

Guided Reading, Fluency, Accuracy, and Comprehension

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Guided reading instruction is a necessity in the elementary classroom. Through such instruction educators can meet the diverse needs of their readers as these programs allow for differentiated reading lessons. Schools that implement a guided reading program produce more confident readers. Overall, they are more fluent, accurate, and can effectively answer comprehension questions related to a piece of reading. Inauinta (2006) stated, “In a truly balanced literacy program, *how* you teach is as important as *what* you teach” (p. 417).

Current literature supports that educators need to first understand what guided reading instruction is and how they will make it fit in their classroom before they can effectively implement such a program. Ford and Opitz (2001) wrote, “True, guided reading . . . is increasingly perceived as an integral part of a balanced reading program designed to help all children become independent readers” (p. xv). Recently a local elementary school implemented such a program, called the Fountas and Pinnell Guided Reading System. Implementing this system has allowed staff members to test and teach their students based on each of his or her individual needs.

The Fountas and Pinnell Guided Reading System consists of leveled books from A to Z which teachers use to find guided reading levels for each of their students. This is useful because it allows teachers to group students based on reading levels and gives students the opportunity to read books that are a good fit for them based on their guided reading levels. As the student reads, the teacher marks his/her errors, self-corrections, and fluency. Once the student has completed the reading, the teacher asks a series of questions to check the student’s comprehension. Teachers utilize the Fountas and Pinnell Guided Reading System in hopes of seeing increased fluency, accuracy, and comprehension among their students.

A great deal of information supporting the implementation of guided reading instruction as a way to increase student reading skills exists; however, a problem lies in the fact that little is known about the exact increase students experience over the course of a school year in the areas of fluency, accuracy, and comprehension. This study took place with second and fourth grade students. Research on guided reading instruction and the success of similar programs in other schools was utilized. The Fountas and Pinnell Guided Reading System was the tool used to assess students because teachers have access to the program.

Literature Review

Guided reading

Reading is a complex aspect of instruction for many educators. Due to this fact, so many educators are easily overwhelmed by the wide variety of student needs that should be addressed. In the process of trying to reach each student at his/her level, educators often become frustrated at their inability to do so effectively. One rationale for diminishing this frustration is the implementation of a guided reading program. Fawson and Reutzel (2000) stated, "Teachers we have worked with are typically excited about the possibilities of providing the necessary scaffolding and instructional support to their students that guided reading offers" (p. 84).

This process begins with educators first assessing their students' reading abilities. Educators need to assess students in order to group them appropriately. This is done using running records. Data in the areas of reading fluency, accuracy, and comprehension need to be gathered on each student to allow educators to first discover the needs of each learner and to then develop approaches and instruction to ultimately improve student performance (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Assessing fluency, accuracy, and comprehension will often provide insight as to whether a text is too easy or too difficult. Recognizing such factors aids educators in discovering

when to reassess and move a student to a different group where his/her needs will be better met.

Utilizing guided reading within the classroom provides educators with an effective way to differentiate reading instruction, allowing them to meet the needs of their students. The success of students and their ability to begin using the strategies they learn on their own is a goal of educators who implement guided reading. Students receive ample support to encourage an eventual outcome of successful, independent silent reading (Ford & Opitz, 2008). A study conducted by Harris (2004) at Woodland Intermediate School in Illinois concluded such findings as she stated, “These pragmatic educators sensed that frequent small group instruction and assessment components, inherent in guided reading, were an outstanding vehicle for achieving individualized instruction” (p. 24).

Such individualized instruction begins with forming guided reading groups based on the data gathered from assessing. A survey of 3,000 educators who implemented guided reading found these groups may consist of up to six students, meeting about three times a week for a duration of about 20 minutes each time (Ford & Opitz, 2008). During small group instruction, elementary educators leading groups of students ranging in age from kindergarten through fifth grade guide students through a selected text which meets the reading needs of the group. Creating guided reading groups may make it easier for elementary educators to diversify lessons and allow students to learn in a way that is best for them, which could increase their fluency, accuracy, and comprehension.

Students benefit greatly from the implementation of guided reading instruction. Often, students who feel they cannot read just give up. When provided with texts at their own guided reading level, students begin to realize exactly what they are capable of and eventually develop an excitement for reading. Harris (2004) noted, “When difficulty of text matches a student’s

capabilities, interest in and love of reading is more likely to be fostered” (p. 25). Making reading fun and enjoyable encourages students to take part in reading activities more often.

Lyons (2003) expressed just how important motivation is in relation to reading when she wrote the following, “Motivation is arguably the most critical ingredient for long-term success in learning to read and write” (p. 84). Lyons discussed this further in her text through explaining the learning experiences of Matthew, an unmotivated first grader. Matthew struggled with reading and writing and was put into the Reading Recovery program where he was able to succeed and became excited about reading. Reading Recovery is strictly used with “low-achieving first graders” (Reading Recovery Council of North America, 2010). Despite this difference, Reading Recovery is much like guided reading. Both programs are used to aid each student in succeeding in reading at a pace and reading level appropriate for him/her. Ferguson and Wilson (2009) noted, “Through the work of Marie Clay’s Reading Recovery, the guided reading framework became a prevalent instructional practice in the primary grades” (p. 293).

Through the use of both individualized instruction and guided reading groups, students are able to move at a pace comfortable for them. Fountas and Pinnell (1996) wrote, “If young children are to learn to read, they must encounter material that supports their development” (p. 98). Students are engaged and can feel comfortable and confident as they read aloud and are asked to recall details. Lyons (2003) suggested teachers “create learning situations and activities in which children are interested and can meet with success” (p. 92). Students develop an understanding of important reading strategies and begin to internalize the strategies and self-monitor while they are reading. Guided reading instruction takes the stress off the students who do not feel successful. Lyons’ suggestion to “provide opportunities for children to take risks without the fear of failure” (p. 92) allows them to read with others knowing the environment they

are in is free from judgment and is set up for their specific learning needs. Each of these factors promotes fluency, accuracy, comprehension, and perhaps most important of all, mastery in reading. Ford and Opitz (2001) noted that “The ultimate goal is to foster independent readers, and guided reading is a means to this end rather than the end itself” (p. 2).

Fluency

Fountas and Pinnell (2006) define fluent reading as “using smoothly integrated operations to process the meaning, language, and print” (p. 62). Implementing guided reading is a way to build fluency in young readers. Fluency is an aspect of guided reading and is used to aid teachers in finding each student’s guided reading level. Studies have shown reading fluency increases when students read at their own specific level. Coulter, Shavin, and Gichuru (2009) explained, “Curriculum-based measurement of oral reading fluency (ORF) is especially useful because it accurately predicts later reading success” (p. 71). One study which further examined the impact of guided reading instruction on student fluency was conducted by Nes-Ferarra (2005) who wrote, “Fluency is a skill that develops with practice and observation, and permits the reader to grasp larger units and even phrases with immediate recognition” (p. 215).

Nes-Ferarra (2005) found implementing reading in a one-on-one manner improved student fluency. Her study focused on one student, Sally, who struggled with fluency, especially when reading in a whole group setting. Nes-Ferarra actively took notes and held discussions with her subject. She also provided her subject with texts that were at her reading level to enhance fluency. While working with this student individually, Nes-Ferarra found “she made substantial progress in reading fluency over the course of the study. By the end of the study, Sally read faster, smoother, and with more phrasing and emphasis” (p. 227). The success of individualized instruction and guided reading implementation with one child can be a sign additional children

may benefit as well.

Ferguson and Wilson (2009) found that “In the primary grades, guided reading increases students’ oral reading fluency, phonetic understanding, as well as their overall reading level” (p. 294). In a study conducted by McCurdy, Daly, Gartmaker, Bonfiglio, and Persampieri third grade guided reading instruction and the results of the instruction were examined. Ferguson and Wilson (2009) reported that the study took place using three different types of reading groups. The study consisted of a group that focused on small group reading instruction and rereading, which they referred to as the instructional condition. The study also consisted of a group that was given a reward when reading performance increased, and a control group that was used for comparison purposes. At the conclusion of the study, the group that demonstrated the most significant increase in fluent reading was the group that focused on small group reading instruction and rereading. Their study illustrates the growth in fluency among third grade students in the instructional condition, which mimics guided reading instruction with its use of small groups and rereading strategies.

A different study conducted by Bonfiglio, Daly, Persampieri, and Anderson involving fourth graders investigated the kind of reading instruction that would be most beneficial to students. “Their strategies included passage previewing, choral reading, error correction, and tangible rewards” (Ferguson & Wilson, 2009, p. 294). After the implementations were in place and the study was complete, the researchers discovered that fourth graders who were part of the “small group that included passage previewing, error correction and choral reading increased their fluency (correctly read words) and decreased their errors per minute” (Ferguson & Wilson, 2009, p. 294). The strategies used in the instructional small group are also strategies used during guided reading instruction indicating the importance of guided reading instruction and its

relationship to an increase in reading fluency among students.

Accuracy

Accuracy is an indicator of whether or not students are reading books at an appropriate level. Fountas and Pinnell (1996) explained, “The accuracy rate lets the teacher know whether she is selecting the right books. The books should be neither too easy nor too hard” (p. 90). The target accuracy level for students in second grade is 90% or better and the target accuracy level for students in fourth grade is 95% or better (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996). Students in either grade who obtain an accuracy level below their target level are likely reading texts that are too challenging. If the books are too difficult, student accuracy will be poor. This is indicated by Fountas and Pinnell (1996) who stated, “Stretches of accurate reading mean there are appropriate cues that allow the child to problem-solve unfamiliar aspects of the text” (p. 90). When the teacher implements guided reading groups he or she must be sure the books chosen are at an appropriate level for each of the readers in the group.

A study conducted by Nes (1997) illustrates the benefits of small group reading on student accuracy. Although Nes did not implement guided reading, she did implement paired reading which is still conducted in a small group setting with focus on increasing student fluency, accuracy, and comprehension. The main difference between paired reading and guided reading is paired reading can be done with any book, not necessarily a leveled guided reading book. Nes reports, “All four of the less-skilled readers in the study demonstrated improvement in fluency, with individual differences in the amount of improvement; demonstrated and maintained very high accuracy percentages; and had high scores on the maze comprehension measures” (p. 41).

An additional study in the area of accuracy conducted by Mesmer (2010) had

inconclusive results. Mesmer compared decodable text accuracy levels to qualitatively leveled text accuracy levels of 74 first grade students. Decodable texts are books that encourage students to apply knowledge they have about letter sounds within words and word families. Phonics is the driving emphasis behind such texts. Decodable texts focus largely on long vowel or short vowel patterns. For example, if short a is the vowel pattern in the decodable text, then each sentence would have one or more short a words in it to reiterate the short a pattern. Qualitatively leveled texts are the types of books used during guided reading instruction, which “should support readers in using multiple sources of information to recognize words” (Mesmer, 2010, p. 22). Mesmer conducted her study over the course of the school year and compared the data she collected to conclude whether or not decodable texts or qualitatively leveled texts (those used in guided reading instruction) made a difference in each student’s accuracy level. Mesmer found, “The analysis of accuracy across the first-grade year showed uniform growth regardless of text and inconclusive results for texts” (2010, p. 30).

Comprehension

Comprehension is a fundamental aspect of reading. Fountas and Pinnell (2006) stated, “Comprehension is the vital, central core of the broader and more complex ability to reason” (p. 4). Students benefit greatly from understanding what they have read. When a student has difficulty answering comprehension questions, it indicates a text is too difficult for a student and he/she is not retaining the information from the text being read. Baier (2005) conducted a study on reading comprehension and reading strategies and found, “after using reading comprehension strategy, the sixth grade students received higher test scores than before using the reading comprehension strategy” (p. 38).

Fisher (2008) noted, “The principles underpinning the practice of guided reading are

concerned with the teaching of comprehension strategies and the development of critical literacy” (p. 20). Guided reading instruction provides students with such strategies when it comes to comprehension as well as providing students with a comfortable place to participate and answer comprehension questions. Fisher (2008) wrote, “A guided reading group offers a supportive environment in which to promote such active participation in meaning making” (p. 20). In this way, students have a better chance of understanding texts they read. Iaquinta (2006) took the importance of guided reading instruction and its impact on students’ comprehension into consideration when she wrote,

A framework for guided reading lessons (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001) provides for different kinds of learning in different ways; each element has a function related to students’ ability to construct meaning. These components work together to form a unified whole and create a solid base from which to build comprehension.
(p. 417)

Both fluency and accuracy can impact comprehension in reading. A study conducted by Fountas and Pinnell (1996) “of over one thousand fourth graders’ oral reading fluency found that rate, fluency, and accuracy were all highly related to comprehension” (p. 150). When a student’s reading is not fluent and accurate, it is more difficult for the student to comprehend what he/she has read due to the amount of time taken to decode words and complete the reading selection.

Fluency, accuracy, and comprehension are all aspects associated with guided reading instruction. The purpose of including and examining each of these aspects in guided reading is to “meet the varying instructional needs of all the students in the classroom . . . to teach students to read increasingly difficult texts with understanding and fluency; to construct meaning while using problem solving strategies . . . , and understand concepts or ideas not previously

encountered” (Iaquinta, 2006, p. 414). Implementing a program such as guided reading provides students with focused instruction at their specified level increasing each student’s overall reading ability.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the amount of student growth in the areas of fluency, accuracy, and comprehension through the use of guided reading instruction.

Understanding that the instructional method being used increases student’s fluency, accuracy, and comprehension makes clear the benefits of guided reading instruction for teachers to use within the classroom. Fluency, accuracy, and comprehension levels contribute to student reading success as a whole, but often growth in student reading levels is the only indicator examined to determine growth in reading. Recognizing growth in the areas of student levels of fluency, accuracy, and comprehension is important to ensure students are making total gains in reading.

Methodology

Each variable was addressed separately to determine if there was an increase, a decrease, or if student levels stayed the same in the areas of fluency, accuracy, and comprehension. The study was completed using the Fountas and Pinnell Guided Reading System in one second grade and one fourth grade classroom. Notes taken about each student’s levels of fluency, accuracy, and comprehension were recorded at the beginning and end of the study. Examining research which has already been conducted in each of these areas helped inform this study.

Participants

The subjects for this study were 24 second grade students between the ages of seven and eight and 16 fourth grade students between the ages of nine and ten. There were 13 second grade girls, 8 fourth grade girls, 11 second grade boys, and 8 fourth grade boys yielding a total of 21

girls and 19 boys, or 40 subjects total assessed for this study. Second grade students were assessed in their second grade classroom by their teacher, and fourth grade students were assessed in their fourth grade classroom by their teacher. Parent permission was obtained for students to participate in the study. Parents were assured their child could not be identified in any way. All 24 second grade students returned their signed permission form and 16 out of 20 fourth grade students returned their signed permission form. Students who did not return a student permission form were not included in this study.

Research Design

This research followed a paired study design where student levels of fluency, accuracy, and comprehension were examined. The goal of the research was to find a relationship between student levels of fluency, accuracy, and comprehension prior to the implementation of guided reading instruction to student levels after the implementation had been put into place. Change among students' fluency, accuracy, and comprehension scores were anticipated after the Fountas and Pinnell Guided Reading System was utilized. In order to determine if the implementation was successful, student levels from the first guided reading assessment were compared to those gathered after the final guided reading assessment was administered.

Instrumentation

A running record was used to gather data on student fluency, accuracy, and comprehension in reading. The running record came from the Fountas and Pinnell Guided Reading System. The assessment was administered to each student individually in the same room as, but at a table away from their classmates who were working quietly at their desks. The assessment began with the teacher introducing a book and proceeded with the student reading the book. While the student read aloud to the teacher, the teacher marked errors and self-corrections

in the provided columns on the running record to later determine the student's reading accuracy. All students were aware the teacher would take notes on their reading performance and were neither bothered nor distracted by this.

On the running record, the teacher also determined the student's fluency on a 0 to 3 scale. On the fluency scale, a student who scored zero typically read word-by-word with awkward pausing and no expression; a student who scored a one read in two-word phrases slowly, but not smoothly; a two was given to a student who read mostly smoothly and with expression in three- or four-word groups; and a three was given when the student read smoothly with expression in large meaningful phrases and at an appropriate rate.

The test concluded with a series of comprehension questions for the student to answer in order to check his/her understanding of the text just read. Student responses were scored on a 0 to 7 scale. The scoring for this portion of the test was somewhat subjective. The running record listed the questions asked and also provided examples of acceptable answers to guide the teacher's scoring decision. In the end, the score was decided upon at the teacher's discretion. Students who earned zero to three points demonstrated unsatisfactory comprehension, a four showed limited comprehension, a five showed satisfactory comprehension, and a six or seven indicated the student had excellent comprehension.

Data Collection Procedures

The test was implemented during small group reading time in the second grade and fourth grade classrooms during the months of March and June. Administering the tests in March and June allowed enough time between tests to be able to distinguish if the implementation was successful. Both the second and fourth grade classrooms utilized in the study were chosen because the teachers in each classroom were familiar with the procedure to correctly implement

the Fountas and Pinnell Guided Reading System.

Students were called to the back table in each of their classrooms to work one-on-one with the classroom teacher where the reading test was administered. Students in second grade read with their second grade teacher and students in fourth grade read with their fourth grade teacher. Students were asked to read aloud to the teacher and then answer a series of questions based on what they read. Test time varied from student to student in a range from 15 to 30 minutes, but there was no time limit. Each classroom teacher kept track of student levels of fluency, accuracy, and comprehension on a table designed for this study. The researcher gathered test results after initial student testing was completed and after students were retested in order to compare the two sets of data to one another.

Data analysis

The test data was analyzed using a table to illustrate growth, non-growth, or if students stayed the same in the areas of fluency, accuracy, and comprehension. The results were compared to original student levels of fluency, accuracy, and comprehension which were obtained prior to the implementation of the Fountas and Pinnell Guided Reading System.

Results

Fluency

The first research question in this study addressed the effect of guided reading instruction on fluency. Fluency was assessed using the Fountas and Pinnell Guided Reading System. The students read a passage aloud and notes were taken on each individual's fluency level. Fluency was scored on a 0 to 3 scale with a score of zero indicating little to no fluency and a score of three indicating the student was fluent.

Table 1 illustrates the results gathered while assessing student fluency in the form of the

number and percentage of students who increased, decreased, or stayed the same.

Table 1

Student Fluency

Fluency Level	Number of Students (N=40)	Percentage of Students
Increased	12	30%
Stayed the Same	25	63%
Decreased	3	7%

The table illustrating student fluency shows there was little decrease in this area. About one-third of students showed an increase in fluency, and more than half of the students who participated in this study neither increased nor decreased in the area of fluency.

Accuracy

The second research question in this study addressed the effect of guided reading on accuracy. Students were assessed while reading a designated passage from the Fountas and Pinnell Guided Reading System. Accuracy was determined by the number of errors a student made while reading. The formula used to yield a percentage of accuracy was $[(\text{number of errors})/(\text{number of words})]*100$.

Table 2 illustrates the results gathered while assessing student accuracy in the form of the number and percentage of students who increased, decreased, or stayed the same.

Table 2

Student Accuracy

Accuracy Level	Number of Students (N=40)	Percentage of Students
Increased	20	50%
Stayed the Same	16	40%
Decreased	4	10%

As with fluency, the data gathered in the area of accuracy showed little decrease. Half of the students showed an overall increase in accuracy. A little less than half of the students tested in this area showed neither an increase nor a decrease in accuracy. Instead, they stayed the same.

Comprehension

The third research question in this study addressed the effect of guided reading on comprehension. Students were assessed on comprehension after they read a designated passage aloud. Questions were based on the reading passage. Student responses were scored on a 0 to 7 scale with a score of zero indicating little to no comprehension and a score of seven indicating the student had outstanding comprehension. More specifically, students who earned zero to three points had unsatisfactory comprehension, a four demonstrated limited comprehension, a five showed satisfactory comprehension, and a six or seven indicated the student had excellent comprehension.

Table 3 illustrates the results gathered while assessing student comprehension in the form of the number and percentage of students who increased, decreased, or stayed the same.

Table 3

Student Comprehension

Comprehension Level	Number of Students (N=40)	Percentage of Students
Increased	19	48%
Stayed the Same	12	30%
Decreased	9	22%

Nearly 50% of students demonstrated an increase in comprehension, making it the most common result of this study. Almost one-third of students showed neither an increase nor a decrease in comprehension while reading and about one-fifth of students showed a decrease.

Discussion

The underlying theme of each research question addressed by this study was to determine if the implementation of guided reading instruction would produce readers who became more fluent, more accurate, and who developed better comprehension skills throughout the process.

The basic design for this study was descriptive and an experimental methodology was used to gather data about each of the three variables. The subjects for this study were 24 second graders and 16 fourth graders. Fluency, accuracy, and comprehension were chosen as variables since they are crucial components which contribute to the development of young readers. Each variable was examined individually to determine if there was an increase, decrease, or if students stayed the same in any of the tested areas. Performing the research in this way provided an in depth insight into each variable.

A test from the Fountas and Pinnell Guided Reading System was used to gather data on student fluency, accuracy, and comprehension in reading. The test was administered to each student individually. The test was administered two times per student, once in March at the beginning of the study and once in June at the end of the study to determine the results of the implementation. Students read a selection aloud. Notes were taken on fluency to determine where each student fell on a 0 to 3 scale. Errors and self-corrections were tallied to later determine accuracy. Finally, comprehension questions were asked after the student read aloud. Each question was scored using a 0 to 7 scale depending on the detail and correctness of each response. The results were used to identify an increase or decrease in fluency, accuracy, and comprehension, or if students stayed the same and showed neither an increase nor a decrease in these areas.

Limitations of the Study

There were three limitations involved with this study. The first was dependent on parents signing and returning student permission forms allowing students to participate in this study. The second was a procedural weakness. The test was implemented by two different teachers within their classrooms. Both received the same training, but due to the somewhat subjective scoring for the comprehension portion of the test, overall comprehension scores may be skewed based on each individual teacher's perception of student answers. The final limitation focuses on the fact that the second guided reading assessment was more difficult than the first as students reading levels increased with the implementation.

Implications

The results of this study indicated the implementation of guided reading instruction was beneficial to students in this area when placing students into three categories of increasing, decreasing, or staying the same in the area of fluency. One-third of students showed an increase in fluency. However, this indicates almost two-thirds of students did not show an increase in fluency with this implementation when combining the number of students who stayed the same with the number of students who decreased. The fact that more than half of the students stayed the same in the area of fluency even though the texts they were tested on were more difficult the second time indicates that the implementation of guided reading was beneficial. This coincides with the study conducted by Nes-Ferarra (2005) who found working with students individually gave them more confidence and allowed them to read more fluently.

The study indicated 50% of students showed an increase in accuracy. There was little decrease (10%) in student accuracy scores. The remaining 40% of student scores neither increased nor decreased. Therefore, almost all students (90%) either increased or maintained their scores rather than earning a decreased accuracy score. Combining the number of students

who increased in accuracy or stayed the same would replicate what Nes (1997) found in her study of paired reading. The most common trend in her study was student accuracy either increased or stayed the same.

Student levels of comprehension did increase with the implementation as nearly 50% of students demonstrated an increase in scores. The results of this study correlate with the results found by Baier (2005) in which students performed better when asked to answer comprehension questions after a program supporting them in doing so was implemented. Given a greater number of students increased, implementing guided reading was successful in the area of comprehension.

Conclusion

Implementing guided reading instruction results in students who are more efficient and capable readers. The following conclusions can be made based on the results of this study: Fluency levels may have been affected by the increased difficulty of the second test administered. Tests are given at a higher level to determine if students are ready to change reading levels. Given the nature of the text and the more difficult words, this may have affected results. Examining accuracy scores shows exactly half of the students in the study demonstrated increased levels, indicating overall that the implementation of guided reading was positive and beneficial to students. Providing students with texts to read at their individual level proved to be a positive implementation in the area of comprehension. Nearly half of the students tested showed an increase in this area illustrating that guided reading had a positive impact on their comprehension. Testing whether or not student exposure to reading has an effect on fluency, accuracy, and comprehension would be beneficial. Determining how much time students spend reading outside of school may be an indicator of their successes or struggles with reading in school.

The tests utilized in this study were administered over the course of a short time frame. Had student levels of fluency, accuracy, and comprehension been looked at from the beginning of the year to the end of the year, the results may have been quite different. Additionally, taking student guided reading levels into consideration as well as their levels of fluency, accuracy, and comprehension would more effectively illustrate the true impact of guided reading on student reading skills. If student reading levels are increasing, then their skills are increasing as well.

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