

The Effect of Close Reading on Reading Comprehension  
Scores of Fifth Grade Students with Specific Learning Disabilities

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of explicit reading comprehension strategies versus close reading strategies for aiding reading comprehension of similar historical fiction texts. The measurement tools were researcher-created assessments. The study involved a pre-experimental design with a convenience sample of a group of eight fifth grade students with specific learning disabilities that served as their own controls. The results of both assessments showed that there were no significant differences between the mean reading comprehension scores under the explicit (Mean = 66.63, SD = 6.41) and closed (Mean = 66.88, SD = 13.85) [ $t(7) = 0.06, p > .05$ ] conditions. Implications and recommendations for future are discussed throughout the study.

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### Overview

With the recent implementation of the Common Core State Standards, there has been a great emphasis on ensuring that students are college and career ready by the end of their public education. Educators must be well-informed about the changes in education and committed to helping all students meet the high standards that have been set. The Common Core State Standards call for several key shifts in the area of English Language Arts (National Governors' Association, 2014). According to the National Governors' Association (2014), students will be using higher-level, or complex texts in order to better prepare them for the demands of college and life and ensure that they will get more out of what they read. Students will be asked to read texts that contain a great deal of academic vocabulary and will also be required to find evidence in the text to support their understanding. Elementary school students will be expected to read a balance of half informational text and half literary text. With the many shifts and changes across the country, it is absolutely essential that teachers are prepared to teach in a way that ensures that the Common Core State Standards are met and that students can reach high levels of success regardless of the path they choose in life.

Along with the many shifts in education is a great emphasis on ensuring that all students have equal access and exposure to higher-level skills and complex texts, regardless of disabilities or other challenges students may face. The Common Core State Standards describe that all students, including those with diagnosed disabilities “must be challenged to excel within the general curriculum and be prepared for success in their post-school lives, including college and/or careers” (National Governors' Association, 2014, p.1). It is further stressed that how such

high standards are taught and assessed is of critical importance when working with students with disabilities. Educators must be well-prepared to work with students of all ability levels and ensure that they help students to meet the high standards that have been set, even if how they reach the standards looks different.

Today, there is less of a focus on removing students with disabilities from general education classrooms and more of an emphasis on ensuring that all students are exposed to rigorous content with peers of all ability levels. According to the U.S. Department of Education, (2011), 13% of public school students receive special education services, and 36% of these students have been diagnosed with a specific learning disability. For the purposes of this research study, students with specific learning disabilities (LD) will be highlighted. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) defines a specific learning disability as “a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write spell, or do mathematical calculations” (USDE, 2011, Sec.602 (30) (A)). The students who are participating in this study have specific learning disabilities, and all receive services in the area of reading due to the fact that they are reading at least two grade levels below their average peers. The challenge for teachers is to instruct students reading well below grade level in such a way as to improve their reading comprehension while continuing to expose them to more complex texts. Students have to work at their instructional reading levels and also improve their reading comprehension skills with higher level texts at grade level.

Teachers have been trained using a variety of strategies to help students improve their comprehension levels. Two of these methods include explicit reading comprehension instruction and close reading. Explicit reading comprehension instruction refers to teaching students specific

reading strategies with modeling and guided practice. With such instruction, teachers often present strategies one at a time and allow students to take as much time as they need to master a strategy before introducing a new strategy (Manset-Williamson & Nelson, 2005).

The importance of close reading has only recently been emphasized with the implementation of the Common Core State Standards. With close reading, teachers encourage students to read and reread in a way that is well-planned and deliberate. Close reading allows students to be able to focus on specific words and sentences within a text to arrive at an understanding of an entire text (Boyles, 2013). Because there is a greater emphasis on students reading complex texts and finding evidence within the text to answer text-dependent questions, close reading is a strategy that many teachers have recently adopted.

### **Statement of Problem**

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of using close reading with students with reading disabilities compared to explicit reading comprehension instruction. The independent variable in this study was the type of reading instruction (explicit or close). The dependent variable was the comprehension scores of fifth grade participants when asked explicit and implicit questions using assessments that were created by the researcher.

### **Hypothesis**

The null hypothesis is that reading comprehension scores of students with reading disabilities will not differ significantly when items are based off of a text with close reading strategies as compared to items based off of a text instructed with explicit reading comprehension instruction.

### **Operational Definitions**

*Reading comprehension:* For the purpose of this study, reading comprehension was defined as student performance on researcher-created comprehension assessments containing both implicit and explicit reading comprehension questions. After reading each historical fiction story, students were given eight short answer and selected response questions and were also asked to compose a summary.

*Explicit reading comprehension instruction:* With this approach, students were instructed before, during and after reading a historical fiction story. Students were exposed to new vocabulary and given background information about the time period they would read about. Comprehension was checked throughout the story with questioning strategies, oral retell, and summarizing strategies. The researcher modeled how to summarize a story in writing before students were released to do so independently.

*Close Reading Strategies:* With this approach, students read a historical fiction story with guidance and were asked to analyze specific sentences, word choice and illustrations in order to make inferences about character traits, the story outcome and author's purpose.

*Specific learning disability:* Students involved in the research study all have Individualized Education Plans (IEP's) because of a specific learning disability. These students display evidence of a cognitive processing disorder that adversely affects their academic skills in at least two of the following areas: visual/spatial perception, phonological processing, visual/motor integration, reasoning, concentration, visual attention and/or working/-short-term memory. Relative to each student's age, or relative to meeting state-approved grade level standards, it has been determined that the cognitive processing disorder results in inadequate achievement in at least one of the following areas: Basic Reading Skills, Listening Comprehension, Reading Fluency Skills, Oral Expression and/or Written Expression. These students all have reading and

written language goals on their IEP's, and many of them also have math goals. These students receive testing accommodations and modifications when presented with grade-level material.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

This literature review seeks to explore what reading comprehension is, as well as determine reading comprehension strategies that benefit students in the intermediate elementary grades who have diagnosed reading disabilities. Section one provides an overview of what reading comprehension is and why it is so important for students with reading disabilities. Section two discusses the challenges students with reading disabilities have when comprehending text. In section three, a variety of reading comprehension strategies and interventions that have been researched are summarized.

#### **The Importance of Reading Comprehension for Students with Reading Disabilities**

“A large part of academic learning occurs through reading. Reading is not only the ability to accurately and fluently decode words but also the ability to gain meaning through the text that he or she reads” (Berkeley, Scruggs, & Mastropieri, 2010, p.1). This statement clearly defines what it means to comprehend text. If students are not able to decode words, or are struggling to define vocabulary, they are simply not able to understand what is being read and are unable to learn what their average peers are expected to. A large number of students with diagnosed learning disabilities (LD) have particular difficulty with reading comprehension (Antoniou & Souvignier, 2007). For many students with reading disabilities, the task of understanding what is being read impacts every part of the school day. Because reading is a component that is evident throughout everyday life, students can be adversely affected if they are not able to understand text that is all around them. If students do not read and comprehend grade level material, all subject areas are negatively affected. It has been determined that students who enter the intermediate elementary grades as poor readers are proven to continue struggling throughout

their schooling (Wanzek & Roberts, 2012). The National Center for Education Statistics (as cited in Wanzek & Roberts, 2012), reports that students who are poor readers throughout school are at a high risk for academic failure, dropping out, unemployment, overall low income and even poor health.

Many students enter elementary school without adequate early literacy skill exposure. These students may receive interventions, but if they do not catch up to their peers early in elementary school, the reading gap continues to grow. Throughout kindergarten and first grade, the focus of reading instruction is mainly on decoding words and applying early literacy skills. As students progress through elementary school, the focus shifts from learning to read to reading to learn. If students enter second and third grade without a basic foundation of reading skills, while their peers are progressing with reading comprehension skills and complex texts, these students are at a great disadvantage (Klingner, Urbach, Golos, Brownell, & Menon, 2010). Additionally, students with learning disabilities have weak executive functioning and struggle to plan and organize information and ideas. These students also struggle to self-monitor, and choose and change strategies, and regulate behavior while reading (Klingner et al., 2010).

Students who struggle with reading comprehension often fall further and further behind their peers in school. Another huge component that factors in is the social stigma that goes along with being a struggling reader. As students progress through school, they can become further ostracized or labeled by other students, and can feel socially and academically isolated (Berkeley et al., 2010). It is essential that students with reading disabilities receive excellent reading comprehension instruction from an early age to avoid not only academic disadvantage, but also social isolation and deprivation.

## **Challenges in Reading Comprehension for Students with Reading Disabilities**

Reading involves many processes, which is why students with learning disabilities can struggle with one or several components when learning to read. “Comprehension involves a number of lower-order (i.e., processes above the word level) specific to reading” (Pressley, 2000, p. 546). When reading, students may struggle to decode words, understand new vocabulary concepts or use active strategies to understand the meaning of the printed text (Antoniou & Souvignier, 2007). If one or many processes of reading are affected, reading comprehension skills can be adversely impacted.

Students with learning disabilities often fail to recall strategies needed for comprehension and do not regulate behaviors that lead to successful comprehension of text. These students also rarely self-monitor and do not pay close attention to the structure of a specific text (Antoniou & Souvignier, 2007). The skills necessary for comprehending a fiction text are not necessarily the same as those that are useful when reading a nonfiction text. Because they have difficulty identifying the type of text they are reading, they are not able to apply specific strategies with the ease that average students do.

Many students with disabilities in reading also struggle to simply decode and understand the words within a given text. If a student is asked to read a text but struggles to decode words, has difficulty using context clues, or cannot understand new vocabulary concepts, the student will not be able to grasp what they are expected to understand. As text becomes more complex and rigorous, students who struggle with reading comprehension will be greatly affected.

## **Researched Reading Comprehension Strategies and Interventions**

### **Explicit Reading Comprehension Instruction**

Explicit comprehension instruction refers to direct reading strategy instruction. Students who are explicitly taught are given direct instruction of each strategy through modeling and guided practice with an emphasis on the purpose of the strategy being given to students. Students who are explicitly taught comprehension strategies for before, during and after they read are also taught to self-monitor as they read, while they use the strategies that have been taught (Manset-Williamson & Nelson, 2005).

When teachers teach reading comprehension strategies explicitly, they often present strategies one at a time and allow students to take as much time as they need to master a strategy before introducing a new strategy (Manset-Williamson & Nelson, 2005). Students with learning disabilities may also require more time to practice what they have learned in order to implement the strategies more independently (Antoniou & Souvignier, 2007). Strategies such as using prior knowledge, making predictions, explaining the main idea, and retelling the most important details are strategies that are explicitly taught when using this model (Manset-Williamson & Nelson, 2005).

When reading comprehension strategies are explicitly taught, students learn to distinguish a text's genre and also to determine if a text is narrative or expository. When they are able to do this, they are more prepared to determine the strategies needed to comprehend a given text (Antoniou & Souvignier, 2007). Explicitly teaching reading strategies is one method that has been researched and determined to be an effective strategy when teaching students with learning disabilities.

### **Implicit Reading Comprehension Instruction**

Implicit reading instruction differs from explicit reading instruction because reading strategies are not directly taught to students with such an approach. Fountas and Pinnell's

approach, also known as guided reading, is based on the assumption that students naturally gain reading comprehension skills with repeated exposure to different types of literature, as well as natural teacher support (Manset-Williamson & Nelson, 2005).

Implicit reading comprehension instruction means that students are not taught specific skills in isolation, but rather are instructed with a great deal of teacher modeling, subtle cues, and supportive guidance as they read on their own. With guided reading instruction, it is expected that students will develop skills necessary to comprehend material more independently, instead of relying on specific skill instruction. Some current research leans more towards implicit reading comprehension techniques when instructing students in reading (Manset-Williamson & Nelson, 2005).

### **Word Recognition and Decoding Emphasis**

Intermediate elementary students are expected to read text that is complex and comprehend instruction that is rigorous. For many students with reading disabilities though, essential basic reading skills have not been mastered, making reading comprehension much more difficult than for the average student. “Evidence from studies with older students who exhibit deficits in decoding and fluency has suggested that these students must receive instruction in basic elements of word reading, regardless of how old they are” (Wanzek & Roberts, 2012, p.2). Because teachers of intermediate elementary students expectations’ increase for independent learning, and instruction on how to read is deemphasized, struggling readers and readers with reading disabilities are constantly trying to “catch up” to their peers. Evidence from various studies shows that there is a need for these students to continue to receive basic elements of word reading, even if they are intermediate level students.

Techniques common to decoding-based feedback strategies include pre teaching vocabulary, sounding out words, and using context clues to determine a word. Using this approach, many teachers have found that teaching students overall word knowledge and decoding abilities also improves their comprehension simultaneously (Crowe, 2005). With such an approach, students are taught specific phonics rules and are given feedback about new words and errors they may be making as they read.

The Wilson Reading System is an example of a widely used reading intervention for older students. The system includes word attack, spelling, and comprehension. Multisensory activities are used with this approach, which includes voicing a phoneme while tracing it with a straight arm (Manset-Williamson & Nelson, 2005). Some evidence suggests that a more multisensory approach to reading is effective with students with reading disabilities (Manset-Williamson & Nelson, 2005). Although the emphasis of this approach is on word recognition, this intervention includes learning vocabulary words in isolation and allows teachers to check for comprehension as students read (Manset-Williamson & Nelson, 2005). When students are taught strategies that they can use when they come to an unknown word, combined with phonemic awareness and analysis, researchers have found superior outcomes for some students with reading disabilities (Manset-Williamson & Nelson, 2005).

Decoding words contributes to reading comprehension because the more skilled students are at decoding words, the less effort is required to read. Students who decode easily can give more effort towards understanding what they are reading, in relation to context clues (Pressley, 2000).

### **Close Reading**

With the recent implementation of the Common Core State Standards, rigor and complex texts have been greatly emphasized. Close reading has been identified as a key component of college and career readiness. Essentially, close reading means to uncover layers of meaning in order to comprehend a text on a deeper level (Boyles, 2013). With close reading, teachers encourage students to read and reread deliberately. Close reading allows students to be able to focus on specific words and sentences within a text to arrive at an understanding of an entire text (Boyles, 2013). Encouraging students to delve into a text more deeply is something that many middle and high school students have been asked to do, but with increased expectations and different standards, close reading strategies are now being implemented at the elementary school level.

Close reading enables students to build stamina and persistence when reading a complex text that is challenging to comprehend (Fisher & Frey, 2012). This being said, Fisher and Frey (2012) stress that not all texts require students to do a close read. When a text is easily understood or is simply organized, encouragement of close reading strategies would not be warranted. There are times when a text is complex or important enough that students should be encouraged to take another look. With close reading, students are asked to slow down and concentrate on a section, a phrase or even a repeated word within a text. With an increased emphasis on complex texts, it has also been noted that other instructional reading practices must be accompanied by close reading (Fisher & Frey, 2012). Interactive read-alouds, shared reading, teacher modeling and think-alouds, guided reading, collaborative reading, discussion and time for independent reading and writing are all essential components of a well-rounded reading program (Fisher & Frey, 2012).

In addition to using more complex texts, there are a few other features that make close reading different from other comprehension techniques. Students are asked to read short passages that are either stand-alone readings or passages that have been selected from a longer text. With a close read, there is almost no frontloading or pre-teaching prior to reading when reading with older students. With close reading, teachers constantly set a purpose for reading, but do not give students a great deal of information or guidance before they start reading (Fisher & Frey, 2012). Students in elementary school may need some pre teaching, although not with all texts. If a vocabulary term were used in a way that would not allow students to determine the meaning using context clues or structural analysis, some frontloading or pre teaching would be necessary (Fisher & Frey, 2012). When to close read and how much guidance to give prior to reading is left to teacher expertise and discretion. Teachers should ensure that frontloading students with information prior to reading the text does not remove the need to read the text in order to allow them connect on a deeper level.

Additionally, the questioning used with close reading is text-dependent. This means that students are not asked to simply recall different facts and details, but rather, to go back into the text and discover big ideas and information. Such text-dependent questioning leads students to go back to the text several times and also fosters conversations between students in small groups (Fisher & Frey, 2012). When students are taught to close read starting at a young age, they are able to build stamina and independence when they become more independent readers. The Common Core State Standards describe more complex texts being used in classrooms to help students develop the skills necessary to eventually read such texts independently (Ostenson & Wadham, 2012). Ideally, when students begin close reading at a young age, they will be able to

underline key information, circle confusing parts, and write notes in the margin with little teacher support by the time they are in middle school and high school (Fisher & Frey, 2012).

In order for students to connect to a text at a deeper level, they must be engaged in what they are reading. Young adult literature is a genre that allows students to make connections to characters and events and engage in close readings and discussions. The Common Core State Standards suggest that it is easier for students to make strong connections to characters or events, as well as to the world around them, with a book that presents characters and conflicts that are familiar to them (Ostenson & Wadham, 2012). Using young adult literature may be a way for teachers to ensure that their students are engaged as they close read sections and analyze characters and events on a deeper level.

Although the term “close reading” is a relatively new one, articles have been written and studies have been completed that show evidence of success when students are encouraged to read at a deeper level. Pressley’s (2000) article about comprehension instruction does not use the term “close reading,” but instead, mentions “conscious, controllable processing” (p.550) when reading. The techniques described in this article match what is expected when completing a close reading. Being aware of the purpose of reading and determining why an author chose to write something in a certain way (Pressley, 2000) are all part of closely reading a text. Teachers have always encouraged their students to deeply comprehend what they are reading, but may not be encouraging students to read close enough, according to the new standards. This is why teachers must be trained in close reading so that their students can develop essential reading skills that will ensure college and career readiness.

### **Summary**

Reading is essential in order to master all academic subjects, as well as for success throughout life. Students with diagnosed reading disabilities have to overcome many challenges with decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension in order to have success with the rigorous reading comprehension tasks that are now expected of students at an early age. The challenges that students with reading disabilities face have been discussed in depth, and several researched strategies have been explored. With the new implementation of the Common Core State Standards, it is essential that teachers stay informed and continue to receive training that will help to prepare them to teach reading comprehension skills that will help students tackle complex texts and answer text-dependent questions. Students need to develop essential reading skills early in elementary school so that they are more prepared to comprehend text in middle and high school and as adults living in a 21<sup>st</sup> century world.



## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS**

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of using close reading strategies as compared to traditional, explicit reading comprehension instruction with a small group of fifth grade students with specific learning disabilities. The comparative effectiveness of each technique was measured by researcher-created comprehension assessments with explicit and implicit questions that were scored with a rubric.

#### **Design**

This study employed a pre-experimental design with a convenience sample of a group of eight fifth grade students that served as their own controls. Students read two historical fiction stories while being taught with explicit reading comprehension strategies and close reading strategies. They then completed researcher-designed comprehension assessments. The independent variable in this study was the type of reading instruction (explicit or close). The dependent variable was the reading comprehension scores of the eight fifth grade students on the researcher-created comprehension assessments containing both implicit and explicit questions. The comprehension scores of their performances on the test for the text taught through the traditional, explicit reading method was compared to the comprehension scores on the test for the text taught through the close reading method.

#### **Subjects**

The subjects in the study were fifth grade students from an elementary school in a suburban county in Maryland. The school qualified for Title I services based on overall low socioeconomic status of the student body. 75% of the student population qualifies for free and reduced lunch because of their household incomes. A family of four earning \$43,568 or less

would qualify for free and reduced meals based on the qualifications aligned in the county's food and nutrition services information (Office of Food and Nutrition Services, 2014).

The fifth grade subjects were students who work with the researcher daily in a small group. All of the students in this group qualify for special education services based on their specific learning disabilities. These students are all reading at least two grade levels below their average peers. The eight students in the group consisted of seven females and one male. All of the students were Caucasian.

### **Instrument**

Both instruments were researcher-created and contained five explicit questions and five implicit questions. The question format was short answer and selected response (i.e. multiple choice). Each assessment contained five selected response questions and five short answer questions. Students were expected to write one sentence per short answer response. An additional component of the assessment was that students were asked to write summaries after reading each historical fiction selection. A researcher-created rubric was used to score each assessment. Each short answer and selected response question was worth one point and the summaries were worth three points for a total value of 13 points. There is no reliability or validity data for these instruments.

### **Procedure**

#### **Explicit Reading Comprehension Instruction:**

Before reading two similar historical fiction stories, the group of eight fifth grade students was given general information about the historical fiction genre. Students were then told that they would be reading *Apples to Oregon* by Deborah Hopkinson. This story was chosen with the help of the school librarian and was determined to be a "complex text." Such a text allows

students to make inferences and look for evidence within the text. The text also included more challenging vocabulary that students may not have been exposed to. *Apples to Oregon* is at the early third grade level, or guided reading level M, which is where the fifth grade students are currently reading instructionally. The researcher introduced the story and reviewed important vocabulary concepts with the students. Students were each given a vocabulary word to look up with a partner, and they were then asked to explain its meaning to their peers. Students were given guidance and examples of each vocabulary word using Promethean Board technology. After thorough review of each new vocabulary word from the book, students were given a cut and paste assessment to show their understanding of each word.

After reviewing challenging vocabulary words in isolation, students were shown individual sentences that contained some of the vocabulary words that were presented in context. Students were then asked to move the words into the sentence on the Promethean Board and read the sentence fluently. This process was repeated with four more challenging sentences that students would come across within *Apples to Oregon*.

The following day, students reviewed the new vocabulary as well as the sentences that were practiced the day before. The researcher introduced the story and then began reading the first portion of the story while the students followed along in their own books. Periodically, the researcher would ask students to take turns reading, stopping after a few pages to check for comprehension or re-phrase what had occurred in the story. Students are used to the explicit teaching model and have been explicitly taught vocabulary, comprehension strategies and fluency techniques as they read while reading every book throughout their year in fifth grade.

The group read *Apples to Oregon* together over the course of three days. Students were then asked to reread the story with a partner to improve comprehension and fluency. The

researcher then told students that they would be working to summarize the story using a specific strategy. The researcher modeled the summarizing strategy using a book that had been read previously by showing students how to write the storyline, an important detail, the problem and the solution. Students observed the researcher and were told that they would be writing a summary of *Apples to Oregon* independently. The researcher gave students an organizer to help them write each part of their summary. Students then completed summaries as the researcher circulated to assist students and scribe for those who require this accommodation. The following day, students were given the researcher-created assessment containing both short answer and selected response questions. The researcher read each question aloud and scribed for students who are unable to express themselves clearly in writing independently. Students were told that they could look back in the story when answering questions.

### **Close Reading Strategies:**

Before reading *Dandelions*, by Eve Bunting, students were told that they would be reading another historical fiction story with many similarities to *Apples to Oregon*. This selection was also reviewed by the researcher and the school librarian to ensure that the text was complex and that students would be asked to make higher-level connections and inferences. Higher level vocabulary is embedded in the text as with *Apples to Oregon*. This story is also at the early third grade level and is at a guided reading level N. Compared to *Apples to Oregon*, the selection is slightly more complex with a higher word count but very close in complexity and storyline. The stories have similar themes and are both about families who travel cross country to settle in a new state. Before reading, students were told that they would be looking closely at different phrases, words and pictures in order to draw conclusions about the author's purpose and to learn more about the family in the story. Although students have used close reading strategies during

instruction, they had never been taught exclusively with close reading strategies while reading a story. Students were given sticky notes and were told that they would be using them to ask and answer questions as they read. They were also told that they would be stopping periodically to discuss words and phrases which had been previously chosen by the researcher.

Students read the first few pages of the book together and after doing so, students were asked to think about differences between two of the main characters based on evidence from the text. They were asked to write about how they thought the mother in the story felt about moving across the country compared to the father in the story. Students were asked to focus on one page and find specific reasons why they chose the feelings that they did. The group had a discussion about why the character's feelings were different and how they knew.

As reading progressed, students were asked to stop at different words and use context clues to determine what the words meant. They were asked to work with a partner and determine the meaning of different words based on evidence from the text. The researcher stopped to have discussions with the students about words such as "soddie" and "quivered." Students described what they thought the words meant based on what the characters said or did, as the researcher wrote their ideas on the board.

The students read *Dandelions* over the course of five days, reading a few pages at a time, analyzing and discussing specific words, phrases and pictures within the story. The researcher had chosen the parts that would be focused on and discussed prior to working with the students in small group each day. On the final day of reading, students were asked to discuss the symbolism of the dandelions in the story and look at the final picture in the story closely. They were asked to write about what they thought the final picture represented and respond to a question about what the family's life was like at the end of the story. Students took time to

closely analyze the picture and discuss the representation of the dandelions with a partner and in a group as the research facilitated and wrote down responses.

Lastly, students were asked to write a summary of the story and complete the 10 question assessment. Students were told that they could look back in the text if needed as they answered questions. The researcher read for students and scribed for students who needed this accommodation.

The comprehension assessments for the stories taught by the two different methods were scored by the examiner with the researcher-created rubric. The mean scores from the two assessments were compared with a non-independent samples t-test.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The primary purpose of this study was to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference in reading comprehension scores among fifth graders with specific learning disabilities when instructed with explicit reading comprehension strategies compared to when the same group of students were instructed with close reading strategies. Reading comprehension was assessed using researcher-created assessments after reading two similar historical fiction texts.

Table 1 below contains the mean reading comprehension scores on the researcher-created assessments as well as the results of statistical analysis.

Table 1

*Means, Standard Deviations, and t-test Results for Reading Comprehension Scores under Explicit and Closed Instruction Conditions*

Condition	Mean	Std. Deviation	t statistic
Explicit	66.63	6.41	0.06 (NS)
Closed	66.88	13.85	

N = 8

NS = non-significant at  $p < .05$ .

There was no significant difference in the mean reading comprehension scores under the explicit (Mean = 66.63, SD = 6.41) and closed (Mean = 66.88, SD = 13.85) [ $t(7) = 0.06, p > .05$ ] conditions. See Table 1. Thus, the null hypothesis was not rejected. Reading comprehension

scores did not differ significantly for instruction with close reading or explicit reading comprehension strategies.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of explicit reading comprehension strategies as compared to close reading strategies. The researcher focused on a small group of fifth grade students with specific learning disabilities and determined that the null hypothesis, that there would be no difference in student performance on researcher-created assessments when instructed with explicit reading strategies as compared to close reading strategies, failed to be rejected.

#### **Implications of the Results**

When analyzing the results of the study, there is no evidence as to whether or not close reading strategies are more effective than explicit reading strategies. When instructing students with both methods while reading each historical fiction text, the researcher noted observations about the students' behaviors, questions, and comments. While reading *Apples to Oregon*, students were instructed using explicit teaching techniques. The researcher noted that students did not appear to be as engaged as they were while reading *Dandelions* using close reading strategies. Students are usually taught with explicit reading techniques, and a great deal of “front-loading” is done before students prepare to read. The researcher can only infer that because *Dandelions* was taught in a way that was new and allowed students to read the book without much preparation or pre-instruction, that their level of engagement was higher when instructed with close reading strategies.

Teachers may want to consider which type of instruction is most appropriate based on the type of text and the specific skills that need to be taught. The level of complexity and interest level may also be factors in determining which strategies might be most effective when

instructing students. Teachers will have to ensure that texts are read in advance and skills are considered before choosing which technique will be most beneficial to students.

Although the results of this study show that there was no significant difference in students' performance on researcher-created assessments, continued instruction with close reading strategies could show increased student achievement in reading comprehension over time. Students used sticky notes throughout close reading instruction and were encouraged to answer questions and make assumptions and inferences while reading. The researcher believes that the level of engagement increased because of the materials being used as well as the fact that there was little pressure to learn new skills before reading. Over time, students' reading comprehension levels may continue to increase once they became more familiar with the methods that were introduced while reading *Dandelions*.

The students involved in the study all have specific learning disabilities and have always struggled to read. Although there was no significant increase in students' performance in the area of reading comprehension, the researcher feels that engagement and variety are key components when teaching reading to students who struggle. Introducing new techniques and materials will help to ensure that students gain an interest and love of reading over time.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Although there is no evidence to suggest that close reading strategies are more effective than explicit reading strategies when instructing students with specific learning disabilities, theories do suggest that students can benefit from a variety of teaching techniques and methods. Students who struggle to read are often hesitant to do so and can have negative feelings related to reading comprehension instruction. Manset-Williamson and Nelson's (2005) study showed that explicit reading comprehension instruction is beneficial to students when implementing reading

comprehension instruction but that a great deal of modeling, practice, feedback and teacher review can lead to labor-intensive instruction. With such a model, reading is not as authentic as it is when students are encouraged to read with more implicit strategies. While it is absolutely necessary to teach students in an explicit way with a great deal of teacher modeling, it is also important that students feel engaged and excited to read. When the text is complex, introducing close reading techniques is a way to keep students motivated. Using a variety of techniques may help students feel excited about what they are reading and help build skills that will be necessary as they continue through their education and into a productive role in society.

### **Threats to Validity**

This study contained some threats to internal validity. To begin with, a convenience sample of eight students was used in the study. Due to the small sample size, the statistical power was extremely limited, which made it difficult to detect differences in performance. If a larger sample of students had been used, more valid results would have been achieved.

An additional concern is that the assessments were researcher-created and not norm-referenced, or used with a variety of different students. Although the researcher worked hard to ensure that the assessments were very similar, the data may not be as accurate as it would be with a nationally norm-referenced or widely used assessment that has gone through a rigorous development process. This caused an instrumentation risk to internal validity.

Although the texts that were chosen were both historical fiction text and considered to be complex, the reading levels vary slightly. Using the Fountas and Pinnell literacy ladder, *Apples to Oregon* is an instructional level M and *Dandelions* is a level N. Both texts are at the early third grade level, but *Dandelions* is slightly more complex according to their levels. This also created a risk to internal validity.

Lastly, the students are much more familiar with explicit reading comprehension instruction because much of their reading instruction has been delivered in this way over the years. If students had more practice using closed reading strategies that were introduced, their performance on the comprehension assessment might have differed. More implicit reading comprehension instruction, which includes close reading techniques, is being greatly emphasized with the many shifts of the Common Core State Curriculum. The importance of student independence is greatly stressed as we prepare students to be college and career ready. There is less focus on teacher-led instruction and more focus on students leading their own discussions based on what they discover on their own while reading. This difference in history of experience with the two strategies created a risk to internal validity.

In addition, there were threats to external validity. This study was completed with a small group of fifth grade students with specific learning disabilities. The researcher did not have a group of non-disabled students to compare the results with. Close reading strategies were not specifically used with younger students, so it is difficult to know if they would initially be effective with younger students or if such instruction would make a large difference in reading comprehension scores of learning disabled students over time. The results also cannot be generalized to middle or high school aged learning disabled students.

An additional threat to external validity is that the group was instructed by the researcher and assessments were created and scored by the researcher. Experimenter bias is a possibility given the fact that there was only one researcher who acted as the teacher and assessor. There is a potential for unconscious bias when the assessments were scored by the researcher. Such bias could lead to skewed or inaccurate results of the study and are an additional threat to external validity.

## Connections to the Literature

The results indicated that there was no significant difference in the reading comprehension scores of fifth grade students with specific learning disabilities when they were instructed with explicit reading strategies or close reading strategies. Close reading has been greatly emphasized with the recent implementation of the Common Core State Standards, but the researcher was unable to find a great deal of research or studies related to close reading.

Although there was no significant difference in the results, the researcher noted that students were more engaged and interested in reading *Dandelions* with close reading strategies. Fisher and Frey (2012) noted that “the primary objective of a close reading is to afford students with the opportunity to assimilate new textual information with their existing background knowledge and prior experiences” (p.1). Students involved in this study have struggled to read for years but have great background knowledge and life experiences to share. Throughout instruction, students were able to relate their experiences to those of the characters in *Dandelions*, compare ideas with their peers, ask questions and make comments with sticky notes, and make inferences and generalizations about why the characters chose to do something. Fisher and Frey also note that “close reading must be accompanied by other essential practices,” (p. 2) such as read-alouds, shared reading, and teacher modeling. The small amount of research that has been conducted about close reading stresses the fact that not all readings need to be close readings or require an in-depth look the way that other texts do. Students require a variety of teaching techniques and strategies—not one single method—in order to gain reading comprehension skills.

Manset-Williamson & Nelson’s (2005) study suggests that students naturally gain reading comprehension skills with repeated exposure to different types of literature, as well as natural teacher support. Their study provides evidence that a balanced approach to reading

instruction should be considered when working with students with specific learning disabilities. While Manset-Williamson & Nelson's research showed that implicit reading comprehension techniques were more effective when instructing students in reading, but the study that was completed by the researcher does not favor such implicit instruction.

### **Implications for Future Research**

With the increased emphasis on close reading, further research will need to be done to determine if close reading strategies are effective when used with students with specific learning disabilities. It would be beneficial to complete such studies over greater periods of time with larger samples of students. This would allow students to become more proficient with close reading strategies and allow them to gain skills and confidence over time. Researchers could also choose to complete such a study using different genres of text such as poetry and narrative literature. This would allow researchers to gain more information about the kind of impact close reading has on students who struggle to comprehend particular text genres. Lastly, a researcher may want to consider using interest inventories or surveys to determine what type of instruction students prefer. Monitoring on-task behavior during instruction is another tool a researcher may want to include when assessing the value of each type of instruction. Engagement is a critical component when determining what strategies should be used when teaching different types of texts. If research could provide empirical evidence as to which type of strategy is preferred by students and/or leads to more on task behavior, teachers would have additional data to inform their decision as to which type of strategy to use in the classroom.

### **Summary**

Although there was no significant difference when comparing instructional techniques, this study does indicate that teachers may want to consider student preferences, learning styles

and levels of engagement when selecting reading comprehension strategies. With the recent implementation of the Common Core State Standards, close reading is being emphasized greatly. It is essential that educators be provided with adequate training in the area of close reading so they know when to use such strategies and when to use more traditional techniques. Educators are expected to help students be college and career ready by the time they move on from their public education. Therefore, teachers must be prepared to use a variety of teaching techniques to ensure that students gain essential reading skills as well as a love of reading that will ensure success well past their years in school.

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