CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION
Overview

One of the largest components of grade school, specifically primary grades, is teaching students to read. The primary grades main instructional focus for learning to read is structured around phonemic awareness, decoding, fluency, phonics, and comprehension instruction. Intermediate grades then shift from learning to read to reading to learn. Time is spent in guided reading groups, whole group instruction, teacher modeling, paired reading, and learning multiple reading strategies and how to use them appropriately. Reading comprehension is the most important element in the reading process, a skill that they will carry throughout their life.

Comprehension is a critical component of learning to read for elementary-aged children; Second grade being the most important. In third grade, students begin taking standardized assessments that rate their ability to comprehend text and other skills. For example, In Maryland, grade 3 through 8 students take the Maryland State Assessment (MSA). Their score is based on their performance and then classified as advanced, proficient, or basic and the results impact both students and schools. The MSA includes a math and reading portion, both of which require reading comprehension skills for successful completion. Students are prompted to read passages that are both fictional and expository texts and then respond to multiple choice questions or extended written responses.

There are many different reasons why students struggle with comprehension, most are reasons that the teacher and students have very little control over. Poverty being the biggest factor. Poverty has been shown to be one of the most powerful correlates to reading difficulty. Children who live in impoverished situations are more likely to struggle in reading. (Rasinski

2017, p.519) This is due to students having a lack of books or materials at home to read or from lack of parents reading with their children.

Research has been done over the past 20 years using the National Reading Panel (NRP) framework, showing that seventy-five percent of U.S. homeless children preform below grade level in reading, (Rubin, Erickson, San Agustin, Cleary, Allen & Cohen, 1996) and schools and teachers may not be prepared to teach these students, further hindering their literacy development and school achievement (Walker-Dalhouse & Risko, 2008). Although poverty is not the only reason students lack reading skills, it is often noted that students may have a lack of phonemic awareness and have a difficult time decoding words which results in lack of comprehension.

Statement of Problem

The purpose of this study is to determine the effectiveness and impact of the Cooperative Learning Reading Strategy in lower preforming second grade students reading comprehension skills.

Hypothesis

Providing reading strategies will have no effect on the reading comprehension of students.

Operational Definitions

The *dependent* variable in this study was reading comprehension which was measured via the Fountas and Pinnell reading assessment too.

The *independent* variable in this study was reading strategies. This was implemented using the Cooperative Learning reading strategy.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview

This literature review investigates several methods for improving reading comprehension in primary age students with a specific emphasis on strategies that can be utilized within the classroom for effective teaching and optimal growth. The first section of this review focuses on the background of strategy instruction. Section two covers reading strategies. Section three discusses the reasons why students struggle with Reading comprehension. Section four talks about techniques for teaching reading strategies to improve students reading comprehension skills. Section five is about a teacher resource book, "Strategies that Work". Lastly, the sixth section is the summary.

Background of Strategy Instruction

Over many years' researchers have studied why students struggle with reading comprehension, strategies that improve reading comprehension, and Instructional methods that improve reading comprehension. It is the most important element in the reading process. Not only to academic learning but also lifelong learning. Students may be reading the words, but without comprehension there is no actual purpose for the reading. This affects all subjects not just reading. It effects the interpretation of math problems, reading the newspaper or news articles, reading a textbook for science or social studies, and many other areas.

Research supports that a successful program of comprehension instruction should include 4 components: (1) large amounts of time for actual text reading, (2) teacher directed instruction in comprehension strategies, (3) Opportunities for peer and collaborative learning, (4) and

occasions for students to talk to a teacher and one another about their response to reading. A program that includes these components will set the stage for students to be interested and engaged in reading and provide them motivation to succeed. (Feilding and Pearson, 1994). Research that was done in the 1970's and 80's is surprised to find that there was a small amount of time that children spent actually reading texts. Compared to now when we allot ample time for students to be reading as frequently as possible. Teachers allocate time for actual text reading and ensuring that students are engaged is one of the most important tasks related to comprehension instruction. The estimated range back then was from 7 to 15 minutes per day from the primary grades to the intermediate grades (Anderson, 1985).

The real importance for text reading is time. Time for reading gives the opportunity to apply the skills and strategies that are vital to proficient reading. Just like in sports and music, practice makes perfect in reading too. Reading results in gaining knowledge, to which in turn fuels the comprehension process. Fielding and Pearson (1994) state that research in the late 1970s and early '80s consistently revealed a strong reciprocal relationship between prior knowledge and reading comprehension ability. The first part of this reciprocal relationship was the focus on developing methods for activating and adding to readers' knowledge base before reading to increase text understanding (Beck et al. 1982, Hansen and Pearson 1983). The second part of the relationship was the role that actual text reading plays in building knowledge. For example, increases in vocabulary and concept knowledge from reading silently (Nagy et al. 1987, Stallman 1991) and from being read to (Elle, 1989) have been documented. Further, the positive statistical relationship between amount of time spent reading and reading comprehension (Anderson et al. 1988) may be largely attributable to the knowledge base that grows through text reading.

Feilding and Pearson (1194) discusses that in one of the biggest success stories of the 1970's and 80's, research showed repeatedly that comprehension can be taught. Many strategies have been taught successfully such as, Using background knowledge to make inferences (Hansen & Pearson, 1983), getting the main idea (Baumann, 1984), Identifying the sources of information needed to answer a question (Raphael & Pearson (1985), and using the typical structure of stories (Fitzgerald & Spiegel, 1983) to help students understand what they are reading.

The students are not gaining anything while reading without the skill of reading comprehension. Good readers generally incorporate reading strategies into the reading and understanding of the text. Students taught specific reading strategies and who practiced these strategies until it became a regular routine for them can develop good reading comprehension.

Reading Comprehension Strategies

There are many strategies that contribute to enhancing reading comprehension in primary grades. Comprehension instruction should include four main components: (1) allotted time for actual text reading, (2) teacher-directed instruction in comprehension strategies such as small group or whole group instruction, (3) opportunities for collaborative learning, and (4) opportunities to have text discussions with the teacher. A program with these components will set the stage for students to be interested in and to succeed at reading--providing them the intrinsic motivation for continual learning (Fielding and Pearson, 1994). Possible effective strategies are as follows:

1) **Monitoring Instruction-** Purpose is to develop awareness while reading. Using methods such as metacognition to help students become aware of where they are having difficulty in order to learn new skills to help improve their area of weakness.

2) **Cooperative Learning Instruction-** The goal is to teach children to read with a partner or small group. The students learn to read aloud as well as listen to another student reading aloud. Students take turns reading aloud, making predictions, discussing and analyzing text and learn summarizing techniques. This includes turn and talk opportunities, paired reading, think-pair-share, discussion groups, jigsaws, book clubs, and inquiry circles.

3) **Use of Graphic Organizers-** Students have the opportunity to make graphic representations of the reading that was read. It allows them to organize their thoughts on paper and can be used for text recall or summaries. Some of the types of organizers available are semantic maps, expository maps, story maps, story schema, and graphic metaphors.

4) **Active listening-** requires readers to listen as a peer or teacher is reading aloud. This strategy encourages participation and gives students an opportunity for expressing their thought process as well as having discussions about what is being read and how it is being interpreted. This also includes interactive read aloud's when the teacher is modeling her thinking and processing out loud. This strategy provides a model of how to re-read for clarification, deeper understanding, and to build knowledge.

5) **Thinking Aloud-** Giving children the opportunity to express their thinking during and after reading a text.

6) **Rereading-** Multiple reads of the same text allow for close reading and increases fluency and comprehension.

7) **Annotating text**- Jotting notes, words, pictures, short phrases, questions, etc. as we are reading. The teacher can model his/her own thinking and walk students through what it

should look like in order for them to apply the strategy on their own. This includes short constructed responses, response journals, creating and making, and musical responses.

8) **Prior Knowledge**- enables readers to make connections to the text based on things they have learned previously from their own life and experiences.

9) **Predictions/Visualizing**- Helps the reader create a picture in their mind to help connect them to the story and what is taking place.

10) **Vocabulary**- Helps students to better understand the material especially when it is something new or unfamiliar.

11) **Story Elements**- Helps students become familiar with main characters, where the story is taking place, and the problem and solution. This will help students answer short questions as well as briefly summarizing a story.

12) **Story Structure**- Helps readers understand and identify questions such as who, what, when, where, why and how.

13) **Summarization**- Excludes unimportant details in order to be able to focus on the important topics for summarizing such as somebody, wanted, but, so, then.

14) **Reciprocal teaching-** Reciprocal teaching is an instructional activity where the student becomes the teacher during a small group. The teacher models and shows students how to guide the group using four specific strategies. Summarizing, question generating, predicting, and clarifying. Once the teacher has modeled and students have learned the strategies, the small group will take turns becoming the "teacher" and express their thinking by guiding the rest of the group with discussions about the text.

The teacher should first inform the participants about the strategies and their value, then he/she should model them, make them explicit and concrete. While reading, the teacher

should draw students' attention toward relevant parts of the texts (e.g., the title) and activate their prior knowledge. Then, the teacher and the participants should take turns in leading the meaning-construction dialogue, and the responsibility for the comprehension monitoring is gradually shifted toward the students. During this transfer of responsibility, the teacher should provide feedback to help students move toward competence (Tarchi & Pinto, 2016).

The importance of reciprocal teaching is that it gives the students an opportunity to think about their own thought process during reading. Additionally, its helps students become actively involved and monitor their comprehension as they read. It teaches them to ask questions during reading and helps make the text more comprehensible. Although **reciprocal teaching** aims at **teaching** four comprehension-monitoring and comprehension-fostering strategies, most importantly it activates a process through which students learn and internalize the strategies (Tarchi, & Pinto 2016).

Educators must be well prepared, familiar and knowledgeable with all reading strategies. When preparing for specific texts, some strategies might be more beneficial than others depending on the skill/standard one is are teaching or the text one is reading. According to Harvey and Goudvis (2007), "When it comes to reading, comprehension is the most important thing" and "Teaching strategies for strategies' sake is simply not the point. The objective of reading instruction should be "to explicitly teach a repertoire of thinking strategies that are used to further the cause of understanding and engagement." (pgs. 13-14). In order for strategies to gain authentic use, instruction should focus on the flexible application of the strategy rather than a rigid sequence of steps (Fielding and Pearson, 1994). It should externalize the thinking process of skilled readers- not create artificial processes that apply only to contrived instructional or

assessment situations. Teachers should also demonstrate how to apply each strategy successfully-

what it is, how it is carried out, and when and why it should be used (Paris et al. 1991)

Reasons Why Students Struggle with Reading Comprehension

There are many reasons why students struggle with reading comprehension. Some of the

reasons teachers and schools have very little control over. Poverty being one of the biggest

factors.

Poverty has been shown repeatedly to be one of the most powerful correlates to reading

difficulty. Children who live in impoverished situations are more likely to struggle in

reading. Family and community dynamics, such as parents reading to and with their

children, and access to books and other reading material at home and in the community

library also play important roles in children's success in reading. (Rasinski 2017, p. 519).

Over the past 20 years, researchers have explored the nature of students who struggle in

reading using the framework provided by the National Reading Panel (NRP)**.** Seventy-five

percent of U.S. homeless children perform below grade level in <u>reading</u> (Rubin, Erickson, San

Agustin, Cleary, Allen & Cohen, 1996), and schools and teachers may not be prepared to teach

these students, further hindering their literacy development and school achievement (Walker-

Dalhouse & Risko, 2008).

Although poverty is one of the main reasons, there are other reported reasons for why

students may struggle with reading comprehension. One reason often cited is that students may

have a lack of phonemic awareness and have a hard time decoding words that are being read.

This results in the students are focusing so much on what each word says they cannot interpret

the bigger picture beyond that. Limited vocabulary and background knowledge contribute to

lower levels of reading comprehension. If there are many words in the text that are unknown, it alters the meaning and understanding of the text. Another reason for the lack of phonemic awareness could be that the student is an English language learner; English isn't their first language. Also, students who have learning disabilities such as dyslexia may need more support when it comes to reading a text so their comprehension skills are often affected.

Techniques for Teaching Reading Strategies in Order to Improve Student Reading Comprehension Skills

Reading success has been linked to high school completion, future job success, and future generations of children who can read (Cook, 2010). On average it is likely that if a student does not read on grade level by the end of first grade, they are at a great disadvantage and are unlikely to catch up later.

> Without the ability to read and comprehend text, all aspects of schooling become progressively more difficult and the challenge of poor reading ability can be so difficult to overcome that many poor readers will not complete high school. For these reasons, it is important to identify early experiences in a child's family environment that predict the early skills that are necessary for later reading and reading comprehension. (Cook, 2010)

Learning to read is one of the most important skills that a child can learn. It is a skill that they will use throughout their lives. There are 5 key aspects that need to be taught for the student to become a fluent and confident reader.

The skills necessary to become a proficient reader include (1) phonemic awareness, (2) phonics, (3) vocabulary, (4) fluency, and (5) comprehension. Frequently referred to as the "Big Five," these essential skills have been identified by the NRP as critical components of literacy

instruction (National Reading Panel, 2000). Students must have mastered phonemic awareness and phonics first before any other reading skill. This process will help them with the first step towards reading comprehension which is decoding.

Decoding is the process where students take what they have learned about phonemic awareness and apply the skills in order to sound out words in a sentence or text. Through these strategies, students learn to use high frequency words, context clues, and sounds to read accurately.

Focusing on building vocabulary skills build a strong foundation when it comes to comprehension. Understanding what most words mean enables students to connect with the text and allows them to use prior knowledge when reading.

Fluency is developed when a child is successful with decoding and can read at a faster rate based on words per minute. They begin to use expression and appropriate pausing when reading.

Students must be able to successfully use these skills before gaining an understanding of the text. Comprehension is a skill that is developed after these previous skills have been attained. Students who make connections while reading are better able to understand the text they are reading. Comprehension is the process where a child reads a selected text and is able to answer detailed questions pertaining to the reading, as well as making text-to-self connections, text-to-text connections, and text-to-world connections.

Strategies that Work

The text "Strategies That Work" has become an indispensable resource for teachers who want to explicitly teach thinking strategies so that students become engaged, thoughtful,

independent readers. It recommends that strategy instruction implements Pearson and

Gallagher's (1983) (cited in Harvey & Goudvis, 2007) individual release of responsibility

framework. The framework includes five main elements that are thought to be the most effective

teaching techniques for teaching reading strategies to students.

Teacher modeling (1) is the initial component of strategy instruction. The teacher

defines and explains the skill or strategy, and then models how to accurately use the strategy to

comprehend. The teacher verbally models their thinking process out loud to show the students

what is going on in the teachers mind and how to use the strategy effectively. **Guided practice**

(2) occurs when the teacher is directing a large group conversation to show a specific line of

thinking. The (3) **teacher and** students practice the strategy together during a shared reading

where they construct meaning of the text. During this time, the teacher offers support and

feedback to the students while scaffolding their thinking. This strategy is helping students put

into practice what they've learned. The teacher guides and scaffolds the students through the

process so they will be successful when working independently or cooperatively in groups. The

students then participate in (4) **collaborative practice**. This occurs after teacher modeling and

guided practice have already been delivered. Collaborative practice is an activity completed in

small groups or partners where they share their thinking with their peers while the teacher

monitors and reacts to students' needs. A strategy frequently used for collaborative practice is

Think-Pair-Share. Where the students think first and then get with their group to actively discuss

each thought.

Following collaborative practice, students are directed to (5) **independently practice the**

strategy. This time give teachers and peers to provide feedback. Harvey (2007), states that once

a student "owns" a strategy, he or she can apply it to numerous texts across genres. Meaning that

once the students have mastered the skill they can apply the skill on their own to address the texts they are reading independently.

A lot of times these strategies are wonderful opportunities to enhance or include specific instruction to your students. These opportunities offer time to teach a strategy during

read-alouds /think-alouds, interactive reading, guided discussions, rereading to enhance meaning, anchor charts etc.

Summary

In summary, reading comprehension is a vital life skill for everyone. For students to become successful they must be taught strategies and techniques that are effective in order to help them when reading independently. It is important that this is done at an early age to be sure the student does not fall behind and risk the possibility of not being able to "catch up" to grade level comprehension. There are various approaches when it comes to teaching reading strategies, but all are similar in unique ways.

There are many factors that contribute to why students lack comprehension skills. Discovering the why before hand will set the teacher up for success when moving forward with planning strategic lessons based on the child's needs. The process starts with the teacher's instruction and modeling and progresses to scaffolding the students to become successful. The result is that students can use these techniques independently and effectively. In conclusion, providing students with effective strategies will enhance their understanding and comprehension as well as giving them motivation to read.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to increase reading comprehension of struggling second grade students using a selected targeted strategy.

Design

The independent variable was the cooperative learning strategy intervention. The dependent variable was the students reading comprehension scores using the Fountas and Pinnell reading assessment.

This study consisted of a quasi-experimental pre- post test design to determine the changes in reading comprehension scores of second grade students on Fountas and Pinnell assessments. This study targeted 11 students who were below the second grade average reading level. were selected to participate in the experimental group and received an additional 1 hour a week split into 2-30 minute small group intervention periods. All 11 students completed a pre-test and a post test. The purpose of the intervention was to determine the effectiveness of the instructional strategy. The instructional strategy chosen for this study was, Cooperative Learning Instruction, and was implemented for 3 weeks.

Participants

The participants for this study were enrolled in a Maryland school district, in a second-grade classroom in a suburban community. This school is rated average in school quality compared to other schools in Maryland. Students here are making **about average** year-over-year academic improvement, this school has **below average** results in how well it's serving

disadvantaged students, and students perform **above average** on state tests. Twenty-nine percent of the school's students are FARMS student or low income.

The participants for this research were 55% Caucasian, 9% African American, 9% Hispanic, and 27% two or more races. The group consisted of 7 boys and 4 girls. Students in the study are between seven and eight years old.

Instrument

The instrument used in this study was the Fountas and Pinnell Reading Assessment Tracker. This assessment provides one non-fiction and one fiction book for each assessment level. The assessment used by the participants' school to assess reading comprehension and fluency. The tool is leveled from A to Z. Second grade falls between level J-M. The assessments are given as a "cold read" where students have never read the book before to demonstrate to teachers what they are able to understand independently. Each assessment is timed by how many words per minute the student reads, how many mistakes and self-corrections were made, a series of comprehension questions, and a writing comprehension constructed response on certain levels.

Procedure

The researcher took 11 of her lowest scoring readers in her second-grade class to participate in the intervention. The group received additional intervention using the cooperative learning reading strategy. The intervention was given before school between 8:45-9:15 twice a week. During the cooperative learning intervention students will read with the teacher as well as a partner/small group. The students will learn to read aloud as well as listen to another student read aloud. Students take turns reading aloud, making predictions, discussing and analyzing text,

and learn summarizing techniques. This includes turn and talk opportunities, paired reading, think-pair-share, discussion groups, jigsaws, and inquiry circles. The students read books on a 1st-2nd grade reading level, both Fiction and Nonfiction stories. Students who are receiving intervention will meet with the teacher twice a week for 30 minutes per session for a total of three weeks.
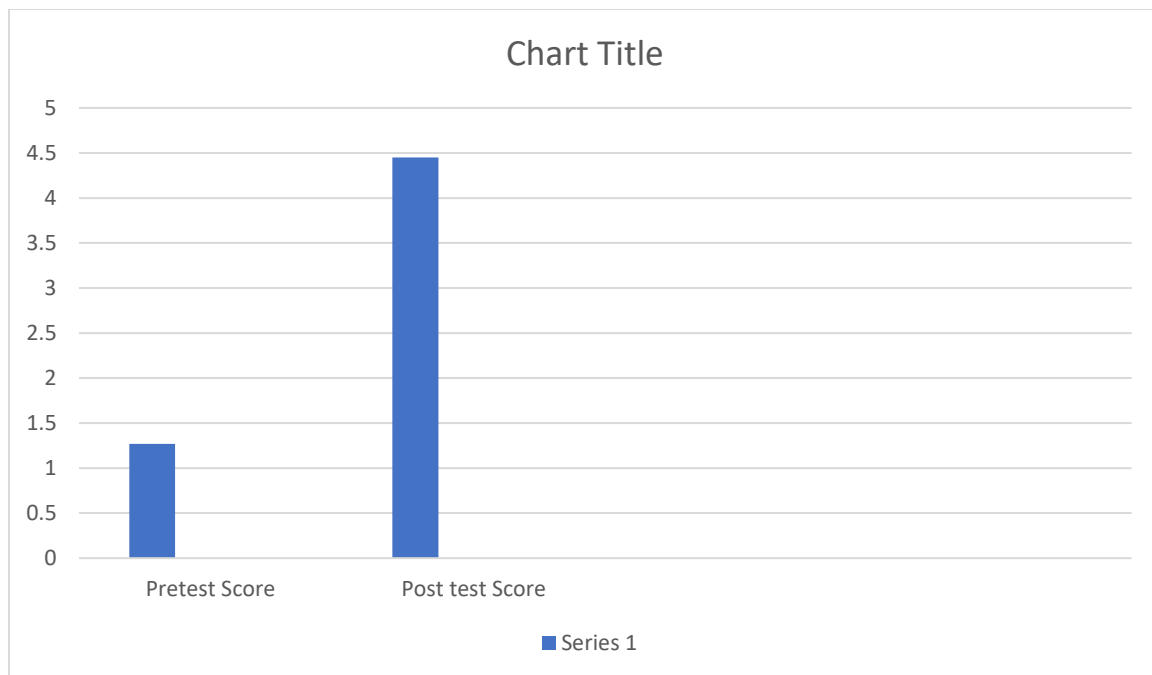
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to determine whether explicit instruction in a specific reading strategy would impact the reading comprehension of lower performing second grade students.

Based on the pre-assessment, all students scored unsatisfactory, or below reading comprehension level. Upon completion of the intervention, post scores significantly increased to 4.45, $t(10)$= -14.05 p<.05. Post-test scores revealed that 64% of the students scored limited comprehension level, 27% scored satisfactory and 9% were at the highest level of comprehension. The findings indicated the intervention had a significant effect on reading comprehension.

Figure 1: Mean Scores on Reading Comprehension

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to increase reading comprehension of struggling second grade students using a selected targeted strategy.

Implications of the Results

Analysis of data from the study showed that the null hypothesis was not supported. The students showed significant gain in reading comprehension ability after the intervention was implemented. The student's comprehension level started at unsatisfactory, and the post-intervention scores showed that students increased to limited, satisfactory, and excellent comprehension levels.

Theoretical Consequences

Vygotsky, a Russian Psychologist formulated a theory of cognitive development and stated that children learn through their interactions with others (Tran, 2013). He believed that children initially experience knowledge and skills through interactions with other children and adults. The social context of the zone of proximity development (ZPD) suggests that the zone must be viewed and not solely relative to the child or the teacher, but the child immersed in a cooperative activity. During the intervention, the strategy used to guide instruction was Cooperative Learning; which is a small group where students work in a social setting to use different methods of reading strategies and collaborate with peers. Vygotsky stresses the importance of cooperative activities and argues that the development of children is promoted by cooperative activities. In his view, cooperative learning among children promotes growth because children of the same age work in one another's ZPD and models behaviors that are more

effective than children working independently. As a result, instructional strategies that promote the distribution of expert knowledge where students collaboratively work together to conduct research, share their results, and perform or produce a final project, help to create a collaborative community of learners.

Johnson and Johnson (1990c) define cooperative learning as "the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and one another's learning" (pg 101) In other words, cooperative learning is the pedagogy within which students are active constructors of knowledge n the learning process instead of passive receivers of any given knowledge.

Threats to Validity

There are several threats to validity related to this study. One being that the students were not randomly sampled. The students chosen were students who were struggling readers, or in other words a convenience sample. Another threat to validity was the length of time the intervention took place. In this study the intervention lasted a little over two weeks, if the intervention had lasted longer, students could've shown more progress. This is called maturation.

Connections to Existing Literature

In the past two decades, comprehension instruction has been a topic of high interest with researchers .(Fielding et al., (1994)) note that "comprehension is now viewed as a much more complex process involving knowledge, experience, thinking and teaching" (p. 62). The focus of comprehension instruction changed during the 1990's, becoming centered on the importance of students constructing meaning and not simply repeating information from their reading resources. Researchers stressed that comprehension skills were not meant to be taught in

isolation. Rather, teachers were encouraged to facilitate higher order questioning and comprehension skills.

Recommendations for Future Studies

For future studies, it is imperative that more time is allotted for intervention time, not only the weekly sessions, but the length of the overall study. Other strategies can be taught during this time to give students an abundance of comprehension strategies to use while reading. Not only will this allow time to learn multiple strategies, but also give students time to practice them and use them independently.

Conclusions

Overall, if this study were to be conducted again, the researcher would extend the timeframe of the entire study and use random sampling to get the most accurate results for the intervention.

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