

A Comparison of Approaches to Silent Sustained Reading (SSR) Programs

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Abstract

A Comparison of Approaches to Silent Sustained Reading (SSR) Programs

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This study compared the effectiveness of two variations of a Silent Sustained Reading program, which involve students reading self-selected books independently, on reading comprehension skills of seventh graders. This study involved the use of a posttest only control group design where the different aspects of the program were implemented to the two groups of students before the post assessment was given. Students from the same low achieving classroom instructed by the researcher were randomly assigned to two groups. One group of students just read silently (Reading Only Group, $n = 14$), while the other group of students was responsible for reading silently, conferencing with the classroom teacher and completing written responses about the text that they had read (Teacher Assisted Group, $n = 13$). The outcome measure was a score generated from comprehension items from one of the seventh grade marking period assessments established by the local school system. An independent sample t -test showed that the comprehension scores did not differ significantly between the Reading Only Group (Mean = 15.50, SD = 3.08) and the Teacher Assisted Group (Mean = 14.85, SD = 2.64) [$t(25) = .56, p > .05$]. Limitations of the study, including difficulties in implementing both types of programs, are discussed. This study found no differences between the two forms of the reading program based on the comprehension scores. Further research is warranted to show which of these procedures would be best to improve student comprehension levels with a silent reading program.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

Silent Sustained Reading (SSR) is a reading program used in many classrooms across the country. Within this program, students are given time during their language arts or English class to read independently. Depending on how the program has been established in individual classrooms by the teacher, the students may or may not be held responsible for their independent reading through reading responses and conferences. There are many established purposes given for including a reading program like this in a classroom, such as building reading fluency and stamina as well as improving vocabulary, overall reading ability and comprehension levels.

There are also varied perceptions within the reading and education community as to the effectiveness of an SSR program, as well as how a program like this should work within a classroom. While some feel that the program is very effective in that it is providing independent reading time for students, others feel that its effectiveness depends largely on the way in which the program is presented and kept up with. One concern is that students may be able to sit and read for the designated time period, but may not actually comprehend what they are reading. Many language arts and English teachers and their department leaders are now faced with an important decision. Teachers need to think about whether or not they should continue to implement a form of the SSR program in their classrooms as well as how the program could be most effectively implemented.

The necessity of a reading program in schools that would aid in fostering the necessary skills to help students become more independent and lifelong learners became even more evident and necessary with the implementation of federal programs such as No Child Left Behind. With

the original implementation of a program such as Silent Sustained Reading, there seems to be a “correct” way to work with and involve the students. As the program has grown within schools, and as teachers become more comfortable with the idea of it, there have been multiple variations of the program, turning out a multitude of different results. For every teacher who sees the importance of conferencing with students during the SSR process, there is the teacher that sees modeling good reading practices while students are reading independently as more important and worthwhile for the students. Within the literature on reading instruction strategies, there are recommendations for using modeling (e.g., Hurst, 2005) and conferencing (e.g., Cunningham, 2005) strategies.

Statement of Problem

The focus of this study was to compare the effectiveness of two variations of an SSR program in a seventh grade language arts classroom in improving reading comprehension. In the Reading Only group the first variation, students spent all of the SSR time engaged in independent reading. In the Reading Response group, the second variation, students spent part of the SSR time engaged in independent reading and the rest of the time in writing responses and conferencing individually with the teacher.

Hypothesis

The null hypothesis is that there will be no significant difference in reading comprehension scores on seventh grade language arts assessments between the students who spend the entire SSR time engaged in independent reading and the students who spend some of the SSR time engaged in writing responses and individually conferencing with the teacher.

Operational Definitions

The following operational definitions are provided for a variety of different words and processes relating to reading processes and programs relevant to this discussion. The often-obvious definition of reading deals with so much beyond the basic surface of what this word actually entails. Reading is the fundamental and culturally imperative manipulations of the alphabetic system (Methe & Hintze, 2003).

The process of Silent Sustained Reading is set in place in most cases to improve a child's reading fluency as well as their comprehension. Reading fluency is the capacity to read a text precisely and promptly (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborne, 2003). A fluent reader is able to automatically recognize and comprehend words and groups of words while reading silently and read aloud with expression and little effort (Armbruster et al., 2003).

This study focused on reading comprehension, which has been broadly defined as intentional thinking during which meaning is constructed through interactions between the text and the reader (NICHHD, 2000). Reading comprehension was specifically measured by scores on reading comprehension questions on end of marking period exams that were designed by reading teachers working in the county's office of reading instruction. Some of the items were multiple-choice questions and some were written responses. Items on the exam that were not specifically related to comprehension (e.g., vocabulary items) were not included in the reading comprehension scores.

The Silent Selected Reading program is a program that would be put into place by the teacher allowing his or her classroom students time during class to be engaged in the reading process independently with books of their own choosing that are also appropriate for their individual reading level.

A reading response includes time once a week for students to respond in writing to what they have been reading about during the past week. A reading response is when students respond to a general list of prompts and sentence starters provided by their teacher. Students use these to develop a response to what they have read about within the past week in their SSR novel. It is not a summary, but rather a reflection type of response encouraging students to develop their own ideas about what they have been reading. The content of students' reading responses helps the teacher assess and develop individual reading abilities and behaviors of students. Patterns of journal responses can help the teacher determine how to further direct reading instruction for their students. The reading responses and the student teacher reading conferences are requiring the students to be active constructors of meaning when it comes to their independent in-class reading.

During reading conferences students individually discuss with their teacher what they have been reading in their SSR selection. For the purpose of this research, students also used their reading responses during their reading conference. During conference time, both the teacher and the student should practice having a conversational role. The teacher would move to the student in a conference situation to keep the student most at ease. The teacher should also attempt to give the student advance notice as to when the conference will take place.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This literature review explores the literature about the impact a Silent Sustained Reading program (SSR) has on the reading comprehension scores of students. Section one provides an overview of what reading comprehension is and its significance in the discipline of reading. Section two provides necessary definitions to aid in the understanding of reading comprehension and the SSR program. Section three investigates teacher preparation strategies, including strengths and weaknesses, and section four reveals different reading comprehension programs. Finally, in section five, the effects of a whole-class SSR intervention program will be viewed.

The Basics of Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is the intentional thinking during which meaning is constructed through interactions between the text and the reader (NICHD, 2000). According to Armbruster et al. (2001), “comprehension is the reason for reading” (p. 48) and if a child is not gaining understanding from the information on the page, then comprehension is lacking and the overall purpose for reading becomes ineffective (Armbruster et al.).

The Report of the National Reading Panel (NRP) notes that Reading Comprehension is one of the five main topics to be looked at in greater detail out of 35 others (NICHD, 2000). Improved reading comprehension has been related to heightened scholastic achievement for many years (Coyne, Eckert, Jacobs, McCoach, & Sall, 2008). Furthermore, Radcliffe, Caverly, Hand, and Franke (2008) note that according to the National Middle School Association (NMSA), readers in America get off to a fast start during the elementary school years and then their level of advancement begins to taper off during adolescence as they are reaching middle school.

Important Definitions

Reading is one of the most “fundamental and culturally imperative manipulations of the alphabetic system” as well as a necessary and essential aspect for the future success of American children (Methe & Hintze, 2003, p. 617). The “alphabetic system” is a fundamental component of literacy, along with comprehension and fluency (Methe & Hintze; NICHD, 2000; Armbruster et al., 2001). Alphabets, known also as phonemic awareness, is defined as a “fundamental component of literacy . . . inclusive of reading and its related processes” (Methe & Hintze, 2003, p. 614) including having “the ability to notice, think about and work with . . . individual sounds in spoken words (Armbruster et al.).

One of the most important and most often tested aspects of reading is comprehension, defined in section one of this review. “Good” readers have the ability to set a purpose before reading and to think actively as they read (Armbruster et al., 2001). The reader who establishes a productive purpose for reading is similar to the teacher providing students with a purpose as to why a particular lesson is being taught. Once a purpose is established both students and teachers are able to be more actively engaged in their activity, whatever it may be.

As humans, we are “hardwired” to imitate the actions of others. The same is true with students and what their teachers aim to teach them through showing what is expected of them (Fisher & Frey, 2008). According to Fisher and Frey, “modeling is another crucial component of releasing responsibility” to students, helping them in the long run to become more independent and therefore often more intellectual thinkers (Fisher & Frey, p. 34). Teachers model different activities in different ways as they get to know their individual students and how they learn best. Teachers may model by thinking aloud to show each step they go through during an activity or

they may show their students notes or diagrams, explaining expectations explicitly (Fisher & Frey).

Modeling provides students with an “expert” example showing them how to complete a task before they are asked to do it independently (Fisher & Frey, 2008). Modeling is crucial for an in-class silent reading program. While children may have engaged in similar activities previously, they still need to know what is specifically expected of them in each new situation. This could be a small set of differences between two similar reading programs, such as Independent Reading (IR) and SSR. While a teacher may have other plans, such as conferencing with students, during silent reading time, the crucial modeling process during this program is also considered by some researchers to be necessary before any sort of further testing or teacher observation should take place.

Independent learning is a prominent term in the silent reading process where students choose a book on their reading level, to read and learn from, independently. In order to be successful with this type of program, students would again benefit from the modeling of different strategies to choose a book on their reading level. Coyne et al. (2008) notes a relationship between “reading fluency and time engaged in independent reading” (p. 300). In a study that included nearly 2,000 middle school students, the preferred way for them to read was independently (Coyne et al.). The survey shows that when groups of students are given a chance to engage in an activity such as this, where there is some built in freedom, that they are more likely to buy in to the program and become engaged in the activity.

Reading Intervention Educator Preparation

To effectively change a trend of children comprehending literature ineffectively, it is necessary to first change the factors that will help the students achieve certain outcomes,

including the insurance that the teacher is presenting their diverse students with material that will consistently challenge them as learners (Coyne et al., 2008). Regardless of the skills being taught, without an instructor who is fluent in the program and prepared for the daily needs of the children present, the effectiveness of the program will be challenged. Delays in reading comprehension can be in part caused by teachers who are not always well versed in different strategies that should be used for their different students (NICHD, 2000). One of these strategies could be SSR, intended to be taught in a specific manner. If a strategy is not being taught effectively, it will be more difficult for students to become experts with that comprehension strategy.

According to the National Reading Panel, there is not enough research to definitively say whether or not pre-service and in-service teacher education programs are effective when teaching specific reading programs (NICHD, 2000). In the studies that were looked at by the NRP, results indicated that “in-service professional development” helped to result in much higher student achievement gains (NICHD). In other words, when teachers who are already in the classroom, actively teaching, are taught different reading programs and different reading strategies to help their students, they are better able to take these skills back to their classroom and work with them effectively. Furthermore, a current teacher would also have knowledge of how her students learned best and therefore, be able to tweak the strategy to work better with their needs. For example, some classes of students may need more experience with appropriate book selection, while others may need additional modeling in what silent reading should actually look like.

A recommendation to remedy the problem of having teachers prepare to teach reading comprehension strategies effectively is to ensure that every middle school teacher, across the

curriculum, has the “knowledge and skills” necessary to “integrate reading instruction” through the middle school child’s entire school day (Radcliffe et al., 2008). This becomes more prevalent in core areas such as science, where textbook readings are often part of a required assignment by the teacher. However, the text often being used in these classes has also caused problems in that certain non-fiction required texts “may confuse students, contain unfamiliar vocabulary, and present challenging text structures,” causing the job of the teacher in most content area classrooms to be more adept at teaching comprehension strategy skills that should be taught with a specific knowledge of what strategies could be used to target issues that certain students have and to ensure equity among all students, regardless of independent abilities (Radcliffe et al., p. 398).

Reading Interventions

There are countless reading interventions that have been introduced and implemented into U.S. educational systems that have been established to not only help troubled readers, but also to help very early learners how to best learn and practice effective reading habits. One of the main interventions that is the focus of this literature review is Silent Sustained Reading (SSR). This is an often “recreational” program that many states, including Maryland, have as part of their Reading / Language Arts / English lesson planning framework (Methe & Hintze, 2003; Chua, 2008). While sometimes considered recreational, the SSR program is also thought to have a positive effect on a child’s reading fluency and comprehension, although there are studies that still need to be effectively done in order to show this (NICHD, 2000; Chua). Additionally, recent reports from the National Reading Panel have concluded that there is a lack of research supporting the idea that the prevalent practice of silent sustained reading in the classroom does show enough positive gains to prove that the program is as successful as it was

once perceived (Fawson, Reutzel, & Smith, 2008). This statement can be taken in a couple of different ways, in the sense that aspects of this program can and will be adopted and modified in order to meet the needs of certain students.

There are also a variety of other reading programs that have been designed and launched across the country, including Free Voluntary Reading (FVR), Drop Everything and Read (DEAR), Daily Independent Reading Time (DIRT) and Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading (USSR) (Chua, 2008). All of these programs are slightly different, but have common basic features such as giving students the freedom to read silently and without interruption for a period of time (Chua). Multiple school systems and classroom teachers have added in an aspect of this program where the students not only are responsible for reading silently, but must also be able to fluently tell about what they had read.

In their content area classroom study, Radcliffe, Caverly, Hand, and Franke looked closely at the PLAN strategy that is used primarily in content area classrooms for the reading of textbooks (Radcliffe et al., 2008). Before they are issued, the textbooks should be reviewed, especially once children reach the middle school level, since these books are commonly considered to be well above the reading level of the average student (Radcliffe et al.). The PLAN strategy stands for Predict (after taking a pre-test), Locate (information on a story-map), Add (information to the story map) and Note (new understanding and new questions) (Radcliffe et al.). In this study, the control group continued to read the text silently as the entire class would have done before, while the test group became versed in the PLAN strategy (Radcliffe et al.). The study was able to that this strategy would also be an effective way of helping students to gain comprehension of specific content area material (Radcliffe et al.).

Another reading intervention is Independent Reading (IR). Trudel (2007) utilized this program in her classroom after realizing that her students did not benefit from a regular SSR program and felt that they may from a more structured IR program. This program was implemented with third and fourth graders in a private elementary school and was different from the traditional SSR because of its 5 key elements, including (1) Teacher guidance for reading selections, (2) Student records of readings, (3) Mini lessons are conducted to include the students and the teacher, (4) Students reflect on what they read and (5) Teachers model reading and engage in student teacher conferences (Trudel). It is necessary to also keep in mind that teachers will utilize variations of several of these reading programs at times to help encourage productive reading habits, leading to heightened comprehension in their classrooms.

In Trudel's study, she noticed that her students that were engaged in IR were more likely to "stay on task, make appropriate text choices, engage in quality teacher-students discussions and create responses" (Trudel, 2007, p. 314). As previously mentioned, IR and SSR are very similar programs and either one could have pieces added to it or taken away from it with the intentions of providing the best possible reading situation for the students in the class. Once the teacher gets to know their students, SSR and the processes that go along with it, or with whatever reading program is used, it should be adapted from student to student in order to be the most effective for everyone. This is the very positive effect that can be seen from research done during similar studies.

While many of the ideas and strategies mentioned in this section are useful and can produce a positive result, there is an additional strategy that uses the "pedagogy" or language of the "gifted children" to develop a reading intervention and enhancement program for all students, titled the Schoolwide Enrichment Reading Model (SEM-R) (Coyne et al., 2008). This program

is known to “encourage enjoyment in learning and the opportunity to pursue creative, stimulating work . . .” (Coyne et al., p. 299). A red flag could be raised with this program as it seems to be geared more towards the gifted students and less towards the reluctant readers. This would, in some cases be a bit redundant because it is often the lower level student that has trouble with reading, as opposed to the more academically gifted students.

Effects of a Whole Class Silent Reading Program

There are a variety of studies that have been providing a wealth of information about silent sustained reading programs. However, depending upon the given study, the evidence may be either inconclusive, positive or negative. An example was mentioned earlier through the NRP. To reiterate, the literature that the NRP found noticed a widespread agreement in the literature encouraging students to engage in silent and independent reading because such practices increase reading achievement (NICHD, 2000). However, specific limitations of these programs are not given. Furthermore, the studies used by the NRP elaborate to say that the more children read, the more their levels of fluency, vocabulary and comprehension will increase (NICHD). It is also important to recognize that the multiple studies compiled by the NRP found their information to be correlational and that the best readers read the most and that the worst readers read the least (NICHD). It could be a relatively huge disservice to students that teachers are allowing them time during class to build a relationship as a reader with a certain story and then adding pressure and in some cases intimidation to the situation by meeting with the student one on one and sometimes having the students write about what they have read. At this point, student skills are being focused on which may be very weak, causing a domino effect for their enjoyment level when it comes to reading, leading to any possible excitement being overtaken by worry, fear and sometimes even humiliation.

Since the above studies are correlational, the correlation does not always mean causation. In other words, it could simply be that certain children read more because they are good at it or that reading skills simply improve with more reading (NICHHD, 2000). The trick here will often be actually getting the resistant reader to actually engage in reading time. The older a child gets the more of a struggle this could become. It is likely that children will begin to feel ashamed about their skill level, especially during middle school, when their peers are reading a book silently.

It is worth mentioning that SSR has a positive following, yet not in all cases, and that an adaptation of the SSR program was instituted into a number of classrooms as a result of teachers feeling they had implemented the SSR program correctly and yet began to see results that show that these supposedly engaged readers are deceiving in some cases (Clausen-Grace & Kelley, 2006). More specific behaviors such as disengaged readers sharing their limited progress with the teacher and students who are reading books well below their grade level show that students are able to make their true abilities within such a program (Clausen-Grace & Kelley).

Clausen-Grace and Kelley (2006) conducted a study as a result of a teacher concerned that some of her students were using the allotted SSR time to read words, but not actually gain any meaning from the topic. The results of this study turned out similar to the results of other studies, concluding that the students needed to be introduced to other genres of books in order to expand their knowledge base for what they could and sometimes should choose as a reading book, including non-fiction (Clausen-Grace & Kelley). Furthermore, the study also concluded that many of the students needed additional time being directly instructed in specific comprehension strategies, this lack of available comprehension strategies could be relating directly to those students who were off task or reading very slowly early on in the study

(Clausen-Grace & Kelley). A variation of pre, during and after reading strategies would be a prime example of what could be effectively practiced with students while reading stories in the classroom in order to help them to be more competent individual readers.

Overall, this study was able to post results similar to that of the NRP, in that a positive correlation was seen between “wide reading, vocabulary acquisition, and a student’s performance on standardized tests” (Clausen-Grace & Kelley, 2006, p. 150). As a result of their findings and the evidence that they had from previous studies, they are able to show that “students who spend more time reading in school perform as well or better on standardized tests of reading comprehension than other students” (Clausen-Grace & Kelley, p. 151).

Summary

The research literature suggests that the more children read, and understand what they are reading, they better that they will become at it. At the same time, if just the opposite is happening and the children are receiving less possible book time, and they are unable to enjoy the book time that they do get, they are less likely to advance their reading skills at the same pace or even slower. There is some evidence that the SSR program may help standard level middle school students perform to the best of their ability after helping to expand both their vocabulary and comprehension skills.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Design

This study was a posttest-only control group design, taking place in a standard level seventh grade language arts class. The participants were a convenience sample from the researcher's classroom. Students were randomly assigned to either the Teacher Assisted group or the Reading Only group. The independent variable was whether or not the students engaged in writing responses and conferencing with the teacher during Silent Sustained Reading or if they spent the whole time engaged in reading. The dependent variable was a reading comprehension score derived from a Marking Period assessment.

Participants

The participants in the study were from a school in the suburbs of a mid-size city in the mid-Atlantic region. While this was not a Title I school, many of the students who had relocated to this school as a result of the redistricting were coming from middle to low middle class families, especially in the standard level classes. Many of the students in the school were attending the school for the very first time, some as a result of countywide redistricting at the end of the previous school year, and others as a result of families moving to the area, some for the purpose of their children attending better schools. The recently added students came from a variety of backgrounds. Some were from private schools and had little exposure to the formal type of testing used for this study. Many of these students were from families that had been broken up multiple times. Some of the students were living with grandparents or other relatives.

Participants for this study were randomly selected from the researcher's lowest achieving seventh grade class, based on previous Marking Period assessment scores. This was done

because the students in this class had the most room for overall growth with their individual reading comprehension levels on their marking period assessment. The class consisted of students who were either on grade level or slightly below for reading. At the beginning of the study, the class had 28 students with an equal number of males and females. The class was divided randomly into experimental and control groups each containing 14 students. The Teacher Assisted group had 9 students in it who were new to the school this year, while the Reading Only group had 6 students in this same category. Students ranged in age from 11 to 14 years. There were 2 African American students in this class and the rest of them were Caucasian. One of the African American students was in the Teacher Assisted group and the other was in the Reading Only group. Shortly after the study began, 3 students were added to the class who were new to the area. They all began participating in the silent reading program shortly after their arrival. However, they were not included as participants in the study.

Besides the 3 newcomers, all 28 students had been exposed to Silent Selected Reading (SSR) on an almost daily basis since the beginning of the school year. Thus, the majority of the students had five months experience with SSR in the regular classroom setting prior to the beginning of the study in the third marking period.

In the Teacher Assisted group, there were 9 males and 5 females. Three of these students had 504 plans instituted by the school system, the child's families and the classroom teacher for attentional or emotional/behavioral concerns, such as Attention-Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Three students in the Teacher Assisted group had behavior problems that necessitated either a full Behavior Intervention Plan or daily behavior sheets.

In the Reading Only group, there were 8 males and 6 females. One of these students was going to be moved up to an advanced class the next year at the request of his teacher for his

ability level. Two of these students were on 504 plans, for attentional or sensory concerns. One additional student in the Reading Only group was being evaluated for attentional concerns during the study.

Instrument

The test used to assess reading comprehension was the Marking Period assessment, developed by county reading teachers and the director of secondary language arts for middle schools in the county. Every seventh grade language arts student in the county takes an end of the Marking Period assessment to measure his or her comprehension and vocabulary level four times a year. For this study, the Marking Period Three assessment scores were used. On this assessment, there were two short reading passages, one fiction and one non-fiction, and a poem that students read and responded to. Students responded to 25 selected response (multiple choice) questions; 19 of these questions tested the students' level of comprehension for the selected reading passages. The six questions that did not relate to the comprehension of the selected reading passages (e.g., vocabulary items) were not included in the reading comprehension score.

The assessment also included one Brief Constructed Response (BCR) question. The students were asked to write a response to the question, which in this specific case had to do with the main idea of the fiction piece of text included as a reading selection. The responses to these types of questions should include a direct answer, direct text support from the reading passage that can be explained and related back to the answer and an inference or connection back to the text. The students had eight lines to complete their responses. This researcher graded the BCR's written by the student and awarded them a score of a 0, 1, 2 or 3. Scores were awarded based on qualities such as the inclusion of a complete answer and the proof of understanding through an

extension. Brief Constructed Responses are also seen on state's assessment exams. The Marking Period assessments mirror the types of questions asked on the state assessment to help the students practice this type of test taking over time. The BCR's on the Marking Period assessments are graded from the state level rubric that is used to score the state assessment exams (see Appendix A). The test was new to the county the year the study was conducted. Since it was a locally developed test, it had not been critiqued from any major test reviewer such as in the Mental Measurements Yearbook. Because this was the first year that the test was being given, the results cannot be compared directly to previous test data.

Procedure

These students met with this researcher, who was their Language Arts teacher, daily for approximately 1 hour and 15 minutes during the regular school week.

The majority of the students involved in this experiment were originally introduced to Silent Sustained Reading (SSR) at the beginning of the previous school year. All students were given either a refresher or brand new information about what the SSR program expectations were for them for the present year. Students were instructed to read for 15 minutes from a book of their choosing on a daily basis during the Language Arts class period.

Students were also instructed in how to choose an appropriate book for them to read through self checks such as the Five Finger Test. During this application, students would open a book they are pondering and try to read a page. If they stumbled over a minimum of five words, they were encouraged to choose another book. The researcher also gave the students guidelines as to the type of book that they should be reading and how long it should be. The students were asked to read a book from any genre as long as it was developed in "story" format. The

researcher read aloud examples of appropriate types of texts that students could successfully choose from, which also sparked individual interest in certain books.

When this program was first introduced to these students, the teacher modeled what active reading should look like by being engaged in reading herself. The researcher also completed a “book talk” for books that she had finished in class as a way to introduce students to different novels. The students and teacher had no form of actual interaction about students’ SSR reading selections until the beginning of the study.

This study was initiated at the beginning of the third marking period. All students were introduced to weekly reading responses (Appendix B) and student teacher conferences at that point. However, it was explained that half of the students would participate in the weekly reading responses and student teacher conferences in the third quarter and that the other half of the students would participate in the fourth quarter.

Students were randomly assigned to the Teacher Assisted and Reading Only groups. The researcher used her original class list and marked off every other student as a member of the Teacher Assisted group, resulting in an equal number of participants in both the Teacher Assisted and Reading Only groups at the beginning of the study. Before the study was complete and testing had occurred, a student was moved from the Teacher Assisted group and placed into another class, leaving this group with a remaining 13 subjects. Group assignments were not announced to the whole class and students were not told that they were participating in a study.

The students in the Teacher Assisted group earned a combined grade for both the reading response and the student teacher reading conference (see Appendix C). The grading rubric was gone over at the beginning of the study to ensure that all students understood how these activities would affect their grade. The Reading Only group received a grade for being consistently on task

during the allotted classroom silent reading time. The classroom teacher clarified expectations for the students.

Students in the Teacher Assisted group completed a weekly reading response to go along with the book they were currently reading in class. Students were individually sought out and reminded about their weekly reading response. It was emphasized that they were not to summarize what they had read, but respond and interact with the literature to show their thoughts and feelings on what had been going on within the story. This was accomplished by responding to one of multiple sentence starters or questions. The point was to encourage the students to not only think specifically and critically about their book and specific events and characters from within, but also to help them internalize and criticize important and meaningful events as they progressed through the story.

Responses were collected from these students every Thursday and were used during the student-teacher reading conference to help develop and further the discussion of their story. Students in the Teacher Assisted group met with the researcher a minimum of once a week for a one-on-one student-teacher reading conference. Students were reminded individually if they were going to conference the next day. While they conferenced, other students were either reading silently or writing their reading response. Approximately three students were conferenced with on a daily basis. Conferences lasted approximately 4 minutes each. The conversation centered around the most recent reading response that the student had completed.

All students, regardless of group membership, kept track of the books they either had finished reading or were actively engaged in reading on an in-class chart. The students had been actively keeping their own reading chart in their daily silent reading folder since the beginning of the school year. This was a way for the classroom teacher to ensure that students were actively

progressing through books and if they were not, she was able to better determine who may have needed extra attention in regards to this issue. This way, students knew someone would be inquiring with them about the book they were reading, which helped them to choose carefully.

Conferences began the Friday after the beginning of the third marking period at the very end of January and continued until the completion of marking period three at the end of March. The study lasted for nine weeks.

The third marking period assessment was given to all students during the first week of April over a two-day period in a group-testing format. The comprehension portion of the test was given to the students on the first day. They completed the vocabulary section, which was not used for the purposes of this study, on the second day of testing. An independent sample *t*-test was used to compare reading comprehension scores of the experimental and control groups.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This study compared the reading comprehension performance of students in a Teacher Assisted group (n = 13) and students in a Reading Only group (n = 14). The null hypothesis was that there would be no significant difference in reading comprehension scores on a seventh grade assessment between students who were engaged in a teacher-directed Silent Selected Reading (SSR) program (Teacher Assisted Group) as opposed to those students who had just spent their time reading (Reading Only Group).

The results of the independent sample *t*-test show that there were no significant differences in the mean reading comprehension scores of the students in the Teacher Assisted group (Mean = 14.85, SD = 2.64) and the students in the Reading Only group (Mean = 15.50, SD = 3.08) [$t(25) = .56, p > .05$]. See Table 1. Thus, the null hypothesis failed to be rejected.

Table 1.

Means, Standard Deviations, and t-Test Results for Reading Comprehension Scores

| Group | Number of Students | Mean | Standard Deviation | t |
|------------------|--------------------|-------|--------------------|------|
| Teacher Assisted | 13 | 14.85 | 2.64 | |
| Reading Only | 14 | 15.50 | 3.08 | .56* |

* non-significant ($p < .05$)

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The results of this study failed to reject the null hypothesis that there would be no significant difference in reading comprehension scores on a seventh grade assessment between students who were engaged in a teacher-directed SSR program (Teacher Assisted Group) as opposed to those students who had just spent their time reading (Reading Only Group).

Comparison to Prior Research

Coyne and colleagues (2008) also found that teacher conferencing does not necessarily improve reading comprehension relative to other silent reading activities. Within their study, a random sampling group of 415 middle school students were all-responsible for reading silently. A portion of the students had peer conferences about the happenings in their books, while the other sampling of students engaged in student teacher conferences. Those students engaged in the peer conferences had overall higher reading achievement scores than those students engaged in teacher conferencing. Thus, even in a study with a large sample size, teacher conferencing was not found to be particularly effective.

Other researchers and theorists, however, have stressed the importance of teacher conferencing. For example, Fawson et al. (2008) conducted a study to determine the effectiveness of a Scaffolded Silent Reading program. The Scaffolded Silent Reading Program in their study was similar to the Reading Response group in the current study. The students were given time to read silently, but through a more scaffolded process than simply being given a book and told to read silently. Students were closely monitored by four different instructors who rotated between the four different sampling groups. Each instructor provided different reading opportunities for the students in addition to plain silent reading, such as choral reading activities,

paired reading activities and reader's theatre activities. The students also met with the teacher individually for random monitoring conferences about what they were reading. Researcher observation while the students were engaged in reading activities also played a large role in the study. Fawson and colleagues examined the development of third graders' reading fluency rates (as determined by a reduced number of reader errors in reading, an increase in the number of words read per minute, an increase in expression rating scores during reading) and an increase in comprehension as measured by the amount of ideas that the students recalled from the reading divided by the number of words included in the total reading.

Fawson et al. (2008) found no significant differences between the fluency practice and the Scaffolded Silent Reading in improving the third graders' level of reading comprehension or fluency levels. However, the authors did make references to other studies that had previously determined that conferencing between the students and the teacher during any kind of silent reading time could help the students to better comprehend what they were reading. Thus, similar to the current study, they did not find teacher conferencing to be more effective than other techniques in improving reading comprehension. However, by observation, they perceived benefits to the technique whereas in the current study, as will be detailed below, this researcher did not observe benefits to the technique.

One major difference between this study and the study conducted by the researcher is the grade level of the subjects. Fawson et al. (2008) utilized four different classes of third graders, totaling 72 student subjects from two different schools, both in a high poverty area, for their sampling, whereas the researcher for this study used a small sampling of seventh graders. The differences in grade levels and socioeconomic status of the students did not impact statistical findings of significance on reading comprehension measures. However, it is possible that these

differences, as well as in the difference in the structure of the activities based on age, may have contributed to differences in observed benefits from the program. For example, the third graders were involved in a slightly more structured program, whereas the prior knowledge of the seventh grade current study group was relied on more by the research showing certain expectations of the students going into the study on reading strategies and knowledge.

Another difference between the researcher's study and the Fawson et al. (2008) study is that the current researcher compared two specific silent reading groups who were just reading, although one of the groups had other responsibilities to contribute about the text that they were reading once it was complete. In the Fawson study, there were four different teachers who rotated through the different groups of readers. Each professional was considered to be a professional within the fields of fluency and comprehension. They implemented not only silent reading strategies, but also paired reading activities, choral reading activities and readers theatre activities. This selection of different activities was also combined with direct teacher modeling and observation as well as individual student teacher meetings, similar to the current researcher's study, and student interviews about their reading procedures. When comparing the effectiveness of the intervention, Fawson and his colleagues were comparing other in-depth, teacher directed interventions to teacher conferencing, whereas the current research just compared self-directed reading to teacher conferencing/writing. The fact that teacher conferencing/written responses was not found to be differentially effective in the current study is more striking.

Implications of the Study

Implementing the silent reading program where students show that they understand what they are reading through conferencing with the teacher and completing writing was not found to be more effective than a silent reading program in developing reading comprehension skills.

Since these results do not provide compelling evidence that one type of reading program is better than the other, educators will have to consider other factors when deciding what type of silent reading program is best for their classrooms.

One factor to consider is that by using the conferencing and written response method as implemented in this study, students lost the benefits of modeling. A variety of the studies have suggested that modeling good silent reading strategies and practices while the students are also engaged in reading, will allow them the opportunity to see their teacher doing what they are being asked to do and therefore be more able and in some cases, willing, to imitate the given practice. For example, in a study conducted by Methe and Hintze (2003), student reading comprehension scores soared after teacher remodeling was reintroduced after previously being removed from a silent reading program. The improvement in scores was attributed to students being on task for 90 to 95% of the time that they are being allotted to read silently.

This researcher has in previous years spent every day modeling for her students what she expected them to do during the allotted reading time. This has worked very well with this specific set of students. If the teacher is spending her time conferencing with students, it is nearly impossible to also spend adequate time modeling appropriate reading behaviors.

There were additional concerns with the teacher-directed SSR program related to the amount of time required for conferencing. It took some of the students a couple of minutes to get warmed up to speaking on their own during each conference session, making the overall conferencing experience somewhat grueling for both parties because of the amount of time that became necessary to spend with each student in order to attain appropriate information. The unexpected, greater time period spent with the students caused the researcher to feel rushed when

meeting with the students in order to stay on track for meeting their time goal and get the regular daily lesson started in adequate time to get all material covered before the quarterly assessment.

An additional concern with the teacher-directed SSR is the impact on classroom behavior and morale. The researcher noted that the students included in the Reading Response group appeared to feel an enormous amount of pressure each time they were told that they would be met with individually, regardless of the fact that they had advance warning of the meeting and had had plenty of time to read and write in preparation for the conference. This researcher noted that students were much less apt to read silently and show good and positive reading strategies when they knew that the teacher was not meeting with them in the near future. As a result, this distraction caused a downward trend in behavior in the classroom towards the end of the study when students were not on task once they knew they were not being met with, causing a distraction for other students who were expected to be reading, writing, or conferencing.

There are also concerns about the behavioral implications of not having a conferencing and writing requirement. This researcher felt that some members of the reading only group felt as if they were not being held accountable for the silent selected reading portion of the class, and therefore took advantage of their fifteen minutes of reading time, by drawing or completing other homework assignments, regardless of the amount of prompting that occurred. At this point in the reading program, the teacher felt conflicted in the respect that continuing to prompt the students in this group to read would be taken as a forceful approach causing her students, some of the with an already strong dislike for reading, to dislike reading even more. Thus, if the teacher-directed SSR program is used in a classroom, all students should follow the procedure.

Another concern of the researcher was that it was difficult to understand through the conferencing and journal entries how well the students comprehended what they had read. This

was frustrating. However, it also was not possible to determine the comprehension of the reading only group. Thus, neither strategy may be very effective in allowing educators to assess comprehension of reading selections.

Limitations of the Study

There are many probable limitations that occurred or could have been a factor during this study. First, the study included a small sampling of students from only one grade level and age range. Also, all of the students included for the sample were in the level standard language arts class. Consequently, the generalizability of the results is very limited. It is possible that different results could be obtained with different populations, such as students who were being co-taught or in an advanced level course.

An important limitation to the study was that since modeling was not included before or during the study, many of the subjects may not have understood appropriate reading behaviors. As a result, they may have been less likely to benefit from the conferencing strategy. The lack of modeling is of particular concern due to the characteristics of the study participants. A vast majority of students involved with the study were not only new to this specific class and reading procedure, but also to the school and their peers as a whole. Unfortunately, many of these students, with their varied backgrounds, may not have ever had good silent in class reading strategies modeled for them. This would put these students at a disadvantage because they may not know appropriate silent reading behaviors. Since fitting in, especially at this age and academic level, is extremely important, many of the subjects may have been making behavioral choices about reading behaviors based on what they saw their peers doing.

A related concern is that the students may not have understood what they were supposed to do in the teacher conferences. Teacher conferencing was a novel activity for most, if not all, of

the students. If teacher conferences had been modeled (perhaps with another teacher role playing the part of a student) and practiced many times prior to the initiation of the study, the conferences may have been more efficient and productive as well as less stressful.

Another limitation included within this study stemmed from the two different student groups that influenced classroom dynamics. Since there was a clear division between the two student groups, where one group was responsible for reading only and the other group was responsible for reading, responding to what they read in a written format and then also conferencing with the teacher, the students were aware of the disparity in responsibilities. The students who had the opportunity and the time to read only took advantage of this negatively in the sense that they spent time doing other things besides reading because they felt that they were not being accounted for, at least not anytime soon. Also, the members of the group who were responding to what they read by writing and conferencing with the researcher seemed to feel some resentment towards their peers who had more freedom to read and take from what they were reading, whatever they wanted.

Due to logistical constraints, it was not possible to have separate classes involved in the study. In a more perfect student subject scenario within these constraints, the two different groups would still of course exist, but one set of group members would not necessarily have knowledge of what the other group was completing during their work time. The splitting of the student groups into two very different sections within the classroom could have also seemed like much less of a victimization if certain students of another teacher, such as a Special Education co-teacher, had been present in the classroom to assist with the conferencing or even to walk around and monitor the members of the reading only group.

Ideas for Future Research

Ideally, in any future research, the researcher would be able to accumulate a much larger group of subject to be a part of this study. This would increase the power of the study as well as the diversity and generalizability of the results. The study could be conducted at different grade levels (e.g., primary, intermediate, middle school, high school). It could also be conducted with students of different skill levels. It could also be conducted with students from different demographic backgrounds.

By increasing the number of participants and the diversity of the subjects, it would also address the concern related to students in the same classroom having differing responsibilities. The single classroom constraint made acceptance and full participation from all students nearly impossible because they individually saw what the other group members were doing and had the opportunity to consciously make the decision that they would rather be doing what they other group was doing. Therefore, in future studies dealing with a similar manner, the reading only group would be in one classroom with one instructor while the other group would be in a different classroom, neither group having a firm knowledge of what is going on in the other classroom.

In future research, it will be important to establish appropriate reading behaviors prior to the introduction of conferencing and written responses. One way to address this concern would be for the educator to model appropriate reading behaviors during silent reading time to show students explicitly what good silent reading practices should look like. Similarly, it will be important that students understand the teacher conferencing process prior to data collection.

Summary

In conclusion, this study failed to find any significant differences in reading comprehension scores between students in a teacher-directed silent reading intervention, in which students wrote responses about what they read and then had a conference with their teacher, and students who just read during silent reading. Teachers will need to determine which approach is most appropriate for their classrooms based on other factors such as time constraints and classroom management. Limitations of the study include limited generalizability, lack of modeling, and student perceived inequalities in responsibilities based on group assignment. Future research should address these issues. This study provides insight as to considerations involved in a designing a silent reading program implemented in a middle school setting with the intention of helping to build reading comprehension skills.

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MSA Reading - BCR Rubric - Grades 3-8

Score 3

The response demonstrates an understanding of the complexities of the text.

- Addresses the demands of the question
- Effectively uses text-relevant¹ information to clarify or extend understanding

Score 2

The response demonstrates a general understanding of the text.

- Partially addresses the demands of the question
- Uses text-relevant¹ information to show understanding

Score 1

The response demonstrates a minimal understanding of the text.

- Minimally addresses the demands of the question
- Uses minimal information to show some understanding of the text in relation to the question

Score 0

The response is completely incorrect, irrelevant to the question, or missing.²

Note 1:

Text-relevant: This information may or may not be an exact copy (quote) of the text but is clearly related to the text and often shows an analysis and/or interpretation of important ideas. Students may incorporate information to show connections to relevant prior experience as appropriate.

Note 2:

An exact copy (quote) or paraphrase of the question that provides no new relevant information will receive a score of "0".

Name _____
Date _____
Period _____

Reading Response Literature Log

Directions: After you read, write your personal responses in the **journal section** of your notebook. Don't just summarize the plot. Let me hear your voice. These starters are suggestions for you to use. Remember in your response journals you are recording reactions and questions, not simply summarizing what you've read. After you read the selection, ask yourself these questions. Decide which would make the best entry from your response journal. You may certainly use other ideas of your own. Just make sure you include more than just a summary of what is happening. Support your response with what you are feeling as you read your book.

****One Reading Response journal will be completed every Thursday, after silent reading time is complete. Your journal response will be used during your reading conference with me. Every aspect of this assignment should be completed during your in class reading and journaling time. This will count as part of your reading grade. Please refer to the rubric!**

I wonder what this means

I really don't understand this part

I really like/dislike this idea because

This character reminds me of somebody I know because

This character reminds me of me because

This character is like (name of the character) in (title of book) because

I think this setting is important because

This scene reminds me of a similar scene in (title of book) because

I like/dislike this writing because

This part is very realistic/unrealistic because

I think the relationship between _____ and _____ is interesting because

I like/dislike (name of character) because

This situation reminds me of a similar situation in my own life. It happened when

The character I most admire is _____ because

If I were (name of character) at this point, I would

What you liked or disliked and why

What you wish had happened

What you wish the author had included

Your opinion of the characters

Your opinion of the illustrations, table and figures

What you felt as you read

What you noticed when you read
Questions you have after reading

I began to think
I love the way
I can't believe
I wonder why
I noticed
I think
I observed
I wonder
If I were
I'm not sure
I felt sad when
I like the way the author
I wish that
This made me think of
I was surprised
It seems like
I'm not sure
This story teaches
I began to think of

Name _____
Date _____
Period _____

Reading Response Literature Log Rubric

_____ / 10 points ~ Followed directions; successful conference

_____ / 5 points ~ CUPS (Capitalization, Usage, Punctuation, Spelling)

_____ / 5 points ~ On Task & On Time

_____ / 20 points ~ Total