

The Effects of Readers Theater Intervention on Fluency Scores of Third Graders

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of a Readers Theater intervention on the fluency scores of third graders. This quasi-experimental study measured the reading fluency scores of participants using a pre-assessment and a post-assessment from the oral reading fluency portion of Dynamic Indicators of Basic Literacy Skills Assessment (DIBELS). There were fourteen participants in the study which included seven Caucasian males, four Caucasian females, one Caucasian male with an IEP, one Hispanic male and one African American female. The study took place over a ten week period and hypothesized that there would be no significant difference in fluency scores for students after participation in a reading intervention, as measured by the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessment, of students who received repeated Readers Theater intervention over a ten week period when their results are compared with their performance on the reading fluency portion of DIBELS assessment that was administered at the beginning of the study. The results suggested that there were statistically significant differences overall in the performance of students on the DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency assessment. This study supports previous research on the effectiveness of implementing a repeated reading program in the classroom.

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Reading is an essential component of education which has been linked to individuals' overall achievement and success over a lifetime. The process of reading is composed of many skills which need to be learned and practiced in order to become a successful reader. The skills often will overlap and depend on one another. Fluency is a skill that enables a reader to make meaning from written words. Fluency is the ability to recognize words with automaticity and accuracy. Fluency is being able to read with prosody or expression. As students become familiar with written words they progress to a stage where they are no longer concerned with individual words but with focusing on recognizing words automatically with speed and accuracy. Comprehension becomes the focus of reading, not decoding individual words. Fluency is considered a critical component in overall reading achievement. (Huang, Nelson & Nelson, 2008).

The importance of fluency is shown through research such as that reported by Kuhn (2004) who stated that fluency plays an important role in terms of a reader's ability to construct meaning from the text. However, teaching fluency generally is not emphasized in early grades. The researcher became interested in learning more about the relationship of reading fluency to comprehension in her role as a special educator. In the school where the researcher works, emphasis is put on phonics in daily reading lessons but fluency is not emphasized. Fluent reading is modeled and practiced for the students but fluency is not incorporated within the curriculum.

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### **Statement of the Problem**

The purpose of this study was to determine if students participating in an intervention program increase their oral reading fluency scores after participating in an intervention program.

### **Statement of Hypothesis**

There will be no significant difference in fluency scores for students after participation in a reading intervention.

### **Operational Definitions**

Within this study, the independent variable was a 10 week Readers Theater intervention program. Readers Theater, a program that emphasizes repeated readings. Using fluency practice in Readers Theater, students are give a script and assigned a specific part as if they were in a

play. Students create drama through their voices as they read their parts expressively without acting. Readers Theater provides students with time to read and reread their assigned parts prior to the final performance. The *dependent variable* in this study was the students' oral reading fluency as measured by the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Literacy Skills (DIBELS). One of the DIBELS' subtests is oral reading fluency. Benchmark passages at each grade level are used to measure accuracy and speed in oral reading of graded passages. Passages are calibrated for each level.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

This literature review examines the impact of reading fluency on the reading process and ways to improve students' fluency. The initial section discusses the importance of reading fluency. Section two addresses the effects of poor reading fluency on students' success with reading. Then third section considers strategies to help students with reading fluency.

Fluency is an important part of the reading curriculum but often neglected (Clark, Morrison, & Wilcox, 2009). After the National Reading Panel report was published in 2000, fluency once again became a critical goal in elementary reading curriculum. Young, Porfeli, & Algozzine (2009) and Algozzine, Marr, Kavel & Wilcox (2009) stated that having students develop skills in fluency and comprehension is an important aspect of preventing and correcting reading difficulties for students who are at risk for school failure.

#### **The Importance of Reading Fluency**

Musti-Rao, Hawkins, & Barkley (2009) stated that fluency is the ability to read with accuracy, speed and proper expression. Fluency is synonymous with quick and effortless reading of text. This is a skill that diffluent readers lack. The automaticity theorists such as Kuhn (2004) maintain that effortless decoding of text allows the student to focus on meaning of the text and aids in comprehension. According to Young et al., (2009), other reading scholars define reading fluency as the ability to read words in text with sufficient accuracy, automaticity, and prosody to lead to comprehension. Fluent reading simply should sound like natural speech. Kuhn (2004) stated that the combination of accuracy, automaticity, and prosody makes oral language sound like spoken language. Young et al. (2009) define accuracy as word recognition that refers to a reader's ability to read words in a text without errors in pronunciation. Young describes



automaticity as the ability of proficient readers to read words in a text correctly and without effort so that they may use their cognitive resources to focus on meaning while reading. Further, they define prosody as the ability of readers to read text with appropriate expression and phrasing to reflect the semantic and syntactic content of the text.

Reading is an essential component of education and has been linked to individuals' overall achievement and success over their lifetime. Huang, Nelson & Nelson (2008) maintain that fluency is a critical component in reading achievement. Researchers such as Algozzine et al. (2009) agree that fluent reading is essential skill for children in elementary school. Efficient and effective word recognition skills are essential for becoming a successful reader. The ability to read text aloud with sufficient speed, accuracy and expression and the ability to understand what is read are rooted in rapid recognition of isolated words, facility in processing phrases and sentences, and consistent expression when reading text. Algozzine (2009) further explains that fluency is a critical component of early literacy instruction.

Patton, Crosby, Houchins & Jolivette (2009) reflect that oral reading fluency is considered an important element of reading because it enables readers to see words and phrases as chunks of text. Oral reading fluency is a bridge to effective literacy development. It has been documented by researchers such as Huang et al., (2008) that fluency promotes the greatest extent of growth in reading achievement in early elementary years with a negatively accelerating curve throughout students' middle and high school years. This may relate in part to the fact that as students' progress through their school experience, the nature of their reading development reflects an increase emphasis on comprehending and analyzing expository text.

Wright & Cleary (2009) explain that the National Reading Panel recognized that fluent reading is an essential foundational skill for achieving higher-level comprehension. They further

state that the panel acknowledged that when decoding becomes largely automatic, students no longer must unlock meaning at a word level but can devote crucial cognitive resources to understand more complex concepts conveyed through text. Wright et al., (2009) also observed that the National Reading Panel concluded that although fluency is an essential component of reading, fluency instruction is missing in many classrooms.

The instructional hierarchy is one way to conceptualize the instructional support that diffident readers need. The instructional hierarchy describes the art of learning in a series of four stages. First the learner initially goes through the acquisition phase or period. The student manages to perform a skill accurately or commit knowledge to memory. Next, the learner advances to the fluency stage. This is where the student learns to perform the target skill more quickly or recall and apply the target knowledge with greater speed. The generalization phase is when the student becomes both fluent and accurate in performance. The student is ready to apply the skill or knowledge in a novel setting or situation. The adaptation phase is when the student can eventually apply the skill or knowledge to new uses. Wright et al. (2006)

According to Kuhn (2004), fluent reading attributes to skilled reading in general and comprehension. Two primary ways fluency plays a part in a learner's reading is development involving development of automatic word recognition and dealing with prosody or elements of fluency that allows oral reading sound like spoken language.

### **The Effects of Reading Fluency**

The effects of reading fluency can be considered in several different contexts. For example, the impact of fluency can be discerned in considering the relationship of fluency to reading, and comprehension. Another context involves the effect of teachers' misunderstanding of fluency. Huang et al. (2008) explain that non-fluent readers stumble through text word by word and read

inexpressively with little meaningful comprehension. Poor readers engage in less reading time, and the non-fluent readers avoid reading entirely. The non-fluent reader exhibits deterioration in skills and this creates an increase in their knowledge gap as compared with the achievement of their peers. Young et al. (2009) found that students who read with little or inappropriate expression during oral reading are more likely to have poor comprehension when reading silently than those students who read with appropriate expression. The rate of development of important emergent and literacy skills can predict later reading achievement in reading comprehension.

Kim, Petscher, Schatschneider & Foorman (2010) explain emergent literacy skills refer to skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are developmental precursors to conventional forms of reading and writing. Kim et al. further observe that in addition to considering students' achievement levels at beginning of a school year, noting the divergence in students' oral reading fluency growth rate during the course of the year reveals important prognostic information about students' later reading comprehension achievement.

In terms of later reading achievement, students' oral reading fluency appears to decline in conventional forms of reading. Fawcett & Rasinski (2008) found that 75 to 90% of students with significant comprehension difficulties have reading fluency problems. Applegate, Applegate & Madla (2009) observed that if readers have not developed automaticity in word recognition by their primary years, then efforts they expend in decoding generally will limit the efforts they can give to comprehending what they read. Kuhn (2004), stated that readers who need to spend a significant portion of their time identifying individual words rarely have enough attention remaining to focus on the text's meaning.

Teachers play an essential role in students' level of reading fluency; Applegate et al. (2009) observe that teachers have not been provided with proper training for helping students develop

reading fluency. Many teachers appear to emphasize speed, phrasing, or prosody related to their students' oral reading while giving little or no attention to comprehension of the text they read. If comprehension instruction had been incorporated into instruction in fluency, the comprehension assessed was text-based, and did not detect students' level of thoughtful comprehension. Clark, et al., (2009) found that many teachers may not have a clear understanding of fluency and what it encompasses. Although many teachers may monitor fluency through running records or other oral reading assessments, they do not appear to implement explicit fluency instruction.

Subsequently, fluency instruction often is neglected. Musti-Rao et al. (2009) stated that explicit fluency training frequently is a missing component or forgotten goal in many classrooms. Huang et.al (2008) explains that emphasis has been placed on strategies that are designed for individual instruction. Teachers often assume that increase amounts of decoding instruction automatically will lead to improve fluency. Teachers rely on "round robin reading" as the primary approach for oral reading instruction. Young et al. (2009) found that when students are reading for speed, appropriate attention is not given to reading with expression.

Fawcett et at. (2008) observes that professional development and university courses tend to focus on content reading and typically omit fluency instruction for adolescent readers. Strategies to teach fluency generally were not part of an in-service or pre-service professional development. Musti-Rao et al. (2009) explain that much educational research has been conducted with only limited collaboration with classroom teachers. The lack of significant involvement of classroom teachers in research studies has increased the gap between research and practice as well as providing only limited information on effective instructional strategies.

Wright et al. (2006) found that elementary children across the nation demonstrated reading deficits serious enough to interfere with learning. These researchers explain that students with

reading delays in primary grades first must attain basic fluency in decoding text before they can comprehend the meaning of passages in an efficient manner. Students who read text but decode more slowly than their typical reading peers tend not to be fluent readers. Difficult readers are at a disadvantage when taking high stakes tests because the tests often are time (Fawcett et al. 2008). These researchers explain that slow and disconnected oral reading makes effective comprehension virtually impossible. Poor readers and students with disabilities seem to be particularly at risk for experiencing reading fluency problems (Chafouleas, Martens, Dobson, Weinstein & Gardner, 2004).

Musti-Rao et al., (2009) maintain that students from low socioeconomic and culturally diverse backgrounds are less likely to speak Standard English than their more affluent or Standard English speaking peers. Many of these children begin school with insufficient pre-literacy and oral language skills. This skill deficiency increases the probability of urban students having difficulty with reading and, in turn, performing below grade level. Huang et al. (2008) noted that students vary widely in their initial reading skills. Students who enter school with limited language and literacy experience may need to catch up with and develop at a faster rate than their peers with more experience. Therefore, both skill level and growth rate in critical reading skills becomes predictive of later reading achievement.

### **The Strategies Used to Help Students Who Struggle with Reading Fluency**

Research and scholarly literature such as that cited by Wright & Cleary (2006) support several specific methods to promote fluency in reading. For example, Wright & Cleary note the effectiveness of interventions that boost fluency by providing increased opportunities to practice reading with corrective feedback. Further, they observe that the National Reading Panel recommended specific evidence-based rehearsal strategies such as listening while reading and

pair readings. Such simple fluency-building interventions can be taught quickly and implemented using commonly available materials.

One way to assist struggling readers to become fluent readers is to provide them with numerous opportunities to practice reading texts at their instructional level (Musti-Rao et al. 2009). Using repeated readings requires students to reread a passage of text several times during a defined period or until fluency criterion is met.

Patton et al., (2010) note that repeated readings of the same passage can facilitate increased fluency and comprehension. This outcome is based on the theory of automaticity in reading. Greater fluency leads to increased automaticity, thus allowing more cognitive resources to be available to process the meaning of text.

Peer mediated learning groups in which children work together to support one another represents powerful academic interventions that can prevent and/or remediate reading failure before it leads to even more devastating outcomes (Algozzine et al. 2009), These approaches require learning conditions in which students are successful by using strategies that improve their performance with frequent repetition and monitoring. This outcome creates motivation to practice. These repeated readings provide opportunities for students at different instructional levels to participate in the same activity and improve individual rates.

Wright et al. (2006) describe the benefits of cross-age peer tutoring on the development of reading fluency. Peer tutors offered a reading rehearsal intervention to diffluent readers. Peer tutors may be students within a single classroom or older students from different classrooms. Musti-Rao et al. (2009) advocate peer mediated repeated reading conditions that include modeling, repetition and positive feedback from adults and peers.

Parental involvement can assist students in increasing the amount of time reading and can broaden their exposure to reading materials. Such involvement presents increased opportunities for repetition and learning (Huang et al. (2008).

Flexible groupings are an example of a strategy that can support effective literacy instruction. Kuhn (2004) explains that it is beneficial to develop a strategy that combines effective fluency instruction within flexible grouping format.

According to Young et al. (2009) model, assisted and repeated readings are effective strategies for developing fluency by another. In assisted reading the reader is reading a text simultaneously while listening to a fluent reader present the same text. A repeated reading is the reading of one text until a level of fluency is achieved in reading.

Skill and performance-based strategies can be used in isolation or combined within and across categories according to Chafouleas et al. (2004). Skill based strategies are those in which teachers, peers or parents serve as models for learners prior to independent reading by reading the passage aloud as the student follows along. Repeated readings involve a student reading a short passage two or three times in succession prior to assessment. Performance-based interventions include contingent reinforcements, goal setting and performance feedback. Clark et al. (2009) and Young et al. (2009) note that although fluency instructional methods can be effective, motivation to engage in them is usually low for students and teachers. Using fluency practice in Readers Theater, the student is given a script and assigned a specific part as if they were in a play. Students create drama through their voices as they expressively read their parts without acting. Students are more likely to practice or rehearse if they know that they will be performing for an audience. Readers Theater provides time to read and reread the assigned

parts prior to the final performance. Readers Theater is a motivational way to engage students in fluency.

### **Summary**

Fluency is a critical component of reading. Through the use of specific strategies designed to improve fluency, teachers can help students become more fluent readers. Educators need to understand what fluency is, what some of the effects of fluency are, and what they can do to help students improve fluency.



## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS**

The purpose of this research was to determine if repeated reading instruction using Readers Theater resulted in a statistically significant improvement in the reading fluency of third grade students. The researcher's null hypothesis was that there would be no significant difference in fluency scores for students after participation in a reading intervention.

#### **Design**

This study utilized a pre-experimental design that included a pre-assessment and treatment, followed by a post-assessment. Progress was measured by comparing the participants' achievement against themselves using their pre-assessment scores and their post-assessment scores. The difference in the students' pre-assessment versus post-assessment scores on the oral reading fluency portion of the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Literacy Skills (DIBELS) was the dependent variable for this study, and the treatment that was implemented (repeated readings instruction using Readers Theater) served as the independent variable.

#### **Participants**

The participants in this study were selected from a Baltimore County Public school where this researcher works. They were a selected group of grade three students who were reading either on level or below level. All participants were from low-socio-economic backgrounds. The classroom from which the study participants were selected consists of 23 students, of whom 14 were selected for this study. The study included one Caucasian male who had an Individual Education (IEP), seven Caucasian females, four Caucasian males, one Hispanic male and one African American female.

## **Instrument**

The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Literacy Skills (DIBELS) was the measure used for pre-assessment and post-assessment. The scores that students receive on DIBELS assessment provide accurate feedback about student's abilities. The DIBELS oral reading fluency measures the number of correct words students can read in one minute. According to the DIBELS website ([dibels.uoregon.edu/samples/index.php](http://dibels.uoregon.edu/samples/index.php)), the DIBELS tests provide a developmental timeline and corresponding benchmark for skills.

One of the subtests of The DIBELS is oral reading fluency. Benchmark passages at each grade level are used to measure accuracy and speed in oral reading of graded passages. Passages are calibrated for each level. Students read each of the passages aloud for one minute. The student's score is the median correct words per minute from the three passages. Errors are words omitted or substituted, or hesitations of more than three seconds. Immediate self-corrections are scored as accurate. At the end of administration, the students are given a score and the data is used for analysis of student progress. The DIBELS score is useful for educators to determine the level of basic reading skills for each student. After the achievement level of the student is identified, the educator can teach according to abilities of each student. The DIBELS oral reading fluency is seen as an indicator of connected-text fluency. According to DIBELS, scales are established benchmarks designed to determine learners' risk level in relationship to reading development.

For the purpose of this study the DIBELS assessment was administered at the beginning of the research. Following the assessment, the children in the experimental group were given reading intervention of repeated reading using Reader's Theater five times a week for 15 minutes. The post-assessment was administered following the completion of the reading

intervention. The results of the assessments were analyzed to determine the effectiveness of the instructional program.

### **Procedure**

This study took place over a 10-week period. The reading groups were formed using informal assessment, San Diego Quick Words. The children were told that they were assisting the researcher in a special project. The first administration of DIBELS was given to the participants during the week of September 30, 2013. Each participant was tested on an individual basis for one minute each. Participants were given the chosen DIBELS passage to read and the words they read correctly were recorded. Following the administration, the treatment was implemented as follows.

The Readers Theater selections were chosen at below grade level during the first 5 weeks. Then, the following 5 weeks, Readers Theater selections were chosen that were on grade level and from passages that were familiar to the participants. Each participant was given a part from the Readers Theater selection to practice at school and at home. On Monday, the Readers Theater selection was read to the participants by the researcher at school. On Tuesday, the participants and the researcher read the passage together. On Wednesday the participants read their part individually during independent reading and at home. On Thursday, the students read the Readers Theater selection as a group to the researcher to focus on improving reading fluency. On Friday, participants read the Readers Theater selection to the class. The researcher provided general feedback to the participants to apply to the next week of repeated readings of Readers Theater. Each week this process was repeated with participants being given a new Readers Theater selection each Monday.

At the conclusion of the study, during the week of December 9, 2013, the participants were given the DIBELS assessment again to monitor progress in the same manner as described above. The final scores for words read correctly in one minute were recorded.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to determine whether third grade students participating in Readers Theater over a 10 week period would make significant improvement in their reading fluency scores. This pre-experimental study measured the reading fluency scores of participants using a pre-assessment and a post-assessment from the oral reading fluency portion of Dynamic Indicators of Basic Literacy Skills Assessment (DIBELS). The reading fluency of the students was measured by determining the number of words correctly read in one minute. Students' fluency scores were the dependent variable and the implementation of the Readers Theater was the independent variable. The results reported in Table I below reflect the means and standard deviations for the intervention group.

**Table 1. Pretest and Posttest DIBELS Means and Standard Deviations for the Intervention Group**

Pretest	Posttest
67.00 (17.02)	78.58 (18.05)

A dependent t-test was run to test the hypothesis that there would be no significant difference in reader's fluency after participation in a reading intervention.

Results showed that there was a significant difference in students' fluency scores at posttest,  $t(11) = -17.958, p < .01$ . Students' posttest DIBELS fluency scores were significantly greater as compared to their pretest DIBELS fluency scores.

Based on the results reported above, the null hypothesis that there would be no significant improvement in reading fluency, as measured by the DIBELS assessment of students who received Readers Theater intervention of repeated readings over a 10 week period when compared with their performance on the reading fluency portion of the DIBELS assessment that

was administered at the beginning of the intervention is rejected. These results and their implications will be discussed in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this research was to determine whether there was a significant improvement in the reading fluency of third grade students as a result of repeated readings of Readers Theater over a 10 week period. The researcher's null hypothesis was that students who participated in a reading intervention would not make significant improvement in reading fluency as measured by the DIBELS assessment. The null hypothesis was rejected, thus providing support for the alternative hypothesis that implementation of Readers Theater may significantly improve the reading fluency of third grade students. This improvement was evident in the gains in the oral reading fluency that were made by the students in the 10 weeks of Readers Theater intervention as reported in Table I of Chapter IV.

#### **Threats to Validity**

There are potential problems of internal validity that also help to explain the results that were reported. The first issue related to internal is the maturation of the students. During the course of the school year, students sometimes make progress with reading fluency even without the implementation of a treatment. It is important to note that the participants in this study were immersed in a mandated school system wide reading curriculum on a daily basis that included many reading strategies embedded in the everyday requirements of teaching reading.

The time interval for the study may also affect its internal validity. During the 10 weeks the study was conducted, there was a school wide phonics intervention focusing on decoding. This push for improving phonics may have been an underlying cause for an increase in reading fluency scores. Still another threat to validity is that the researcher conducted this study in one school, in one grade level and with only one classroom of students. Administering this study

across numerous classrooms with more diverse students would give more data to determine whether using Readers Theater intervention is an effective method to increase students' reading fluency scores

### **Comparison with Other Research**

The importance of reading fluency is shown through research such as reported by Kuhn (2004) who stated that fluency plays an important role in terms of a reader's ability to construct meaning from the text. "Research has demonstrated that assisted reading and repeated reading lead to improvement in fluency" (Young et. al, 2009, p 4).

Researchers Barkley, Hawkins, and Musti-Rao (2009) stated that "the need for implicit instruction in reading fluency cannot be overstated" (p 12). These researchers also declare that it is of the utmost importance to improve reading fluency because it is fundamental to drive meaning from text being read."

Results from another study conducted by Casey & Chamberlain (as cited in Patton 2010) indicated that participants immersed in repeated reading instruction over a 12 week period showed an average of 18 more words read correctly per minute than their peers who did not receive a Reader's Theater Intervention. Participants in a study conducted by Corcoran (as cited in Patton 2010) achieved an average gain of 17 more words read correctly per minute than their peers who did not receive a Reader's Theater Intervention.

These studies demonstrated results that provide evidence and support for the effectiveness of implementing Readers Theater intervention in the classroom. Participants in each study made significant improvements in reading fluency.



## **Recommendations for Future Research**

If this study were replicated in the future, modifications such as the following are recommended. First, the random sampling that was chosen for this study could be modified. For this study the researcher chose 14 students who previously were identified as “On Level” or “Below Level” in grade level reading. Future research might include completion of multiple studies that focused on one identified group from various classrooms. Also, instead of comparing pre and post intervention progress of one group of participants, future research studies might compare the progress of one identified group to another identified group. With this type of research each group could receive the pre-assessment and post-assessment to determine which group made greater gains. The researcher could also modify the length of time in which the study is conducted. A longer or shorter study could determine if the length of time has an effect on the improvement in reading fluency and determine if the treatment is more or less effective based on amount of time implemented.

## **Conclusion**

The results of this study support prior research on the relationship between improvements in reading fluency and implementing a repeated Readers Theater intervention. These findings are useful for teachers seeking to increase the reading fluency of their students. With time constraints that exist within a classroom, educators must find and implement effective reading strategies to ensure improvement in reading fluency such as that evidenced in this study.

This study has value for the teachers in the Baltimore County School in which the researcher is employed. As the teachers examine their students’ reading fluency data, they can begin to implement reading strategies in the classroom that will increase the scores of each of their students. These teachers can use this study and its results as a reference for implementing an

effective reading strategy intervention in the classroom that will improve the students reading fluency scores.

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