks completed and the attendance of the group.

At the end of the three-month period of direct instruction in a small group setting, the post-test was administered individually to each of the ten students to determine whether direct

instruction of reading strategies had a positive effect on reading achievement. The teacher compiled the data and assessed the progress of the participants.

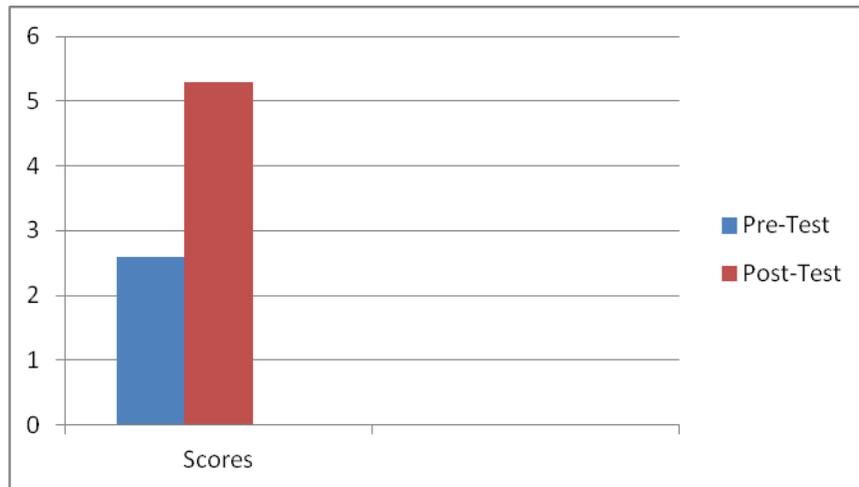
## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The findings from the research supported the hypothesis that small group instruction does have an impact on reading comprehension. The mean pretest score was 2.60 which significantly improved to a 5.30 on the posttest. The results show a significant improvement in reading comprehension following small group instruction.

The results yield a t-score of  $t(9) = -6.02, p < 0.05$ .

Figure 1: Mean Pre- and Posttest Scores on Grade 5 Qualitative Reading Inventory



## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

The original null hypothesis that directly instructing reading strategies to intermediate grade students will not have an effect on their reading achievement was not supported through the research.

#### **Implications of Results**

The results yielded the implication that the students' reading comprehension was better after the small group instruction time. Therefore, reading achievement increased due to direct instruction of reading strategies to a small group of students.

#### **Theoretical Consequences**

Research in reading instruction has focused on providing students with direct instruction on specific comprehension and metacomprehension strategies to improve their reading ability. This type of direct instruction of strategies has been applied successfully to a number of studies on a variety of comprehension skills (Stevens, et al., 1991). The research conducted aligns with this theory that direct instruction is beneficial to increase reading comprehension.

Recent intervention research with children at risk for reading failure has provided powerfully converging evidence that explicit interventions are more effective than interventions that are less explicit (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001). There are many variables that affect academic reading comprehension interventions and future studies aim to fill this gap in the literature.

## **Threats to Validity**

There were threats to validity included in the study. One major threat to validity was differential selection. The sample population used for the study was a convenience sample, and the teacher was familiar with the students and their academic abilities. Another threat to validity was generalization. Since the sample population was very small and included only ten students, the ability to generalize to the overall population is limited.

## **Connections to Previous Studies/Existing Literature**

To address the needs of children most at risk of reading failure, the same instructional components are relevant, but they need to be more explicit and comprehensive, more intensive, and more supportive in small-group or one-on-one formats in order to meet the literacy needs of all children (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001). The research conducted is similar to Foorman and Torgesen's (2001) study, because small group instruction was utilized as the delivery method of the reading strategies. The small group was explicit and intensive and the teacher taught a new strategy each week using a scaffold model.

Children at risk for reading failure acquire reading skills more slowly than other children, but they must acquire the same set of skills to become good readers (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001). By providing explicit instruction in a smaller setting for the struggling readers, the students were able to improve their reading comprehension.

Most of the published studies reviewed for this project had a larger sample size of 45 or more subjects than the research conducted, but the same result was obtained; that direct instruction increases reading comprehension. Most studies also used a standardized test that is easily administered to the students.

## **Implications for Future Research**

For future research and to make the study more meaningful to the general population, it would be beneficial to have a larger sample of students. Having a larger group of students would allow for the results to be more significant. It would be informative to have an entire intermediate school participate in a similar study to assess if small group instruction is beneficial to reading comprehension.

Conducting the research over a longer period of time would also be a suggestion for future research. The current research was only five months long. If the research would be conducted from the beginning of a school year until the end of the school year, the results may be more significant and show valid progression of reading achievement.

## **Conclusions/Summary**

After conducting the research, the researcher concluded that small group instruction was beneficial to struggling students. The results indicated that through direct instruction of reading strategies in a small group setting, reading comprehension increased over time.

The ability to directly teach reading strategies to a small group of students, rather than a whole class, gave the teacher more time to be flexible and individually focus on each student's strengths and weaknesses and accommodate for them accordingly. The small group setting also allowed for the students to feel more comfortable asking questions and practicing their skills with lower level texts, without fear of falling behind with the whole group lessons.

The students were able to work collaboratively together and formed a bond with one another over the lunch bunch setting as they progressed together with their reading comprehension ability.

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