

Reading Instruction in Upper Elementary Classrooms

by

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Abstract

Research shows that students entering the intermediate grades of elementary school are still struggling with their reading skills. It is found that comprehension and fluency are both areas of concern for many students. While teachers focus on teaching students to read in the primary grades, it is often assumed that they do not need that instruction once they hit grade 4 and little is done to teach reading strategies. This paper provides a review of literature relating to instructional strategies to teach reading in the intermediate grades. It looks at the difference between comprehension and fluency, as well as strategies such as guided reading, literature circles and independent reading. Lastly, this paper provides ways teachers can implement those strategies into their intermediate classroom.

Keywords: reading instruction, guided reading, literature circles, independent reading, comprehension, fluency, differentiated instruction, individualized education, intermediate, grade four, grade five

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Reading Instruction in Upper Elementary Classrooms

Chapter 1

The Problem

Introduction

In the elementary classroom, reading is an essential part of the instruction throughout the day. By the time students reach grade 4, there is an expectation that they are able to read fluently and comprehend age-appropriate texts on their own (Education, 2006). Although that is the expectation, in my experience I have found that many students in grade 4 and 5 are not able to do so, corroborated by others such as Begeny, Fletcher, and Edmonds (Begeny, Krouse, Ross, & Mitchell, 2009; Byrne, 2012; Edmonds et al., 2009; Fletcher, Greenwood, Grimley, Parkhill, & Davis, 2012) and many continue to struggle beyond elementary school (Edmonds et al., 2009; Godden, 2013). While literacy is deemed extremely important in the elementary classroom, it has been found that many intermediate teachers assume the children know how to read text fluently and comprehend what they are reading, so there is a lack of specific reading instruction after the primary years (Fletcher et al., 2012). While this may be the case in many schools, there are innumerable strategies teachers and schools can implement to ensure that children are getting proper reading education in the upper elementary years, before entering middle and secondary school.

Background of the Problem

In the primary classrooms, the literacy block is full of scaffolded learning and small group reading instruction. There is much research showing the benefit of small group reading instruction for teaching explicit reading skills to new readers, which are needed to become

proficient readers in the higher grades (Wilson, Nabors, Berg, Simpson, & Timme, 2012). These groups allow for differentiated instruction and to meet the students where they are, rather than teaching skills too simple or difficult for them. Teachers are able to teach students how to predict what will happen in the story, decode words and retell what they read to name a few of the skills taught during these small group reading sessions. While these have proven to be extremely successful in improving reading abilities for young students, small group reading instruction is often stopped after grade 3 (Mooney, 1995).

There is a lack of reading instruction in the upper elementary grades, as teachers often assume that students know how to comprehend grade-level text (Fletcher et al., 2012). Teachers are not teaching students how to think about the texts they are reading to develop a deeper understanding. They are using reading as a tool to learn new ideas without teaching the skills students need to do so. This results in students feeling discouraged, uninterested and disengaged during reading, which impede reading success (Gallagher, 2010).

Students often struggle with fluency as they are unable to determine words they are not familiar with and are unable to read a text with the smoothness of a confident reader (Mastropieri, Leinart, & Scruggs, 1999). They also have difficulty comprehending the stories or information that they read (McKeown, Beck, & Blake, 2009) which is extremely worrisome. Reading comprehension is crucial when it comes to middle and secondary school as students are expected to acquire a large portion of their information from independently reading (Guthrie et al., 2004).

Statement of Research Question

With all this information in mind, I have become very curious about the difference in reading instruction between the primary and the intermediate grades. With the huge push to have all students reading at grade level by the end of grade 3 (Lesnick, Goerge, Smithgall, & Gwynne, 2010), I thought that the intermediate teachers should look closely at what the primary teachers are doing to teach reading. My observations and discussions with other teachers have led me to understand that there is an abundance of small-group reading instruction in the primary grades (Harris, 2004) but that often ceases once students enter grade 4, as reading instruction changes from, “learning to read” to “reading to learn” (Lesnick et al., 2010, pg 1). I questioned these practices and wondered why small-group reading instruction often ends when the students leave grade 3. This has led me to my research question of, “Is small group instruction the best way to support intermediate level reading skill development, and if so, how can it be best accomplished?”

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine the most effective reading instructional program for the upper intermediate grades and find out how teachers can implement the program into their classroom. Although there are many effective ways to teach reading instruction to children, I want to find what will be most applicable to teach comprehension and fluency skills to upper intermediate grades. When reading skills are improved, student success will increase in all subject areas so it is important to focus on explicitly teaching those skills to students throughout their schooling. Some strategies that are used to teach reading to students are guided reading

programs, literature circles and independent, silent reading. All of these help support reading and can be very effective in the upper elementary grades.

Importance of the Study

Reading is an extremely important skill that people use every day. Whether it is at their job, in the supermarket, on the television guide or at the doctor's office, you must know how to read to acquire information at some point in your life. It has been reported that, "the ability to read and comprehend is foundational to individual and national success in today's global economy" (Hock et al., 2009, p. 21). This shows the importance of a strong reading program in the elementary grades, so students can acquire a basic reading foundation to help prepare them for their future.

High school dropout rates are continuing to be a source of concern for many citizens. They cost the economy a large amount of money in lost earnings, taxes and productivity and dropouts are more likely to get arrested or have a child while still a teenager (Foundation, 2010). It is often a school district goal to decrease the number of students who do not graduate (Godden, 2013). While some may assume that is the job of the high school teachers, that is not the case as many students who drop out have become disengaged during middle school because of the struggle to keep up academically (Foundation, 2010). A huge cause of this is the lack of reading proficiency in the upper elementary and middle school grades as students are expected to know how to read and comprehend the text, but this is not always the case. Instead of teachers focusing on this and trying to bring them back up to grade level by creating an intervention program for them, students are often shuffled through which causes them to fall further and further behind.

There is research that states that students who do well at a young age often are successful throughout the rest of their educational journey (Foundation, 2010; Xiang et al., 2011).

“Reading proficiently by the end of third grade can be a make-or-break benchmark in a child’s educational development” (Foundation, 2010, p. 9) is a critical statement that teachers must take seriously. While it is important to try and have all students meeting reading expectations by the end of the third grade, this is not always the case. Instead of writing them off, teachers must work at trying to bring them back up to grade level and give them a chance to be successful in their future.

Summary

Research has shown that being a proficient reader is beneficial throughout a student’s educational journey as well as in their future (Foundation, 2010). Teachers can increase student’s ability to read proficiently by ensuring they are explicitly teaching comprehension and fluency strategies to the students all throughout their education. Small group reading programs allow teachers to individualize learning for specific groups as well as give them an opportunity to practice their skills independently (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; O’Brien, 2007; Reutzel, Fawson, & Smith, 2008). These programs are very apparent in primary classrooms, but are often forgotten when students reach grade 4, although they are still a very effective teaching strategy that should be used more often in upper elementary classrooms (Mooney, 1995).

Outline of the Remainder of the Paper

In the next chapter, I will be reviewing the pertinent literature relating to reading instruction in the elementary classroom. I will begin the second chapter by looking at the

importance of teaching reading skills to students with a focus on comprehension and fluency.

Then I will review the aspects of guided reading, literature circle and independent, silent reading programs in the elementary classroom. In the third chapter, I will summarize my findings around reading instruction in the intermediate classroom. I will also make recommendations for establishing a small group reading program in an intermediate class. Finally, I will look at the limitations small group reading instruction has on students, teachers and schools.

Chapter 2

Review of literature

Introduction to the Chapter

There is a large amount of literature that has been written on small group reading instructional strategies in the elementary school setting. Small group reading gives teachers the opportunity to approach true individualized instruction and teach strategies that the students need, while giving them an opportunity to practice using books they understand (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

While there are many different ways to teach reading skills that are age and skill level appropriate in the upper elementary grades, small group reading instruction is unusual while there are students that would benefit from it. This literature review will provide a look into small group reading instruction and the importance of strong literacy skills. It will look at guided reading, literature circles and independent reading time and how these three instructional strategies affect comprehension and fluency in the elementary grades. It will also discuss the barriers contributing to the lack of small group reading in the upper elementary classrooms and how teachers and schools can try to incorporate more of this into their literacy instruction.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of understanding the meaning of the terminology used throughout this paper, definitions are as follows:

Primary grades: Kindergarten through grade 3.

Intermediate/Upper Elementary grades: Grades 4 and 5.

Elementary School: School that houses students from kindergarten to grade 5.

Middle School: Grades 6 through 8.

Secondary School: Grades 9 through 12.

Small group reading instruction: teacher working explicitly with a group of 4-8 students at a time, when the rest of the class is working independently on something else.

Differentiated Instruction: to accommodate the different ways that students learn by maximizing student growth and individual success. This can be done by providing many avenues for students to acquire, process and develop information (Demirsky Allan & Goddard, 2010).

Individualized Learning: each child's learning is personal and different from others

Scaffolding: "A process used to help learners perform tasks that would be too difficult for them to complete without assistance" (Rollins, 2014).

Decode: being able to read a word aloud.

Making Connections: ability to "draw from background knowledge and personal experiences while reading to help create meaning from the text" (Gear, 2006, p. 9).

Asking Questions: "asks both literal (surface level) and inferential (deep) questions before, during and after reading to clarify meaning and deepen understanding" (Gear, 2006, p. 9).

Visualizing: ability to "create a multi-sensory image in the 'mind's eye' while reading to help make sense of the text" (Gear, 2006, p. 9).

Determining Importance: "sort through information in the text, select key ideas and remember them" (Gear, 2006, p. 9).

Drawing Inferences: ability to understand that "not all information is included in a text, and is able to reasonably 'fill in,' hypothesize, and predict, based on evidence in the text" (Gear, 2006, p. 9).

Analyze and Synthesize: ability to “break down information and draw conclusions based on both the text and his or her own thinking” (Gear, 2006, p. 10).

Monitor Comprehension: being “aware when understanding is being compromised and is able to stop, go back, and reread in order for understanding to occur” (Gear, 2006, p. 10).

Transforming: “a change in thinking” (Gear, 2006, p. 101).

Predicting: “Happens before, during and after reading when students use information from their own knowledge base to make sense of what they’re reading” (Trehearne, 2004, p. 113)

Summarizing: “condensing a portion of the text into a manageable chunk” and “may consist of only a sentence or two” (Trehearne, 2004, p. 111)

Activating Prior Knowledge: when students use what they already know to help them understand what is happening in the story.

Importance of Reading Skills

Reading is a critical skill that students need to be successful in their future. It is evident in many schools that a high number of students are still unable to read proficiently when they enter the fourth grade (Byrne, 2012; Edmonds et al., 2009; Foundation, 2010). This is extremely worrisome as a study found that students who are reading proficiently by the end of third grade are more likely to graduate and be successful throughout their educational experience (Foundation, 2010). While many students who are successful at a young age continue to flourish throughout their educational career, teachers must still work on teaching the struggling readers how to become more proficient so to help them be successful in their future (Foundation, 2010; Harris, 2004).

Students entering secondary school need to have strong reading skills to be successful. In many subjects in the secondary school setting, students are expected to read something to learn how to do it, and if their reading skills are lacking with this increasingly complex vocabulary, concepts and content, they are more likely to struggle (Fletcher et al., 2012). While there is lots of specific reading instruction in the younger primary grades, it is often assumed that students know how to read once they reach the upper elementary grades and those skills are rarely taught (Vaughn et al., 2010). Fluency and comprehension are aspects of reading that are equally important and need to be taught and practiced for students to become proficient (Hock et al., 2009).

Teaching students how to comprehend what they are reading is the most critical piece of reading instruction and it is the ultimate goal (M. R. Kuhn, 2005). Miriam Trehearne defines comprehension elaborately:

Reading without comprehension is simply word calling. Effective comprehenders not only make sense of the text, but are also able to use the information it contains. They are able to think thoughtfully or deeply and to make personal connections as they analyze and question what they are reading, hearing and seeing. (Trehearne, 2004, p. 99)

Comprehension is what teachers must aim to teach their students so they have an understanding of the text and therefore can use it for whatever purpose they are reading for, whether it is informational or for pleasure.

While many teachers may feel as though they teach comprehension strategies to their students, it has been found that very little comprehension teaching is actually done after grade 3, but high amounts of comprehension testing is taking place in classrooms (McKeown et al., 2009; Trehearne, 2004). Teachers give students questions to answer after reading a book or are asked

to give a summary, but they were not taught the skills beforehand to help them fully comprehend the reading. This can therefore lead to students begin to feel discouraged with reading and feel incapable, and therefore increase the risk of becoming reluctant readers (Gallagher, 2010).

There are many ideas of what the most important reading comprehension skills are. Gear (2006) states there are 7 strategies that a proficient reader possesses while reading: making connections, asking questions, visualize, determining importance, drawing inferences, analyzing and synthesizing and monitoring comprehension. These skills are what allow students to fully understand the text they are reading. Gear created a program called, “Reading Power” that teaches students how to think about reading, rather than just decoding the words (Gear, 2006). It focusses on metacognition, which is “awareness of thinking” (Gear, 2006, p. 17) and teaching students that thinking while reading is essential for you to successful comprehend the text. It focuses on 5 main strategies: connecting, questioning, visualizing, inferring and transforming. While it is not comprehensive of all the skills mentioned in the proficient reader profile, it is a program that scaffolds students learning, beginning with teacher modeling, then allowing students to practice with teaching assistance and finally independently.

Trehearne (2004) states that there are four key features of comprehension instruction: the amount of time engaged in reading, explicit strategy instruction, rich discussion and writing. In Trehearne’s studies, she finds the works of Anderson, Wilson and Fielding that giving students time to read independently with books of their choice was the best predictor of reading achievement gain in the elementary classroom setting (Trehearne, 2004). It is also critical to explicitly teach vocabulary as that can be a major hurdle for students as they get older if they do not know how to find meaning of unknown words. She states that discussion is another important piece of the comprehension skills that need to be taught as it clarifies meaning and

extends their comprehension of new ideas and this can also be done by writing out their responses to text.

Reciprocal teaching is another comprehension teaching strategy teachers can use to reinforce some of the main skills needed to fully comprehend a text. This strategy focuses on four main reading skills: predicting, questioning, clarifying and summarizing (Cooper & Greive, 2009). This strategy can be used as a teacher model, a way to scaffold learning, or it can be student led. This approach has been found to be extremely successful in helping students who struggle with comprehension, especially in the upper elementary grades (Trehearne, 2004). Predicting is a strategy that is used in this approach but not mentioned in the others. By having students predict, it activates their prior knowledge and is a first step in inferring.

In O'Brien's (2007) studies, he finds the works of Robb stating the 6 key strategies for improving reading comprehension in the middle grades: activating prior knowledge, deciding what's important and synthesizing, inferencing during and after reading, self-monitoring comprehension, questioning and building vocabulary (O'Brien, 2007). While these strategies are very similar to the previous ones mentioned, it specifically mentions activating prior knowledge which is important for students to make connections to what they are reading. It also specifically states the importance of building vocabulary as reading is crucial for learning information in content courses in secondary school, and if students are unable to build their vocabulary successfully there is a higher chance of struggle.

While comprehension is a key factor in reading, fluency and decoding words goes hand-in-hand with comprehension. Harvey and Goudvis (2000) state that reading is a "two-pronged" attack that "involves cracking the alphabetic code to determine the words and thinking about those words to construct meaning" (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000, p. 5). While comprehension is the

ultimate goal in reading, if students are unable to decode the words and read with some fluency then comprehension or enjoyment will not likely be possible.

There are several definitions of fluency. One definition of fluency is, “the ability to recognize words rapidly and accurately” (Nathan & Stanovich, 1991, p. 176) whereas another states that fluent reading involves three components: accurate decoding, automaticity of word recognition and the appropriate use of prosodic features such as pitch, phrasing and stress (M. R. Kuhn, 2005). Being a fluent reader is extremely important as it does aide in the comprehension of the text and the enjoyment of reading.

Some assumptions made about reading are that if students are able to read fluently, comprehension will come (Trehearne, 2004). This could be the reason that comprehension strategies are rarely taught, especially in the upper elementary grades and beyond. But it has been found that nearly half of students in grade 4 are unable to read fluently (Begeny et al., 2009) which affects their ability to comprehend texts and their overall reading ability.

There are several ways that teachers can teach fluency in the classroom. Begeny et al. (2009) state that repeated reading, passage previewing or modeling, and listening to a more skilled reader are 3 ways to improve student fluency. Repeated reading is when students read the same passage 2 or more times until their fluency improves. Passage previewing has 3 types: silent reading beforehand, student oral reading beforehand and listening to a more skilled reader read the passage first while they follow along silently (Begeny et al., 2009). It has been found that the listening passage previewing is more effective than the other preview passaging (Begeny et al., 2009). By giving the students an opportunity to listen to what a fluent reader sounds like, can be extremely beneficial in their fluency progress.

Another strategy that can be implemented to help with increasing fluency is class wide peer tutoring. This approach partners up readers so one student is reading aloud and the other is following along to monitor their performance (Mastropieri et al., 1999). This strategy ensures that students are getting more time actively engaged in reading, either by reading aloud or following along silently which has been proven to help with reading performance. The more students are actually engaged in reading activities, the more they will improve.

Reading Instruction in the Elementary Classrooms

There is an abundance of literature on effective reading instruction. There have been numerous studies done on a vast number of different reading instructional strategies. There are many different types of reading instruction that are crucial for student success. Small group reading instruction along with independent reading time are both well researched and documented to show improvement in reading abilities over time, if implemented effectively (Reutzel et al., 2008). Discussion of the books and individualized instruction is found to be two of the powers behind small-group instruction (Mills & Jennings, 2011)

Guided Reading

Guided reading is used in many classrooms throughout Canada and the United States. The main purpose of guided reading is to help students become independent readers and give them the ability to understand what they are reading at all times (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Guided reading is defined as, “a context in which a teacher supports each reader’s development of effective strategies for processing novel texts at increasingly challenging levels of difficulty” (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, p. 2). While there are many different takes on what guided reading

looks like in the classroom, this definition of the teacher supporting the learner while they become more proficient readers is key.

Fountas and Pinnell (1996) state that the essential components of a guided reading program are: small groups of children with similar reading abilities, teacher supporting students, each child reads the whole text independently and silently, students read increasingly challenging books over time and that the groups are dynamic. Scaffolding is another essential component of guided reading as the teacher must support the learner in a graduated fashion to ensure they are having the opportunity to practice what they have been learning (Frey & Fisher, 2010). If there is no teacher leading the group with prompts and to correct students when they have made a mistake, the learning will not be as powerful.

Small group reading instruction is powerful in many ways. Since the teacher is working with fewer students, he/she is able to focus on the students specific needs and respond to the interventions which will help build the students reading proficiency (Weiss, 2013). The teacher is able to group students according to their deficiencies so that more students can get the individualized help they need to become better readers (Fletcher et al., 2012). This also allows the students to only get instruction on what they are needing help with, rather than getting taught concepts they already know, which is often the case in whole group teaching strategies. When a teacher's attention is only spread over 6 children, rather than 24, those children will be getting more attention and support that is needed for a positive change in reading ability to happen.

Guided reading can look very different in each classroom as it depends on how the teacher sets up what the other students are doing. Since guided reading is such a common instructional strategy in the primary grades (Harris, 2004) teachers have many different takes on the most effective way to implement it into your classroom. The biggest concern for teachers is

to figure out what the rest of the students will be working on while the teacher is working in the small group. Some use literacy centers for the other students to be working on (Wilson et al., 2012) whereas others have students working on literacy skills worksheets independently (Harris, 2004). What is the most crucial for setting up a guided reading program in your classroom is that you get a block of time to work uninterrupted with a small group to work on specific skills to help aid them to become more proficient readers.

Literature Circles

Literature Circles are another small group reading approach and are defined as students who are, “reading lots of good books, thinking deeply about them, writing notes and journal entries, and joining in lively, informed literature discussions” (Daniels, 2002, p. 1). They should be a group of students who are passionate about the book they are reading and mimic what a book club or literature guild looks like in the adult world (Mills & Jennings, 2011). Literature circles have been altered and transformed in each classroom they are administered in, so there are many different techniques used to implement this strategy in the classroom.

O’Brien states 11 key elements that traditional literature circles must have to be successful:

The ability for students to choose their own reading materials; establishment of small groups that continue temporarily based on choice of reading materials; different reading groups working with different reading materials; establishment of a routine schedule for students to meet in their reading groups; use of notes to guide further discussion either in writing or in drawings; student led discussions, including student selection of topics; focus on natural dialogue in open group discussions; teacher as facilitator not dispenser

of knowledge; assessment performed through teacher observation and student self-evaluation; positive atmosphere of reading for enjoyment; and group conclusions that include a sharing session with classmates followed by establishment of new reading groups (O'Brien, 2007, p. 9).

Looking at these key elements, there are many aspects that correlate with guided reading; however there are many that are unique to literature circles including choice of reading materials, establishment of a routine schedule and student led discussions.

One of the main aspects of literature circles is the discussion portion. "Discussion can lead to the construction of new understandings" (Hulan, 2010, p. 43) by having their opinions challenged and questioned. It also allows for students to construct their opinions from other viewpoints and really delve deeply into the text. Open-ended questions and a collaborative environment where opportunities are given to challenge and question opinions are two ways that foster rich discussion (Hulan, 2010).

There are two main types of discussion that are beneficial and used during small group reading instruction. Teacher led discussions are valuable in the sense that the teacher can scaffold the learning for students who are struggling, keep students on topic and look at a theme that the students may not have thought of on their own (Hulan, 2010). Student led discussions are important as they allow students to discuss what is relevant to them therefore increasing their motivation and engagement (Wu, Anderson, Nguyen-Jahiel, & Miller, 2013). Both strategies are useful in creating a well rounded literature circle program.

Literature circles are influential in reading instruction for the upper elementary and middle school classrooms for many reasons, but one of the biggest is it gives them choice. By allowing students to choose their own books it will increase the likelihood that they will be

engaged and enjoy the time spent reading the text (Miller, 2010). It has been found that children often begin to lose interest in reading around age 13 (Miller, 2010) and this is often due to the teacher assigning a book for the students to read which does not interest them. By removing that hurdle and giving the students the opportunity to choose a text that does interest them, there is a better chance that the students will be engaged and comprehend the story more effectively.

Literature circles can look differently in each classroom they are used in. One way to implement them into your classroom is through reciprocal teaching as discussed earlier in this chapter (Trehearne, 2004). By teaching the students and having lots of practice of the basic outline of predicting, questioning, clarifying and summarizing, they are then able to implement their own reciprocal teaching discussions within their literature circle groups.

Another way they can be implemented is by giving each student a specific role they will rotate through during their time reading the text. There are typically 6 roles in a traditional literature circle format: predictor, questioner, passage master, vocabulary enricher, connector and illustrator (O'Brien, 2007). The predictor makes a prediction about what is going to come next and presents it to the group which will likely foster a discussion. The questioner writes down questions for the group to discuss. The passage master chooses a portion of the text they found interesting to discuss further with the group. The vocabulary enricher makes notes of unknown words to bring to the group's attention to try and find the meaning of them. The connector finds a connection to the text and shares with the rest of the group. Finally the illustrator visualizes something from the text that they can then share with their group. Each student will read the selected part of the text with the lens of their role for that day. This will be done independently. They will then bring their information they constructed to discuss with the rest of their group, which leads to the rich discussion of the story. By allowing students to take part in different

roles gives them an opportunity to think about the text and develop a strong understanding of the concept. The collaboration between group members is key to literature circles being effective (Wu et al., 2013).

Independent, Silent Reading

Independent reading time is found in most upper elementary classrooms across the country. This is the time the students have full choice of the books they are reading and they read silently to themselves without interruptions for an extended period of time (Bryan, Fawson, & Reutzel, 2003). Silent reading should be seen as, “the pinnacle of achievement with regard to teaching skillful reading” (Bryan et al., 2003, p. 48). All of the strategies that are learned through small group reading instruction should be put into practice during this time which will allow for students to enjoy a book of their own choice and be able to fully comprehend what they are reading.

Sustained silent reading is one part of an effective literacy program and has shown to be as effective as guided reading when it comes to reading fluency (Reutzel et al., 2008). While it is a popular strategy for teachers and students alike, there are some cases where students are not fully engaged during the silent reading block. Some students simply pretend to read by staring at a blank page, or read books that are too hard or too easy for them, which is not helping them become more proficient readers. It has been found that students who do not participate in silent reading become more engaged if they have a short discussion about their books with a teacher, rather than just reading on their own (Bryan et al., 2003). Holding the students accountable for what they are reading will often help them become more successful independent readers.

Another reason independent, silent reading is important is that it has been found that silent reading allows for students to process two to three times more words per second with no decline of comprehension than if you are reading aloud (Newkirk, 2010). This allows for students who struggle with reading aloud feel successful in their reading skills. While it is important to be able to read aloud with some fluency, reading silently is mostly how reading occurs so students need practice with that skill.

Summary of Findings

Research shows that if students are proficient readers, they are more likely to have academic success in other genres (Reis, Eckert, McCoach, Jacobs, & Coyne, 2008). When comprehension strategies are explicitly taught, students become more skillful in reading. Students also need to practice fluency which will help their comprehension and overall reading ability. One way to teach these skills is through small group reading instruction. Guided reading and literature circles are both effective strategies to teach these specific skills students need (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012; O'Brien, 2007). Scaffolding student learning and giving them an opportunity to practice their skills are both powerfully apparent in these two approaches. Having discussions is another extremely important aspect of small group reading instruction strategies that helps students fully comprehend text. Silent reading must not be forgotten as a way to put everything they learned in place by comprehending a text that is read independently.

This literature review has attempted to accomplish five goals: First to establish that reading fluently and fully comprehending text is a critical skill in a student's educational success; second, to document the effectiveness of guided reading programs in elementary classrooms; third, to analyze how literature circles can foster rich discussion and understanding of texts;

fourth, discuss how independent, silent reading fosters a love of reading in students; and finally, to ask the question: How can teachers best support readers in the intermediate grades with small-group instruction to ensure they meet the prescribed reading level requirements? While there are many students who struggle with reading in the upper elementary grades, there are many strategies that teachers can implement to teach reading skills to these students in an effective manner.

Chapter 3

Summary, Recommendations, Limitations and Conclusion

Summary

This paper has provided a detailed look into reading instructional strategies that are effective in the elementary classroom. Research shows that if students are proficient readers at an early age, they will be successful throughout their educational career and beyond (Foundation, 2010; Hock et al., 2009; Xiang et al., 2011). While small group reading instruction is prevalent in the young primary classrooms, it often stops happening after grade 3 which is detrimental to the student's education of important reading strategies. Specific skills must be taught throughout a child's educational journey for them to become proficient readers, especially once they reach the older grades when they begin, "reading to learn" (Lesnick et al., 2010, p. 1) as reading is a critical factor in other subjects.

There are many reading skills that must be taught that revolve around comprehension and fluency. Comprehension is known as the ultimate goal for reading instruction as it is students fully understanding the text and being able to think about what they have just read (M. Kuhn, 2004). There are several aspects to teaching reading comprehension. Some of the main strategies that came up often in the research included: predicting or activating background knowledge, making connections, questioning, inferring, monitoring comprehension and summarizing. While comprehension is a major part of reading proficiency, if a student cannot decode or read fluently then comprehension is not likely to happen. Students must be taught how to improve their fluency, and given the opportunity to practice. Strategies such as repeated reading, passage

previewing, listening to reading and peer tutoring are all effective approaches to improve a student's fluency.

While small group reading is not the only way to teach these strategies, research shows that it is a very effective approach (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Guided reading involves a small number of students reading the same book with the teacher leading the group. Many skills can be taught explicitly during this time and students have the opportunity to practice their newly learned skills. Literature circles are another form of small group reading instruction that focuses on different roles that the students take turns doing and then discussing the book afterwards (O'Brien, 2007). This allows for rich dialogue to take place, as well as giving them the ability to work with the teacher and learn specific reading strategies.

Implications

The information in this paper has strived to make intermediate teachers become more aware of how they teach reading during their literacy instruction. The paper has shown teachers how important it is to continue to teach explicit reading instruction through the intermediate grades and into middle school. It has gone into detail about how small group reading instruction is a practical way to do this, and it allows students to become more engaged in their learning. Teachers should realize that small group reading instruction is possible in the intermediate grades and should be utilized to its full potential in the literacy blocks of grades 4 and 5.

This paper has suggested that guided reading is one possible solution to teaching reading in the intermediate grades. By grouping the students based on their reading ability allows the teacher to teach specific skills that the students are lacking, which provides an individualized education for each student in the class. It also suggested that literature circles are another form

of small group reading that is an effective strategy to teaching reading in the intermediate grades. By giving students roles to participate in, the students have some choice which is crucial for student engagement and it allows students to engage in rich discussion about literature. These are both vital to ensuring students are indeed improving their reading abilities.

Finally, this paper also suggested the importance of giving students independent reading time to practice their skills they have been learning. The famous saying, “practice makes perfect” is exactly right when it comes to reading. The more children practice the skills taught during the small group reading instruction, the better readers they will become (Reutzel et al., 2008). This portion of reading instruction is essential to creating students who love to read because they get the opportunity to choose their own books and read at their own pace. The fact that they had choice in the books is instrumental for keeping the student engaged.

Recommendations

Reading instruction in the intermediate grades is crucial for student success in middle and secondary school. Two strategies for accomplishing this are small group reading instruction and independent reading time. The following recommendations attempt to address how a teacher should effectively implement these strategies into their classroom. Hopefully teachers with limited experience of teaching small group reading will be able to see how practical and helpful these strategies are and will refer to the following recommendations to implement these strategies into their classroom.

The first step to introduce small group reading in a classroom is to assess each student individually to find out where they are at with their reading abilities. Teachers should find out students reading levels, which can be done using several different assessment tools, two

examples are the PM Benchmark Kits created by Nelson Education, or the STAR test online which is created by Renaissance Learning. There are several other assessments that can be used to determine a child's reading level, and this will be helpful in grouping the students. When assessing the students, it is important to assess their comprehension and fluency skills as well. This information will be invaluable when grouping students based on specific skills that they need assistance with. This will allow for differentiated instruction and personalized learning.

Once the students have been split into groups of preferably 5-6 students, the teacher must now decide what skills each group will work on. These can be chosen from all of the comprehension reading skills discussed in chapter 2. For instance, one group could be focusing on making connections, while another group is working on fluency and reading with expression and another is concentrating on making inferences. These skills will change on a weekly basis to keep things moving along. I suggest that teachers introduce guided reading to their classes at the start of the year and then towards the end of the year, once classroom management and behaviours are established, students can begin participating in literature circles. Independent, silent reading should be occurring throughout the year, with the blocks of reading time getting longer as the year progresses. This is because the children should build up their independent reading stamina throughout the year.

Finally, the teacher must decide what the other students will be doing while he/she is working with the small group. It is important to make sure the students have clear expectations of what they are expected to do, and that they have choice. The choice will increase engagement and reduce behavioural issues. One such strategy to implement this is the Daily 5 which is created by Gail Boushey and Joan Moser. The Daily 5 focuses on 5 strands of literacy instruction: Read to Self, Read to Someone, Listen to Reading, Work on Writing and Word

Work (Boushey & Moser, 2006). Read to self is independent silent reading, read to someone is reading aloud to another person, listen to reading is listening to someone read either in person or electronically, work on writing is practicing writing activities and word work is specific skills such as spelling, vocabulary or phonics. To effectively implement the daily 5, teachers must do so gradually and explicitly teach the students how to do each of the 5 sections. Allow for time to practice these skills independently to ensure the students are perfectly aware of expectations. This is one recommendation of how to ensure each child is engaged in learning during the literacy block, and allows for the teacher to work with a small group of children.

Once the students are comfortable with guided reading and some specific reading strategies have been taught, I recommend that teachers introduce literature circles into the literacy block. Literature circles allow for students to have more choice as they get to decide which roles they want to do or decide what they would like to discuss about the book. Literature circles also foster fantastic discussions around books, which will in turn increase engagement and motivation (Bryan et al., 2003). The reason I suggest waiting until the middle or closer to the end of the year for literature circles is because the students will have likely built a sense of community with one another and trust will have been established between the students which helps foster richer discussion. Also, they are clearer about expectations and routines in the classroom so they know how they should be acting during these blocks.

In my experience, small group reading instruction in the intermediate classrooms is an effective way to teach reading to grade 4 and 5 students. When students decide what books they can read, and what order to complete their work in, there are so many less behaviour problems that need to be dealt with and much higher engagement. Students become excited about reading their guided reading books and they look forward to their literature circle discussion. Students

who are reluctant readers have told me how much they love doing guided reading when they are reading books at their level and are able to choose what books to read with their group. This shows how important small group reading and giving the students choice can be to foster a love of reading.

Limitations

There are many limitations that could affect these small group reading programs being implemented effectively into the classroom. One is a huge financial commitment to buy a large amount of leveled books available for teacher use. While most elementary schools have a collection of leveled books for students to read, many do not have enough options to keep the students reading throughout the entire year. A wide variety of genres, interests and levels is needed to be able to foster a small group reading program. The students will become bored reading the same book over and over again, and it will likely impede advancement of their skills.

Another is the class size and overall conduct of the students behaviour as that will affect the teachers ability to work with small groups while the other students are working independently. In my experience, it has been much easier to conduct a guided reading program with a class of 22 students, rather than a class of 30. There are fewer children to be checking in on to make sure they are fully engaged in their learning. When there are more students, it also increases the likelihood of them distracting each other which also increases the chance of the teacher having to leave the small group to deal with students who should be working independently. This will take away from the effectiveness of the small group instruction. There is also the argument that instructional time is better used in a whole class setting as the teacher

has the ability to monitor all students and ensure they are on task, rather than have the risk of students wasting precious class time.

Finally a limitation could be the instruction the students received in previous and future years, and whether or not one year of small-group instruction is effective in the long term. This is why it is so important to work together as a school and have teachers support one another with their reading instruction. While small group reading is common in the primary grades and usually ends there, a school you can decide to continue it right through all the grades since it has been proven to effectively increase reading scores (Boushey & Moser, 2006; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Harris, 2004; Mooney, 1995; Wilson et al., 2012). They worry that students may not improve as much as hoped, if small group reading suddenly stops in the higher grades.

Conclusion

The problem that was addressed in this paper is the lack of explicit reading instruction in the intermediate grades. Research shows that many students are not meeting grade level expectations when they enter into the intermediate grades, and many even when they reach middle and high school. The goal of this paper was to look at different ways to effectively teach reading instruction to grade 4 and 5 students. The research shows that small group reading instruction paired with silent, independent reading time will result in higher reading scores and can be an effective strategy when teaching reading to the intermediate grades. Guided reading and literature circles are two such strategies when paired with the daily 5 can be extremely effective in increasing reading scores.

It is so important that teachers continue to teach reading all through a child's educational career. Teachers cannot assume that the children already know how to read once they reach

grade 4 and beyond. It is crucial that each child is assessed on their specific reading abilities and taught to their needs. Comprehension and fluency are both important aspects of reading that need to be taught and practiced on a regular basis. By giving students choice of books and activities to complete as well as time to discuss their books with their peers will increase engagement and motivation.

Reading is a vital skill people need to be successful in life, and as teacherd we have a big role in ensuring each student has the ability to read. We as educators must remember that it takes time and hard work to teach some of these skills, but the dedication will pay off when students begin reading for enjoyment because they finally are able to understand what the book is saying.

While writing this paper I have learned many strategies to effectively teach reading to my grade 4 and 5 students and I look at teaching reading through a new lens. I now understand how important it is so ensure students are given some choice during their reading time and that long periods of uninterrupted reading time is crucial for student success. Without good reading skills established in primary and intermediate grades, students will be hampered in acquiring the knowledge expected in secondary grades. As educators we owe it to our students to give them all the reading skills we can so they achieve the greatest success possible.

What's Next?

With this newfound knowledge about the importance of continuing to teach reading strategies in the intermediate grades, my teaching practice is going to be forever changed. Next year, I will be implementing a guided reading and literature circle program into my daily schedule by using the Daily 5 program to ensure that all students are engaged and working

independently while I meet with small groups of students. I am going to encourage the other intermediate teachers at my school to do the same, and will share resources and strategies with them. I will invite them into my classroom to see it in action, and will initiate open discussions with one another on how we can better meet the needs of all students. Once I have taught this way for a year, and if it is successful, I will suggest to the other intermediate teachers that we assemble all the students together and group them according to specific skills they need to focus on. We already do this for teaching math so the students will be aware of the routine. Then, we can have groups mixed with students from all three intermediate classes during the literacy block which will give the teacher the opportunity to really go deep into specific areas the students are struggling with. This will make the literacy block be so much more powerful for the students and give them the opportunity to work with students who are not in their class. This will also help get the entire school on board with ensuring that literacy is being taught from kindergarten through to grade five.

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