

The Effects of Self-Selected Reading on the Reading Comprehension Level of Children of  
Poverty in an Eleventh Grade Classroom

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine whether monitored, self-selected reading would affect the reading achievement of 11<sup>th</sup> grade children of poverty. The measurement tool was the reading comprehension portion of the Accuplacer Test taken online. This study was a quasi-experimental design that involved the use of a pretest/posttest strategy to compare data over an eight-week period of intervention. Achievement gains were significant, although other factors may have impacted the results. More research into implementing this low-cost intervention for students of poverty should be investigated as the need to prepare students for the rigors of college becomes more important as more and more jobs are now requiring higher levels of education.

# **CHAPTER I**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

In today's high schools, more emphasis is being placed on preparing all students for the opportunity to attend college after they graduate from high school. The recent move to the Common Core Curriculum written by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers (2010) and adopted in 44 states emphasizes college and career readiness. Prior to the Common Core, No Child Left Behind federal legislation ushered in an era of data tracking in schools in the early 2000s. Under this act, schools were to keep track of student success rates on standardized testing and then ensure that all student groups were achieving at an equal level. This disaggregation of data proved what many people in education already knew: that an achievement gap exists between students of poverty and their peers, and yet this finding did little to help bridge that gap (Spring, 2014).

Schools, then, must work to eliminate the gap and help their students out of poverty. One way to break that cycle is to attain a degree from an institute of higher learning; students who receive a college degree are far less likely to end up in poverty (Balfanz, 2013). In order to do so, students must successfully graduate from high school, navigate the college admissions process, enroll in college, and succeed in a rigorous college setting. For most students of poverty, however, the goal of a college diploma remains one that is unfulfilled (KIPP Foundation, 2011). The path to college for these students is a long one that is riddled with many obstacles, one of which is meeting with success on college entrance exams. One specific academic area holding students of poverty back is reading comprehension which leads to lower college entrance exam scores, forces them into noncredit-bearing courses, and causes them to struggle in their college classes (Harney, 2012).

Schools are attempting interventions to help students navigate complex text at a variety of scales. Some districts have taken a schoolwide approach in an attempt to address the issue in each classroom (Kansas Center, 2007). Others have attempted using strategies like teaching students to “close read” texts at the classroom level (Brown, Kappes, & Aspen, 2012). A final intervention occurs at the individual student level and involves improving reading skills by getting kids to read more on their own. This model of self-selected reading involves students choosing a text on their own and teachers allotting a specified time during class and actively monitoring students to ensure that they are completing the reading. This model is found to be successful in the elementary and middle level, but is not frequently used or examined at the high school level (Krashen, 2009).

### **Statement of Problem**

The need to help students with reading is a must if we want students to meet with success in high school and beyond. At the secondary level, students are supposed to be able to navigate a wide variety of complex texts in their courses, but little emphasis is given to helping teachers outside of the English classrooms in addressing this problem. In addition, students of poverty are less likely to read on their own or connect with text which further exacerbates their issues with reading comprehension (Kuperman & Van Dyke, 2013). Much of reading comprehension research is focused on the elementary or middle school levels, so the goal of this study is to determine whether monitored, daily self-selected reading will have an impact on the reading comprehension scores of high school students who are children of poverty.

### **Hypothesis**

Will exposing students to more reading and allowing students to choose what they read have an impact on reading comprehension scores? The null hypothesis is that students who are

exposed to 25 minutes of self-selected reading a day in class will show no gains from pretest to posttest on their overall reading comprehension scores on the Accuplacer college placement exam.

### **Operational Definitions**

The independent variable was the introduction of *self-selected reading*, which for this study was operationally defined as students reading a fiction or nonfiction book of their choosing for 25 minutes, being monitored, and completing a reflection log after each period involving answering reflection questions on their reading and noting completed page numbers. The dependent variable was the *reading comprehension section of the Accuplacer Test*, created by the College Board and taken on a computer. This test is used by a variety of colleges to determine academic strengths and weaknesses and place students in the appropriate level of courses.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

#### **Introduction**

The following review of the literature examines the importance of reading comprehension to students of poverty and its impact on their ability to achieve success in enrolling in and graduating from college. In 2011, low-income students made up 48% of the entire public school population of the United States; in 17 states, over half of the student population is made up of children of poverty (Suits, Sabree, & Dunn, 2013). This reality is something that schools and districts grapple with on a daily basis. Children of poverty come to schools with unique needs and challenges. They come to school less prepared for success than their more affluent peers and are more likely not to finish high school and end up in poverty (Balfanz, 2013). However, if students graduate from high school and receive a college degree, they are less likely to end up in poverty.

In the job market of the future, education beyond high school will be the norm. In 1973, only 28% of jobs in the United States required some form of education beyond a high school diploma; by 2018, that number is estimated to rise to 62% (Amos, 2010). If we want to give students in poverty a fighting chance to get out of poverty, they must have the opportunity not only to graduate from high school but also to move on to higher education. In order to do that, educators must ensure that students graduate ready to succeed in college. Educators must ensure that all students have the skills necessary for success, and one key area for success in all subjects is reading comprehension. By developing an understanding of the importance of a college degree and the challenge of placement tests, the struggle that children of poverty face with reading comprehension, and the ways in which to improve reading comprehension, educators can try to

assist students in poverty and strive to guarantee that they have a chance to break the cycle of poverty.

Section one of this review of the literature will examine the importance of college and the challenge of placement tests, especially as they relate to low income students. Section two will look at why students struggle with reading comprehension. Section three will focus on interventions to help students with reading comprehension. Finally, section four includes a summary.

### **College and the Challenge of Placement Tests for Low Income Students**

In 2002, 33% of students in poverty said that they expected to graduate from college (Aud, KewalRemani, & Froehlich, 2011). In 2009, however, only 8.3% of students in poverty had attained a degree by their mid-20's (KIPP Foundation, 2011). This gap in expectations and reality can be attributed to several factors. First, students in poverty graduate from high school at a much lower rate, which excludes them from attending college (Orszag, 2013). One of the greatest predictors of high school graduation rates is the ability to read on level at the third grade (Hernandez, 2011). According to a College Board report on improving college completion rates (Hughes, 2012), the United States must also critically evaluate all levels of education from increased participation in pre-kindergarten to high school teaching and counseling to critically examining college structures. The report also recommends an increased focus on literacy skills so all students can have the opportunity to graduate from high school and complete college and improve on the 43% rate of Americans who held a two- or four-year degree in 2011.

For some, the question remains: "Do students need a college degree?" The monetary incentive is clear. In 2007, the median income for those with a bachelor's degree was \$20,000 higher than for those with just a high school diploma and more than \$27,000 higher than those

without a high school diploma. Most strikingly, only 4.4% of individuals with a bachelor's degree live in poverty, and only 10.5% of people with some college or an associate's degree live in poverty (Crissey, 2009). It is clear that one path out of poverty is education, but it is a path that is difficult. Statistics show, however, that the more education one has, the more opportunities that person has access to in the United States. So an examination of some of the barriers that children of poverty face in completing college is in order.

Enrollment in U.S. colleges depends on several factors: successful completion of high school; an application including a resume, transcripts, and an essay; references; and, finally, test scores (College Board, 2013). Being accepted into a college, however, does not mean that a student is academically prepared. In the United States, most colleges accept the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or the ACT test. These tests are used not only to determine whether a student is admitted; they are frequently used to place students into their freshmen sequence of courses. For example, Western Michigan uses a combination of SAT or ACT scores and high school grade point average to determine whether students are placed directly into credit-bearing math or English courses or whether they enter into a "skill building" noncredit course (Western Michigan, 2013). This placement plays an important role in whether a student eventually graduates from college.

Students are graduating and finding that they are not academically prepared for college success. In 2009, only 24% of students who took the ACT met all four college readiness benchmarks, while less than 50% scored ready in math, and only 52% scored ready in reading (ACT, 2010). For many students, this means enrolling in noncredit-bearing courses. Noncredit courses must be successfully completed before students can enter coursework that counts toward obtaining a degree. Students enrolling into these courses are forced to spend more money and

time and are more likely to be students of color and poor; they are also less likely to graduate (Harney, 2012). For children of poverty, this burden is even more troubling. Recent studies have shown that graduation rates from college for low-income students have only improved slightly over the past 20 years while more affluent students have made significant improvements. Some of this can be attributed to the frustration and financial burden caused by enrolling in noncredit courses (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011).

How do students' income levels and test scores compare? On the Critical Reading portion of the SAT test (where the highest score possible is 800), students who came from families that made less than \$20,000 attained an average of 435; students whose families made over \$120,000 could expect to score over a hundred points higher on average (Strauss, 2013). When students struggle with reading, they perform poorly on placement tests. Not only that, they have difficulty finding success in their coursework. College requires students to access a variety of complex texts, and lack of reading comprehension can hinder successful completion of college.

### **Why Do Some Students Struggle with Reading Comprehension?**

Being able to understand what you read is the foundation of education. From word problems in math to primary documents in history courses, students are expected to discern meaning from a variety of texts. For some students, this skill is more difficult than for others and leads to trouble meeting with success. In particular, the experience children of poverty have with reading, a lack of vocabulary and phonemic awareness, and lack of stamina with difficult readings contributes to lower success rates with reading comprehension.

Students in poverty are hurt by their lack of experience with printed material, which is a key to unlocking meaning from what you read. Kuperman and Van Dyke (2013) looked at students' experience with printed material and vocabulary size. One of the means to understand

what you read is being able to recognize words, and Kuperman and Van Dyke found that students who had a larger vocabulary had greater experience with reading; therefore, these students were able to discern meaning from unfamiliar words more easily, break down complex portions of texts, and have a greater understanding of a text's main idea. Students with more experience and greater vocabulary could move through text more quickly and with greater understanding even when words and concepts were unfamiliar.

Why does this matter? Students of poverty are exposed to less print material and almost three times fewer words than their more affluent peers (Hart & Risley, 1995). Although all children begin speaking around the same time, by the time students reach the age of three, students who come from homes with parents on welfare have been exposed to 30 million fewer words than children coming from professional families (Hart & Risley, 2004). Exposing pre-K students to print-rich environments was found to help students close the gap; however, once students enter kindergarten and enter early primary school, many of these gains are lost and gaps reappear (Neuman & Roskos, 1993).

Another issue for struggling readers is lack of stamina for dealing with readings that are complex and seen as irrelevant to their lives. According to Pressley (as cited in Brownell & Walther-Thomas, 2000), as students get older, struggling readers get increasingly more frustrated with reading as text becomes more complicated, less interesting, and less relevant to their daily lives. One way to help students make sense of text is to infuse more culturally relevant examples; instead of focusing on students' deficits, use what students know to help them learn how to navigate the educational system which can seem foreign to them (Gay, 2000). Children of poverty face a variety of challenges when faced with comprehending what they read, and schools must focus on addressing these challenges to help students out of their situation.

## **Interventions to Help Improve Reading Comprehension**

With the understanding that attending college is becoming more important in today's society, that students of poverty are finding themselves less prepared academically to enter school, and that reading comprehension plays an important role in success at all levels of education, educators must look at attempts to improve reading comprehension. A careful examination of several interventions reveals patterns that can demonstrate what has shown promise in helping improve reading comprehension for students of poverty.

Reading comprehension is a much discussed topic, and therefore, to assess interventions, it can be useful to look at interventions at different scales. Reading comprehension interventions have been used with varying degrees of success at the school level, classroom level, and with individual students. One schoolwide intervention is the School Instruction Model (SIM) Content Literacy Continuum (CLC).

The CLC was created by the University of Kansas and acknowledges that, at the secondary level, students are frequently unprepared to comprehend what they are expected to read, yet they are also expected to learn a fair amount of content. CLC, then, is a schoolwide program that includes five levels: Content Mastery, Embedded Strategy Instruction, Explicit Strategy Instruction, Intensive Skill Development, and Intensive Clinical Intervention. CLC is designed to address the need for increased literacy skills along with the need to gain content knowledge (Kansas Center, 2007). The idea is that core content teachers (math, science, English, social studies) are instructed in the use of these levels, and then students are exposed to this methodology in all classrooms. Thus, students with larger deficits are given intense skills-based reading support, and, consequently, schools will note gains in student growth.

A 2012 study by the Department of Education did not note significant gains made by schools that implemented CLC when those schools were compared to control schools (Corrin et al., 2012). The researchers looked at 28 schools in the Midwest that volunteered to be part of the study for two years. Fifteen of the schools were randomly assigned to implement CLC. After two years and no significant gains, the Department of Education found that it was difficult to ensure that an intervention at the school level was implemented with fidelity. With variable factors such as administrative support, training, varying professional development, teacher familiarity with the program, and consistent implementation, change at this level is difficult.

The next scale examines classroom strategies available to teachers. One such strategy is teaching students “close reading.” With the advent of Common Core, teachers are now expected to teach students to interpret complex texts on their own, and close reading involves giving students short, complex texts and teaching students to use multiple readings with the goal of making students increasingly more independent (Brown et al., 2012). Boyles (2013) argues that forcing students to make personal connections with texts that are not there (as was done for the past decade) is not an effective way to have students comprehend and analyze what they have read. Teachers should focus on teaching students how to reread the passage for greater meaning, process the material, extract meaning, and teach students how to ask the questions. In this way, Boyles argues, close reading allows teachers to get students to interact with text on a variety of levels that will lead students to become more independent readers and thinkers.

The next interventions to review occur on the individual student level. One such intervention involves self-selected readings. Krashen (2009) looked at several reading interventions given to students and examined studies of such interventions, ranging from traditional phonics instruction to the use of chess to boost literacy. One of most effective ways

that was found to boost reading comprehension was self-selected reading. This approach is simple: students are given the option to choose texts that interest them and are then monitored as they work their way through the text. Krashen's argument underscores that schools focus less on quick-fix gimmicks and have students immerse themselves in readings that interest them and are engaging. This method meshes with Gay's (2000) argument that students of poverty and children of color need to have more culturally relevant materials made available to them so they are able to meet with greater success.

### **Summary**

A cornerstone of education is reading. Students must be able to navigate a variety of texts of increasing complexity to meet with success. For children of poverty, the gaps between vocabulary, reading fluency, and comprehension begin as young as age three and continue on through higher education. In order to break the cycle of poverty, more and more education is becoming necessary in the modern workforce. Educators need to understand why gaps exist, how to address them, and give students of poverty the skills necessary to meet with success in the classroom, on college placement exams, in higher education, and in the workplace. By focusing on helping students comprehend what they read, educators can truly affect the chances that a student can make his or her way out of the cycle of poverty.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS**

#### **Design**

The purpose of this study was to determine whether monitored self-selected reading would have an effect on the reading comprehension scores on the Accuplacer college placement test of students of poverty in the eleventh grade. The proposed study was a quasi-experimental design with a pretest/posttest assessment strategy. The study was conducted over an eight-week period between April 21<sup>st</sup> and June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

#### **Participants**

The 49 participants of the study were eleventh grade students in the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) class at a midsize suburban high school outside of Baltimore, MD. The AVID program is a national college preparation course for students who are first generation college students, students from underrepresented populations, and/or students with special circumstances that may keep them from being able to attend college. All students qualified for Free and Reduced Meals under state guidelines. The group featured students of mixed races, breaking down as follows: 18 African-American males, 20 African-American females, seven Caucasian males, three Caucasian females, and one Hispanic female.

#### **Instrument**

The instrument used was the reading comprehension portion of the Accuplacer test. The test is a computer-based adaptive test created by the College Board that is administered by a local community college. Students take the test on a computer, and the questions are adaptive, meaning that different students will receive different questions based on the results of their previous questions; the test adapts to the level of the student and continues to move on from

there. As reviewed in the *Mental Measurement Yearbook*, the Accuplacer was found to be “an excellent system for providing evaluation and placement of students in appropriate courses” (Fischer, 1998, para. 6).

### **Procedure**

Students were administered the Accuplacer test by the community college during their AVID 11 class on March 10 or 11, 2014. The scores were returned to the students and the researcher on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014. These scores provided a baseline for each student’s reading comprehension.

On April 21, 2014, following the Spring break holiday to ensure an uninterrupted eight-week span, students were given 25 minutes each class period to read a book of their choosing. Students were allowed to read a fiction or nonfiction book, but instruction manuals, reference books, and periodicals were not allowed. This time was silent and given during the last third of each class. Each student had his or her own book, time was kept using a timer that was projected on a screen in the classroom, and each student completed a reflection log following the reading. The reflection log consisted of the following question stems:

**Summarize:** “This book is about \_\_\_\_\_”

**Predict:** “Based on \_\_\_\_\_, I predict that \_\_\_\_\_”

**Connect:** “This story is a lot like \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_”

**Evaluate:** “I enjoy/do not enjoy this author’s writing because \_\_\_\_\_”

**Question:** “I wonder why the author chose \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_”

Students were instructed to choose a different question after each reading to keep them from using the same answer to the same question each time and thereby making them more likely to actually read in order to get credit for answering the reflection questions. Logs were collected and checked for completion. Students were monitored during each period to ensure that all students were actively reading. The class meets on a rotating A and B schedule, meaning

students were exposed to the intervention twice or three times during the school week. After completing the intervention, students were once again given the reading comprehension portion of the Accuplacer test on the computer and results were compared.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to determine whether monitored, daily, self-selected reading would have an impact on the reading comprehension scores of high school students who are children of poverty.

Pretest and posttest scores on the Accuplacer reading comprehension subtest for AVID students of poverty were analyzed using a t-test for paired subjects. The results are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1

*Pretest and Posttest Accuplacer Reading Comprehension Results*

Test	Mean	Number Tested	Standard Deviation	t	Significance
Pretest	70.2	49	20.94	5.33	0.000*
Posttest	76.3	49	18.22		

\*p= 0.000

The hypothesis that students who are exposed to 25 minutes of self-selected reading a day in class for eight weeks will show no gains from pretest to posttest on their overall reading comprehension scores on the Accuplacer college placement exam was rejected.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

This study looked at the impact of self-selected reading on students of poverty in the high school classroom. Students were given a pretest followed by eight weeks of monitored sustained silent reading. This intervention consisted of 25 minutes of uninterrupted reading followed by a written reflection on their reading. After the eight weeks, students were given a posttest. Students took the reading comprehension portion of the Accuplacer college placement test. The null hypothesis was rejected because significant differences were found between the posttests following the intervention and the initial pretest scores.

#### **Implications**

This study has several implications that can play a role in bolstering the academic success of students of poverty. With more and more students of poverty entering college unprepared to enroll in credit-bearing courses, educators must look for ways to try to level the playing field (ACT, 2010). Reading comprehension is one academic skill that can significantly affect a student's ability to learn. From an early age, children of poverty face greater challenges than their more affluent peers (Hart & Risley, 2004). One way to reach children of poverty is to allow them to engage in text that is of high interest or seen as relevant to their daily lives (Gay, 2000). This may not always be feasible with the traditional curriculum that prescribes which texts must be used in each unit of study. This study shows that setting aside time during a class period when students can read a text of their choosing has value.

For students of poverty, we have seen that getting an education is one way to get out of the cycle of poverty. Enrolling in noncredit-bearing courses is a major barrier to graduating from college because it adds time and increases the financial burden on students. Incorporating more

opportunities for students to read on their own can have a profound impact on their success on the placement tests that help decide their college sequence of courses and can help them avoid those noncredit courses. Since reading is fundamental to all courses in college, strengthening reading comprehension can have an effect on their success in their courses as well. Self-selected, sustained silent reading is also not a financial burden and can be implemented without expensive training or professional development. The results of the current study suggest that if a high school is looking for an efficient way to raise reading comprehension, it may want to further investigate this type of DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) intervention.

### **Threats to Validity**

There were several threats to validity that may have influenced the results of this study. First is the maturation of the students. The study was done in the course of eight weeks, and the natural cognitive growth of the students alone during this time period may have affected their success on the posttest. Secondly, since these high school students were taking seven other classes at the time of this study, it cannot be ruled out that teaching from other classes may have affected the results of the study. Finally, the students selected may have had a bearing on validity. AVID students are selected to be a part of the program and show a strong desire to attend college and are, therefore, motivated to succeed. If other students, ones with less motivation, were selected, results may have differed.

### **Connections to Previous Research**

The review of literature indicated that receiving a college education makes one less likely to end up in poverty, but only 8.3% of students in poverty received their college degrees by their mid-20s (KIPP, 2011). One of the reasons shown was that according to their test results, many students are not academically prepared for college (ACT, 2010) and are being placed into

noncredit-bearing courses which can affect a student's ability to graduate (Harney, 2012). One area that students in poverty struggle with is reading comprehension. A lack of experience with text and limited vocabulary can impair a student's ability to comprehend what he or she reads, leading to lower test scores (Kuperman & Van Dyke, 2013). With this study, it can be seen that providing children of poverty with an opportunity to spend extended periods of time on text may positively influence their reading comprehension scores. By allowing students to choose what they want to read, teachers can help students avoid some of the frustrations they feel when given a text they feel is too complex and irrelevant to their lives (Brownell & Walther-Thomas, 2000). The results show that increasing the time spent reading may have an impact on increasing reading comprehension scores, which can help students enter college better prepared and more likely to graduate.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Despite results that indicate that the intervention made a difference, several questions remain. First, what was the effect of the reflection on the results? If the reflection was not required or if it was amended, would it have an impact on the results? Second, does the reading level of the book have an impact on the results? Did it matter if a student chose a book that was above or below his or her reading level, or would any reading have an impact? Some students read the same book each day, while others read several different books. Did this impact their results? Another question is what influence the teacher had on the results. Did the behavior of teacher during the silent reading time play a role? Given that the instructor chose to read along with the students, did this modeling make a difference? Finally, would the results have been different for students at different ability levels? Would an honors class see the same gains as a standard class? AVID students are described as coming from the "academic middle," but they

tend to demonstrate higher motivation than some of their peers, so this study may have been different for different students.

Given these questions, there are several ideas for future research. One is to look at what was read more closely. Does it matter what you read, or does the mere act of reading impact reading comprehension? Some students chose nonfiction, some chose short stories, and some chose novels; for this study, students were not allowed to choose from periodicals, but would we see similar results if students only read magazines? Another idea for further research is the use of the reflection questions. Looking at one group that used reflection questions versus another that did not could prove insightful. Assigning reflection questions versus allowing students to choose their own question could also be an area that could be looked at more closely.

### **Conclusion**

Reading comprehension can have a great effect on a student of poverty's ability to graduate from college, and it can influence their ability to escape the cycle of poverty. To become a stronger reader, one must be exposed to a variety of texts and greater vocabulary. More and more students of poverty are entering our nation's schools and will be expected to compete with their more affluent peers. In high school, the reading of texts is expected, but high school teachers do not spend as much time teaching reading to their students. Monitored, self-selected silent reading may be one way to help students improve their reading comprehension. Allowing students to read less than thirty minutes, two or three times a week, may be one way for schools to help their students and appears to be a cost-effective, easily implemented intervention that can have long-ranging implications for students.

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