

Techniques to Improve Guided Reading Levels in Kindergarten

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Table of Contents

List of Tables	i
Abstract	ii
I. Introduction	1
Overview	1
Statement of the Problem	2
Hypothesis	2
Operational Definitions	2
II. Review of the Literature	3
Review of the Literature	3
Definition of Guided Reading	3
Importance of Guided Reading	5
Challenges Associated with Guided Reading	5
Strategies to Improve Guided Reading Levels	5
Summary	8
III. Methods	10
Design	10
Participants	10
Instruments	10
Procedure	11
IV. Results	13
V. Discussion	15
Implications of Results	15

Theoretical Consequences	15
Threats to Validity	16
Connections to Previous Studies/Existing Literature	16
Implications for Future Research	17
Conclusion	17
References	18

List of Tables

- | | |
|---|----|
| 1. Figure 1: Mean Results of Reading Levels | 14 |
|---|----|

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of guided reading instruction on kindergarten students' reading achievement. The Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment Kit was used to assess the students' guided reading abilities. This assessment evaluated the students' fluency, accuracy, and comprehension to determine their reading levels. After the pre-assessment data was collected, small group guided reading instruction was implemented. Upon completion of the implementation of instruction students were assessed again to determine if growth was made. The findings of the research show a significant improvement in students reading levels.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

It's estimated that one in three children experience difficulties with learning to read. Guided reading is a research-based strategy defined as differentiated instruction taught in the small group setting that supports students in developing reading proficiency (Richardson, 2016). It acknowledges that students come from a wide variety of backgrounds and have a variety of different instructional experiences. In the public-school setting, students are pushed from grade to grade even when they are not academically prepared. Studies show that a child who is a poor reader in first grade is eighty-eight percent more likely to remain a poor reader in fourth grade (Iaquinta, 2006). As students continue to fall behind in their academics, they can begin to feel inferior. This feeling can cause a variety of issues within the classroom including low self-esteem, school anxiety, and behavior issues.

“According to the National Research Council, one in five children is estimated to have difficulty learning to read in school; other researchers estimate that as many as forty-five percent of our children are having difficulty learning to read” (Iaquinta, 2006). Additionally, over the past two decades research has been conducted that produced extensive results demonstrating that children who get off to a poor start in reading rarely catch up (Iaquinta, 2006). Teachers continue to struggle to support learners to correct this issue; however, teachers understand that a balanced reading approach is necessary when teaching students to read. This approach includes individualized instruction that supports the students learning where they currently are academically. Guided reading provides teachers the chance to explicitly teach reading strategies at the student's instructional level.

The focus on guided reading and providing students with individualized instruction is being described as a best practice within schools across the country. The researcher who conducted this study works in a Title One school where majority of students come from a low poverty household. In some cases, students within a Title One school struggle with parent support at home to support their learning. Additionally, these students are not provided with any learning experience prior to their first year in the Kindergarten classroom. From grade level to grade level, students continue to struggle showing little growth and never meeting the benchmarks for their grade level. Therefore, the researcher determined guided reading as a need to support students' growth in their reading abilities.

Statement of Problem

The purpose of this study is to identify techniques that impact kindergarten students instructional guided reading levels.

Hypothesis

Techniques will have no effect on students reading levels.

Operational Definitions

The techniques used to improve students reading levels were the independent variable in this study. These techniques can be defined as kindergarten reading strategies such as pointing under each word as you read, using picture clues to figure out unknown words in the sentence, or looking for smaller words within bigger words depending on the student's needs.

The dependent variable was the students reading levels which was measured using The Fountas and Pinnell assessment.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

This literature review discusses guided reading and what techniques show the most promise in improving kindergarten students guided reading levels. The first section of this literature review defines guided reading. In the second section, the importance of guided reading is explained. The third section provides the challenges associated with guided reading. The final section of this literature reviews strategies that might improve guided reading levels of the kindergarten students.

Definition of Guided Reading

As referred to by Iaquina (2006), “guided reading is a teaching approach used with all readers, struggling or independent, that has three fundamental purposes: to meet the varying instructional needs of all the students in the classroom, enabling them to greatly expand their reading powers (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001); to teach students to read increasingly difficult texts with understanding and fluency; to construct meaning while using problem solving strategies to figure out unfamiliar words that deal with complex sentence structures, and understand concepts or ideas not previously encountered” (p. 2). Ford and Opitz (2011) state that guided reading can be defined as “reading instruction in which the teacher provides the structure and purpose for reading and for responding to the material read” (p. 3). Guided reading can also be described as a way to read with students to meet their instructional needs that cannot be accomplished when teachers read aloud to students or when students read by themselves (Ford & Opitz, 2011). The term “guided” suggests a type of instruction that is about coaching. “It is less about the teacher showing a child how to use a strategy and more about providing support as the child uses the strategy” (Ford & Opitz, 2008). Guided reading is conducted in a small-group instructional

setting in which the teacher supports the reader with strategies for processing texts at increasingly challenging levels of difficulty. Students within the group are at a similar point with their reading development. During a guided reading lesson, students learn to engage in the reading process and apply the taught strategies to strengthen their independent reading level. According to Justice and Pullen (2003), guided reading provides a foundation for higher-level literacy skills. They go on to add that through guided reading students gain an understanding of the function and form of print and the relationship between oral and written language. During a guided reading lesson there are several steps that the teacher goes through with the students depending on the students reading abilities. Prior to a guided reading lesson with students the teacher needs background knowledge about each reader. This knowledge supports the teacher in identifying the strategies that will be emphasized during the reading lesson. Every guided reading lesson is different because each group of readers has different strengths and needs (Iaquinta, 2006). Guided reading lessons can include but are not limited to: engaging students in a letter and/ or a word work activity, providing students with a connection and background knowledge of the text along with pointing out any words students may know, observing students as they quietly and independently read the text, providing support as needed to students as they are reading, discussing the story after the students have read two to three times for fluency and extending the students understanding through writing about their reading. After the guided reading lesson, the teacher should spend time reflecting on the lesson in order to plan the next lesson. Ford and Opitz (2011) mention allowing students to engage with a rich variety of texts in order to support the readers' active construction of a processing system and help students learn to think like proficient readers.

Importance of Guided Reading

Guided reading has shown “increased recognition of the importance of rigorous design, implementation, and evaluation of procedures that successfully and efficiently promote literacy in young children” (Justice & Pullen, 2003). Through guided reading students are provided support in expanding their processing competencies. This allows students to have a variety of strategic actions to use as they are reading and come to words within the text they may not understand how to read. Additionally, students learn to make connections in order to comprehend the story as they read. Through guided reading students are enabled to read more challenging texts with support (Justice & Pullen, 2003). Guided reading provides a context for responsive teaching. This is teaching that is grounded in the teacher's detailed knowledge of and respect for each student, supporting the readers' active construction of a processing system. It also allows students to engage in a rich variety of texts and helps students learn to think like proficient readers.

Challenges Associated with Guided Reading

According to Iaquina (2006), it is estimated that one in three children experience significant difficulties in learning to read. Research has shown that children with poor reading abilities do not just outgrow their limitations and children who get off to a poor start in reading rarely catch up (Iaquina, 2006). Young children just entering school are learning the visual representation of letters and that sounds link to the different letters. These early learners are also learning to translate visual symbols into words and words into meaning. A challenge associated with guided reading is finding each student's “just right” reading level (Hoffman, 2017). When working with a classroom of about twenty students it is impossible to select a text that will “fit them all” (Iaquina, 2006). “For some, the text will be so difficult that they cannot possibly learn

anything positive about reading as they struggle simply to “get through it.” For others, the text will be so easy it won’t offer the appropriately stimulating reading challenge necessary for learning” (Iaquinta, 2006). Thus, this provides the educator with the challenge to develop effective emergent literacy interventions to reduce the reading failure spiral (Justice & Pullen, 2003). Additionally, it is believed that teachers begin to focus too much on assessment, not on teaching. Teachers are always trying to level the students up and provide the necessary additional challenges.

Strategies to Improve Guided Reading Levels

Reading strategies can be described as “deliberate, goal-directed attempts to control and modify the reader’s efforts to decode text, understand words and construct meanings of text” (Mahdavi & Tensfeldt, 2013). Mahdavi and Tensfeldt (2013) recommend that children learn to access various strategies to better understand what they have read. Many researchers recommend implementation of reading comprehension strategies before, during and after reading to increase the readers understanding of the text. Furthermore, various studies suggest specifically teaching students to engage in activities to understand what they read, such as activate background knowledge, use inference, self-question and self-explain text, use story maps and semantic or graphic organizers, and engage in peer mediated text study. Through providing explicit instruction to students about how and when to use comprehension strategies students’ ability to understand what they read is increased (Mahdavi & Tensfeldt, 2013). Ankrum et al. (2014) state in their research that because students entering kindergarten demonstrate a range of literacy competencies, it is important for the teacher to provide rich exposure to print and literacy activities. These intervention activities should address both written language awareness and phonological awareness (Justice & Pullen, 2003). The intervention activities should include

naturalistic, embedded opportunities for knowledge attainment as well as explicit exposure to key concepts thus providing an explicit embedded literacy balance (Justice & Pullen, 2003).

According to Duke and Block (2012), practice with the sound structure of words should be provided to develop early readers knowledge about print. This includes the production and recognition of letters, the sounds they make and how they come together to develop words. This word reading skill should provide students with explicit instruction and practice that leads to an appreciation that spoken words are made up of smaller units of sound which leads to spelling-sound correspondence, common spelling conventions and recognition of high-frequency words (Duke & Block, 2012). Word reading is the idea of phonological awareness which is the conscious awareness of sounds in words. A guided reading lesson in the kindergarten classroom should incorporate this teaching to be sure all readers have the knowledge of which letter represents which sound in order to properly decode as they are reading. This also supports the reader with rapid recognition of familiar words during reading. Phonics instruction is also necessary to support readers in developing an understanding for word pattern. Phonics supports emergent readers in learning to identify beginning consonant awareness through recognition of short-vowel words to automatic processing of the various one-syllable vowel patterns (Morris, 2015).

A second reading strategy that supports emerging readers is the use of vocabulary instruction. Mahdavi and Tensfeldt (2013) state that vocabulary instruction can be explained as explicitly teaching words and their meanings so that students may more completely comprehend what they read. “Vocabulary instruction includes selecting several target vocabulary words to teach, activities to introduce the words before reading the story, to highlight the words during reading and to review the words after the story” (Mahdavi & Tensfeldt, 2013). The activities

involve students using the words in sentences they construct as well as determining whether the teacher or peers have used the words correctly. Vocabulary knowledge has even been theorized to precede the ability to read and comprehend text (Mahdavi & Tensfeldt, 2013).

Print awareness is an emergent literacy skill taught in kindergarten. This skill relates to phonological awareness. It is the literacy development that is dependent on the understanding of certain basic insights and observations about the forms and functions of print (Allor & McCathren, 2003). These insights include knowing the difference between graphic displays of words and nonwords, knowing that print corresponds to speech, word by word, understanding the function of empty space in establishing word boundaries and understanding that we read from left to right and top to bottom (Allor & McCathren, 2003). Children can easily learn these skills through exposure to texts and by simply reading to them. As a teacher, parent, or loved one reads to the child they can teach skills such as print directionality by pointing to the words as they are reading. This also provides the understanding of the relationship between written and spoken language. Students should be provided a chance to practice what they are learning by listening to and participating in reading predictable and patterned stories.

Summary

Hoffman (2017) states if a child is to profit most from directed reading activities, he should be given challenging materials to read. Guided reading provides the challenge a student needs to move through the levels of texts. In conclusion, four concepts have been identified in this literature review regarding guided reading in kindergarten. First, guided reading has been defined and the importance of guided reading has been explained. Secondly, several challenges associated with guided reading have been explained. Finally, numerous strategies to improve guided reading have been suggested. The successive chapters of this study will focus on

implementing guided reading strategies to support kindergarten students to meet their grade level reading expectations.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Design

This study consisted of a quasi-experimental pre and posttest design. The independent variable in this study was the techniques used to improve the students reading levels and the dependent variable is the students reading levels. The student's reading levels were measured using the Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment. The study was conducted for four weeks in a small group setting. In each group there were four to five students.

Participants

The study involved eighteen kindergarten students in a Baltimore County Public School classroom. The students selected for the study were the students of the researcher. The students ages range between five to six years old. The group of students includes ten boys and eight girls. Ten of the students were African American and the others are from various races and ethnicities. Within the group of students, there were five students who received ESOL services.

Instrument

The pre and posttest assessment used for this study is the Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment, also known as F&P. This is a standardized reading assessment that determines a student's independent, instructional, and frustration reading levels. The test is administered by the teacher in a one-on-one setting. The levels are described using a letter of the alphabet beginning with A and becoming more challenging as it reaches level Z. For each reading level students are allotted a certain number of mistakes before the level becomes too challenging. This number is used to gain an understanding of their reading accuracy which is calculated into a percentage. Students are then asked comprehension questions with the highest score of six

points. As students begin to read on a level C and higher, teachers are also asked to complete an evaluation of a student's reading fluency. This is based on a scale of zero to three, three being the highest.

The Fountas & Pinnell assessment has been approved by Baltimore County Public Schools as a reliable measure. Teachers all through elementary schools are asked to measure their students reading levels using the assessment two to three times a year. The assessment package contains both fiction and non-fiction texts. The Fountas and Pinnell Assessment has been proven to be reliable and valid (Clay, et al., 2019).

Procedure

Guided reading was conducted among four groups of students two to three times a week for approximately twenty-minutes. Students were grouped according to their Fountas and Pinnell instructional reading level. The focus of each lesson varied depending on the level of the reader. During assessments the teacher observes emergent readers to gain a glimpse of the child's reading process and whether the student matches one-to-one word correspondence, uses picture clues, uses known words, makes multiple attempts on an unknown word, rereads and/ or self-corrects. With this information the teacher creates a lesson plan to further develop the students reading skills thus progressing the child through the reading levels.

For guided reading levels A through D the lessons are made up the same way with a few varying focus factors. The guided reading lesson begins with sight word review where the students are asked to write three previously taught sight words. This supports a student's visual memory and builds automaticity with sight words. Next, the new book students will be reading is introduced with a quick preview and picture walk through the text. During this step the teacher introduces new vocabulary the student may need to support their reading. Before the students

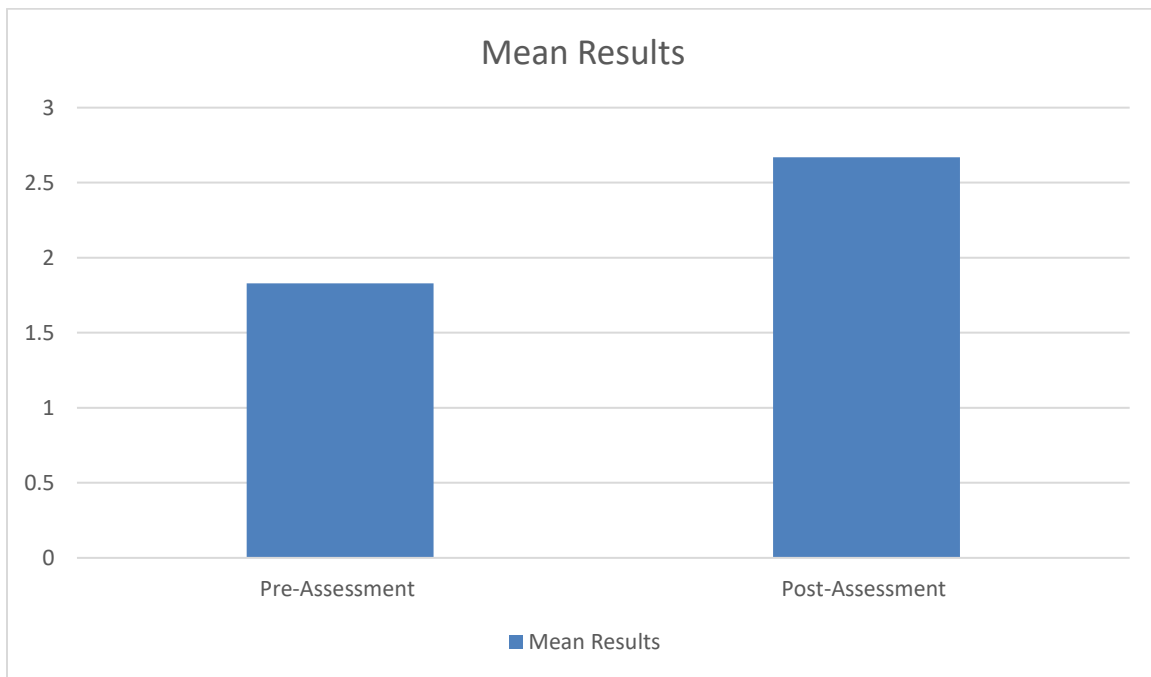
begin to read, they are informed of what strategy they should use in their reading. This could be pointing under each word as they read, checking the picture to see if what they said makes sense, making the first sound of an unknown word to attempt to figure it out or thinking what would make sense. Then, the students independently read the text while the teacher listens in and conferences with each student. Students are asked to read the same story three times to support fluency. When the teacher conferences with a student the prompting and support varies based on the student's needs. One student may need support with a tricky word while another student may need to be reminded to implement the reading strategy they were asked to implement in their reading. After the students read the text, comprehension questions are asked, and a teaching point is made to support the students reading. The teaching point generally is modeling a strategic action based on the observation during the reading. Additionally, the students participate in a word study activity that teaches a new sight word and builds on previously taught phonemic awareness and phonics skills. Students use manipulatives to develop phonemic awareness and learn how words work. The lessons are two-day lessons where skills taught on the first day are revisited on day two and built upon by having students practice guided writing. Guided writing provides an opportunity for students to be supported as they write a brief sentence about the story.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to determine if guided reading instruction would help improve students reading levels. Students reading levels were recorded based on The Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark assessment. These levels were indicated as letters and were converted to numeric values in order to complete the analysis. The conversion was as follows >A=0, A=1, B=2, C=3, D=4, E=5, F=6, G=7. The graph below represents the mean results of students reading levels.

Figure 1: Mean Scores



Based on the analysis conducted there was a significant amount of improvement. The analysis revealed a mean pre-test score of 1.83 which significantly improved to 2.67. The t-test used for this analysis was $T(17) = -9.22, p < .05$. This indicates students were performing at reading level B and improved to level C. Students were identified as making growth if they advanced in their reading level. These results show that majority of students showed growth

between the pre and post-assessment. Therefore, according to the standards of Baltimore County majority of the Kindergarten students are performing on-grade level.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to identify techniques that impact kindergarten students instructional guided reading levels. The study hypothesized that guided reading techniques would have no effect on students reading levels. This hypothesis was not supported due to the improvement of majority of students guided reading levels.

Implications of Results

The data indicates that guided reading instruction had an impact on students reading level growth. This implication is supported by the data that eighty-three percent of students made growth. The students who showed growth grew by one reading level on the Fountas and Pinnell scale. Since growth was made, it can be determined that the students' fluency, accuracy, and comprehension all increased in order to progress on the Fountas and Pinnell scale. Based on the data the researcher noticed that students whose scores increased were on the appropriate reading level for the time of year. These findings imply that guided reading instruction supports students who are reading at or below grade level.

Theoretical Consequence

Based on a review of the literature, guided reading instruction does benefit students' guided reading levels. The data collected from this research supported this theory. As referred to by Iaquinta (2006), "guided reading is a teaching approach used with all readers, struggling or independent, that has three fundamental purposes: to meet the varying instructional needs of all the students in the classroom, enabling them to greatly expand their reading powers" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). They further state that guided reading teaches students to read increasingly difficult texts with understanding and fluency while using problem solving strategies to figure

out unfamiliar words, complex sentence structure, and understand concepts or ideas not previously encountered (Iaquinta, 2006). In this study students' instructional needs were met which supported the success of their learning. Additionally, guided reading allows students to engage with a rich variety of texts to support an active construction of a processing system and help students learn to think like a proficient reader (Ford and Opitz, 2011). The results of this study provide support to these theories.

Threats to the Validity

While this study exhibits positive results, the study does represent some threats of validity. Differential selection is a threat to the validity of this research. The students in the study were not randomly selected; they were the students of the researcher. Since the selection of students was controlled there were no unknown variables that came into play. In other situations, this variable could change the outcome of the data.

Another threat to validity is the process of maturation. This threat is biological and systematically varies with the passage of time stating that as time goes by the students would have reached an on-grade reading level because they would grow wiser over time. Therefore, most participants will, over-time, improve their performance regardless of interventions.

Connections to Previous Studies/Existing Literature

Guided reading provides students with the support needed to expand their processing competencies. Research has shown "increased recognition of the importance of rigorous design, implementation, and evaluation of procedures that successfully and efficiently promote literacy in young children" (Justice & Pullen, 2003, p. 4).

This study showed that most students made growth in their independent reading level. A connection can be made to existing literature by Justice and Pullen (2003) stating that guided

reading successfully and efficiently promotes literacy in young children. Students who did make growth increased their reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. This was shown by the students moving up a level on the Fountas and Pinnell scale.

Implications for Future Research

Future research should be implemented for a longer allotment of time. An extended research time with the structure of guided reading in place could prove to be more successful with young beginning readers. An extended research period could show more growth in students reading levels and/ or additional students could improve their reading levels. Additionally, another factor to consider is the environment in which students are provided the guided reading instruction. Students are more focused in an environment with limited distractions. Future researchers may want to consider these factors.

Conclusion

This research was an attempt to discover the best practices in reading instruction for primary students that would impact their guided reading levels. Based on the literature review and results of this study, the use of guided reading is a beneficial strategy to increase the reading abilities in early readers.

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