Guided Reading in First-Fourth Grade: Theory to Practice

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Abstract
The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of collaborative efforts between a large metropolitan school district and the school of education at an area urban university. A reading clinic, in which university students conducted small guided reading group lessons with elementary students reading below grade level, was established through this partnership. Analysis of qualitative and quantitative data revealed the positive outcomes were twofold. Elementary students participating in the reading clinic achieved progress on two different reading assessments, and university students benefited from the training provided by the district literacy specialists, guidance by the university professors, and the real-world application of best practices in guided reading instruction.

Keywords: guided reading; university clinic; best practice

Introduction

In this article, the authors share insights stemming from an ongoing small-group guided reading partnership involving a university and an elementary school, both located within a large, urban, metropolitan school district. All involved benefited from the experience, while reaffirming the importance of building strong collaborations between university faculty members and area school personnel. This partnership emphasized the importance of extensive classroom experience for university students to build a strong foundation for teaching early and intermediate reading. The highlights of the partnership included: the reading progress made by the elementary student participants, the resultant confidence instilled in both the elementary and university students, and the expanded instructional repertoire and improved teaching competence noted in the university students.

Background of the Problem

Shortly before the beginning of the 2013 fall semester, literacy specialists and administrators from a large metropolitan school district reached out to university faculty members with the idea

of creating a collaborative partnership in the form of a reading clinic. The intent of the reading clinic was for preservice educators, with support from district literacy specialists and university reading professors, to provide small group instruction to first through fourth grade students reading significantly below grade-level.

Theoretical Framework: A Comprehensive Literacy Program

A comprehensive literacy program includes a number of literacy experiences, such as small group guided reading (SGGR), which are carefully planned for students to interact with whole text in a number of ways, and with varied levels of support (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). These opportunities to read, write, speak, and listen as a whole class, in small groups, or independently, build on each other and work together to provide students independent control of literacy tasks. Within a comprehensive literacy framework, teachers provide varying levels of support during instructional activities, which scaffold the control of the student (Bruner, 1982). This combination of activities facilitates a gradual transition from the students' zones of proximal development or what children can do with assistance, to full and independent control (Vygotsky, 1978).

In reading, these scaffolded opportunities include read aloud or modeled reading, shared reading, guided reading, and independent reading. During read aloud experiences, the teacher is usually in full control of the text, modeling fluent reading and focusing on comprehension, while building academic vocabulary and literary knowledge. In shared reading, the teacher uses a big book or displays the text electronically, modeling reading to the students, utilizing 'think out loud' techniques, demonstrating effective word solving practices, within an interactive context and eliciting student participation (Allen, 2002; Fisher, 2000; Parkes, 2000).

In guided reading, the teacher plans the teaching/learning interaction carefully, considering small group composition and text selection, selecting intentional lesson objectives, and supporting strategic behavior with teaching prompts, demonstrations, and questions. Independent reading provides students with opportunities to extend their reading control, strengthen their strategic behaviors, and effectively process information or comprehend (Clay, 1991; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). These are all important pieces of the literacy instruction puzzle. One of the most important pieces, and perhaps the most difficult to master for new teachers, is SGGR

For struggling readers, SGGR is critical and supplemental SGGR outside of the general classroom is often indicated as intervention or treatment for elementary reading struggles (NICHD, 2000; National Early Literacy Panel & National Center for Family Literacy, 2008). In particular, young children who do not progress in reading at the same rate as their peers will likely continue to have difficulty in school (Pianta, Belsky, Vandergrift, Houts, & Morrison, 2008; Torgesen, 2004), with meta-analyses showing 5-17% individuals later manifest indicators of a reading disorder (Bishop, 2010; Shaywitz, Morris, & Shaywitz, 2008). Therefore, early literacy intervention in the form of supplemental SGGR is necessary for young children who initially struggle in reading (Iaquinta, 2006; Pinnell & Fountas, 2008).

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was twofold: 1) to simultaneously ascertain if implementation of SGGR in the reading clinic collaboration improved the reading skill of struggling elementary readers and 2) to determine if the reading clinic experience provided additional benefits to the

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preservice educators. In order to examine the effectiveness of the reading clinic, the following research questions were addressed:

- Will reading performance of struggling elementary readers improve when participating in SGGR twice per week with preservice teachers in a guided reading clinic?
- How will the reading clinic experience impact preservice educators?

Treatment Description: SGGR

SGGR is an instructional approach, which allows teachers the ability to strategically plan the differentiated early literacy instruction needed for each student in their classrooms. Whether a teacher is facilitating the reading development of an emergent reader, fostering the progress of a transitional reader, or supporting the comprehension of an advanced reader, small guided reading groups are designed to accommodate the unique developmental path of each child (Clay, 1998). In SGGR, teachers plan effective reading lessons for small groups of children taking into account their unique areas of strength and needs.

Guided reading is significantly different from the traditional 'round robin' reading groups (Clay, 1991; Holdaway, 1979). During SGGR instruction, students read whole meaningful texts either silently or in a 'whisper voice.' The small guided reading groups are dynamic and change in composition, depending on the progress of the students. Students are grouped according to their current use of reading strategies or processing controls. Ongoing assessment, frequent in-depth analysis of student behaviors, intentional and systematic teaching, strategic lesson planning, and careful text selection are the key components of guided reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

In guided reading lessons, instructors teach strategic behaviors such as: problem solving to decode new words, maintaining fluency, self-monitoring, searching for information, self-correcting, predicting, summarizing, and analyzing text, among others. In addition to teaching for strategic problem solving, instructors also teach for comprehension posing critical thinking questions, and explicitly address phonics, word analysis, and vocabulary as needed (Pinnell & Fountas, 2008). Typically, students also write reading responses and engage in thoughtful, meaning-focused discussions with their peers and/or the teacher.

For purposes of this guided reading clinic, lesson plan templates and guided reading protocols were provided to the university students to guide their lesson planning and offer them specific strategies to use based on elementary students' needs. The guided reading protocols, which were directly correlated to Fountas and Pinnell (20008) reading levels, included text features, word work, and reading strategies, as well as activity examples to use before, during and after reading. Students were encouraged to follow the lesson plan template as a guide and incorporate their own ideas and activities as they related to each lesson.

Data Collection, Instrumentation, and Initial Analysis

Quantitative Data (Elementary Students)

Quantitative data from two instruments, *The Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System (FP-BAS), and Istation's ISIP-ERA Early Reading Assessment (ISIP-ERA-ERA), was provided by school district literacy specialists. The FP-BAS* is a comprehensive one-on-one assessment, which matches students' instructional and independent reading abilities to leveled texts. During this assessment, the student reads continuous text, while the teacher takes a running record for later analysis and reading level determination (Fountas & Pinnell, 2014).

For purposes of the present study, *FP-BAS* reading levels were converted into grade level equivalent scores using a correlation chart included in the FP-*BAS*. *ISIP-ERA* is a computer-

administered assessment for PK-3rd grade students. *ISIP-ERA* is computer-adaptive, dynamically adjusting items administered to individual students in order to measure phonemic awareness, alphabetic knowledge, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Scores from the *ISIP-ERA* represent a combined factor of all reading areas tested with higher *ISIP-ERA* scores representing better overall reading ability (The Imagination Station, Inc., 2014).

Two dependent variables, *FP-BAS* reading level and *ISIP-ERA* scores, were examined at two points in time, prior to and after implementation of SGGR. Normally distributed descriptive data from SPSS 22.0 shown below in Table 1 demonstrate mean improvement of both dependent variables across time. No differences in terms of gender or ethnicity were noted, indicating treatment effectiveness across the sample. As expected, though, differences by grade level for *FP-BAS* reading level (grade level score) and *ISIP-ERA* scores were present.

Table 1
Variable Mean (SD) Scores

	Grade 1 $n = 15$		Grade 2 $n = 6$		Grade 3 $n = 4$		Grade 4 $n = 12$	
DVs	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
FP-BAS Pre	.5	.42	1.5	.31	1.9	.11	3.1	.17
FP-BAS Post	1.01	.35	1.9	.51	2.0	.26	3.2	.67
ISIP-ERA Pre	189.6	5.82	209.8	7.78	221.0	3.5	NA	NA
ISIP-ERA Post	198.3	6.80	218.6	11.39	219.8	6.9	NA	NA

A repeated-measures one-way MANOVA was also run in SPSS 22.0 to determine statistical and clinical significance of the SGGR treatment in terms of *FP-BAS* reading level and *ISIP-ERA* score (Field, 2008). Results of the MANOVA, F (1, 36) = 14.588, p = .01, indicated a significant difference between pre and post *FP-BAS* reading level scores, with the SGGR treatment accounting for 29% of the variance in elementary students' instructional reading level. In terms of *ISIP-ERA* scores, results of the MANOVA were also significant, F (1, 24) = 28.829, p = .00, with the SGGR treatment accounting for 49% of the variance in elementary student *ISIP-ERA* scores.

Qualitative Data (University Students)

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Qualitative data was collected from university students via multiple sources. Most importantly, all university students participated in an end-of-semester focus group to discuss concepts learned from the reading clinic experience. The researchers functioned as participant-observers, facilitating and audio recording focus group discussions, and later transcribing, and coding linguistic data for themes. Other qualitative data, including university student reflective journals, notes from classroom discussion, and feedback from involved district personnel was triangulated with the focus group data to provide evidence of reliability and validity. Several themes emerged as a result of the focus groups, but no unique themes emerged for either the fall or spring semester, again contributing to the reliability of qualitative findings across time.

Findings

Quantitative (Elementary Student)

As use of a non-treatment control presented ethical challenges, inferring direct causality between significant growth in *FP-BAS* reading level and *ISIP-ERA* scores from SGGR treatment was impossible. Thus, quantitative data was examined in terms of treatment duration (length) and responsiveness to intervention by age.

Treatment Duration. Aggregate treatment response of the sixteen (43.3%) students afforded yearlong treatment was compared to the treatment response of the twenty-one students (56.7%) afforded treatment for only one semester. Students who received the yearlong treatment (n = 16) improved more substantially (p = .005) than those who received the semester-only treatment (n = 21), with treatment duration accounting for 21% of the variance between groups (in terms of *FP-BAS* reading levels and *ISIP-ERA* scores). In fact, the average semester-only participant grew only one month in *FP-BAS* reading level, while a typical year-long student grew approximately 6 months in *FP-BAS* reading level (in accordance with Denton, 2012; Gersten et al., 2008; Ramey & Ramey, 2005).

Necessity of Early Treatment. The present study also provides added evidence to the growing body of research indicating reading treatments provided at earlier ages convey better response to intervention (e.g. Braet et al. 2012; Denton et al., 2011). Specifically, mean *FP-BAS* and *ISIP-ERA* scores in Table 1 show less robust improvement over time as grade level increases, reflecting Holt's (2008) model of decelerated reading growth across the elementary years. Moreover, other recent data suggests older elementary students may even be treatment resistant (Corrin, Somers, Kemple, Nelson, & Sepanik, 2008; James-Burdumy et al., 2009; Kemple et al., 2008), as shown by decreasing *ISIP-ERA* scores in grade 3 and the relatively flat *FP-BAS* reading level scores across time in grades 3 and 4 (see Table 1). As such, reading intervention for older children may necessitate a longer and more intensive course, or increased frequency of guided reading sessions, thus encouraging early identification and treatment of reading problems.

Qualitative Findings (University Students Outcomes)

Several themes emerged during coding and triangulation of qualitative data. The most prevalent themes: increased confidence, hands-on experience, and differentiation, indicated the collaboration between the university and school district provided a positive, productive, and eye-opening learning experience for the involved pre-service educators. Even negative commentary from students, such as coping with classroom teachers resistant to pullout, was fodder for learning about the realities elementary school dynamics.

Increased Confidence. An increased feeling of confidence occurred among many of the university students who implemented SGGR for the reading clinic collaboration. Qualitative

findings indicate college student uneasiness diminished while confidence improved as the semester progressed. One student reflected, "I know at the beginning, I was … really scared, terrified. I finally feel like I get it, and it's the end. Now I have something to offer." By the end of the semester, students felt competent enough to fully explain the components of a comprehensive literacy program in future job interviews and confident enough implement SGGR, in particular once in their own classrooms. One student asserted, "[the reading clinic] helped me with my confidence with guided reading because I haven't done this before." Yet another student attributed confidence gained in the reading clinic led to success on her certification exam, commenting, "I passed it my first time."

Hands-On "Real" Experience. Another positive theme for university students was the real-world, hands-on experience gained from being able to develop and subsequently implement their own SGGR lesson plans, while continuously adapting instruction across the semester according to elementary students' needs and interests. Conversely, in reference to writing lesson plans for previous courses, students expressed frustration at not having an opportunity to teach planned lessons, thereby never being able to ascertain actual lesson effectiveness. One student explained how the practice of continually shifting lesson plans according to student response changed her pedagogical approach, commenting, "sometimes something is not going to work like you want it to, so just realizing, oh, okay, if I switch this, it could go better, and you learn from that and keep going." Another student reflected:

> I think that the biggest difference for me was usually when we make lesson plans in class we are just making them out of our imagination, like this is something we can possibly do, but here, we're actually using them with kids, so basically like when we start, it's like imagining in your head, well this is what it's going to be like; I'm going to be able to get through all these things. But then when you come and you do it, you're like, okay this is what needs to go, this is what needs to be changed, this is what works, this is what didn't work, so I think that's the difference between [writing lesson plans in] our other classes, and using the lesson plans in this class.

Preservice teachers also learned about the very real need for constant vigilance in terms of time-management during the instructional day. As SGGR lessons were limited to thirty minutes, preservice educators were required to remain continually focused and on-task. One university student reflected having only thirty minutes, "helped me to organize and to pace myself." Another said, "In the classroom, I'm going to have to time myself to be able to get everything done throughout the day."

Finally, several preservice teachers contrasted abstract learning from literacy textbooks with the realities of working directly with students. One said, "You read about how it will be in the book, and you imagine what it will be like, and when you're actually doing it, it's a lot different." Furthermore, the scenarios presented in the textbooks may not present a realistic picture of instruction in an actual reading classroom, particularly in terms of instruction for struggling readers. One student indicated the textbooks make it seem like all of the students are on the same level and "improving at the same rate," while this experience painted an entirely different picture.

Differentiation within Small Groups. The guided reading field experience allowed pre-service teachers to work through challenges presented by working with students of varying ability levels. Although the students were placed in small groups based on previous *FP-BAS*

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reading levels, the university students discovered students with similar reading levels may have different reading needs. One student said, "My students were so different. They were both on the same level, but they were so different. I had to work with each of them, just helping them. That's where I am growing." More specifically, preservice teachers recognized students of the same level with different reading strengths and needs necessitate differentiated instruction, even within a small group of two or three. Many university students commented on using the strengths of each student to help the others learn. Furthermore, preservice educators learned how to choose leveled books and apply strategies to aid students. One student said, "I will be able to go into the classroom, level my books, and pick out a book and know what to teach from that book, and know what strategies are useful." Another expressed, "I feel comfortable grouping my students, perform[ing] SGGR strategies and I can regroup my students and level them."

While conducting SGGR, university students took annotated records of reading behaviors to continually differentiate future small group lesson plans. These notes helped the preservice teachers to realize the importance of being, as one student conveyed, "an observer of the student," in order to assist the learning process. Another student was able to use anecdotal information to alter her approach in prompting learners, commenting, "You get to know their little personalities; you learn what prompts to use with which students. One of my students was vulnerable and very shy so I knew to sweeten my words and use prompts that are softer, and my other student was very cool and full of confidence and he could handle a little more prompting from me."

Perhaps most importantly, getting to know individual students was an eye-opening experience for many of the university students who entered this field experience with conceptualizations of teaching as a whole-class, teacher-led experience rather than thinking about elementary students as individuals with unique needs. One student relayed this realization quite well:

> One of the things I noticed because of this experience is that we go into guided reading thinking about the benefits that the kid gets, what the students get from us, but then I never realized what a powerful tool it is for the teacher to be able to work with such a small group of kids because you get to know them and it's not just their reading; it's *them*. I was only working with one student towards the end and I really got to know him. Everything he brings into the classroom, his experiences, his stories, he connects it to himself, so I learned a lot about him. And I didn't think that guided reading could be the time where the teacher could learn about the student. I thought it was just where you look at the reading and you help them read, but it's more than just that, you have to go beyond that in order to help. And that's something I didn't know. And now, I go into classrooms where students are needing me and I notice each student individually. It's not like whether you're done with the lesson. That's something I learned with this, it's not about getting through; it's about working with them where they need it.

Implications for Practice and Conclusions

Many teacher preparation programs require field experience and observation hours prior to the student teaching experience; however, some experiences are much richer than others as

related to the pedagogical knowledge gained. Results of the present study showed preservice teachers immersed in hands-on, real-world experiences gain much more than those who are not given a chance to apply theory to practice. This collaboration made a positive impact on the elementary participants, the university students, the literacy specialists, and the involved university professors. This experience gave the university students a clearer picture of what to expect when they move on to student teaching and their subsequent teaching careers. The involvement in the reading clinic has strengthened their confidence and the hands-on practice allowed them to reflect and strengthen their pedagogical skills.

Opportunities for collaboration such as this should be considered by all teacher preparation programs and school districts to provide all-encompassing learning opportunities. Sharing expertise with future teachers regarding research-based practices such as SGGR has an undeniable impact on the type of teachers they will become. One consideration for future research in this area is the impact this type of pullout program has on the general education teacher, particularly during testing months. Teachers should be included in the planning and preparation of targeted skills during small-group instructional sessions. Although the literacy specialists were able to alter schedules so that students were pulled out during their normal reading time, students who are below grade level may need more support and consistency to ensure their academic needs are being met.

The main purpose of this collaboration was to improve reading skills of elementary students who were previously identified below grade level in reading. Quantitative assessment results generally demonstrated a positive impact on the reading growth of the elementary students involved in the reading clinic, especially those students who were younger and those that had participated for two semesters. However, these advances were not the only benefits of this collaboration. Training provided by literacy specialists, along with guidance by university professors resulted in benefits to university students and all members involved.

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