SPECIAL INTEREST ARTICLE

The Fountas and Pinnell Levelled Literacy Intervention as a Whole-Classroom Approach

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Abstract

In this article, the author explores the Fountas & Pinnell Levelled Literacy Intervention efficacy as a tool to enhance both supplemental and whole-classroom instruction to support literacy gains for students. Exploring the efficacy of Levelled Literacy Intervention will also act as a vehicle to explore how school divisions can more proficiently support teachers in implementing resources and policies in schools.

During the 2019/2020 school year, at a division-based junior high school literacy meeting, the main topic of discussion was classroom-based interventions that could successfully address student needs with reading in the classroom. The Fountas & Pinnell Levelled Literacy Intervention System (LLI, Fountas & Pinnell, 2016) was introduced as a trusted, well-researched literacy-based program that would support our struggling readers in our junior high classrooms. LLI offers supplemental instruction to small groups at various literacy levels for K-12 students. The use of systematic assessment data allows students to work at instructional reading levels appropriate for their learning, and facilitates the formation of small groups with similar reading level needs. LLI supports instruction and learning in effectively processing words and word structures, phonemic awareness, phonics, and comprehension. Oral reading of fiction and non-fiction texts encourages student responses through writing, vocabulary, core word learning, and oral expression (Clear Creek Independent School District [CCISD], 2015; Fountas & Pinnell, 2016; Majewski, 2018). The LLI system was recommended at our literacy meeting as a whole-classroom approach despite being developed as supplement to regular classroom literacy instruction.

The use of LLI as a whole-classroom approach, as suggested by the division coordinator, was accompanied by the suggestion of creating ability levelled groups in the classroom based on literacy assessment, running records, reading comprehension, and the web-based literacy assessment Literably (2022). In addition to creating ability levelled groups, it was suggested that we form book studies so that when small group instruction was occurring with one group, the other small groups of students would have meaningful work to help with classroom management and provide the kind of focus and small-group attention that LLI requires. The junior high teachers participating in the divisional literacy meeting raised questions about implementation. Despite an initial skepticism and lack of support amongst teachers, the division purchased multiple LLI systems and delivered them to our division's largest school for implementation. A directive to implement LLI in 15 English language arts classes across grades seven to nine was provided to eight teachers. No guidance, training, or time beyond regular professional learning Fridays was provided to the teachers for implementing Fountas & Pinnell's LLI system. The directive to integrate LLI beyond LLI's intended scope of supplementary usage was not supported by the teachers involved. Exacerbated by the questions of classroom management and training, the teachers involved felt overwhelmed because one more thing was added to their work plate at the cost of the teachers' professional autonomy. A rationale from the division level was not provided to the teachers, just the directive to implement LLI.

Problem

While the suggestion to implement the LLI system was provided with the best intentions, it was offered as a whole-class approach that exceeded the scope of LLI's design for small-group supplementary instruction. No support was provided for implementing LLI other than the purchase of three sets of LLI: the gold, purple, and teal systems, at an approximate cost of $14,000. As a result, the collective teacher motivation to implement LLI systems was reduced and any attempt at administering LLI supports into the classroom within the trial school was likely not given a fair chance. By exploring the merits and limitations of Fountas and Pinnell's LLI system, the following question will be explored: Can LLI create effective and positive results when implemented as a whole-class approach?

Literature Review

LLI is touted as an efficient literacy system because of its approach to small-group instruction. LLI systems intertwine literacy instruction with the application of reading strategies such as word structure and comprehension and writing (CCISD, 2015; Fountas & Pinnell, 2016; Majewski, 2019). Ransford-Kaldon et al.'s (2012) empirical study on LLI further supports its merits because they found that students in LLI made broader gains in benchmark levels in reading (+1.5-5.5) as compared to the control group (+1-3). Another merit of the LLI system is that it is "based on evidence gained from systematic observation and ongoing assessment data and then teaches using a coherent set of evidence-based instructional practices in whole-class, small-group, and individual contexts" (Fountas & Pinnel, 2018, pp. 7-8). Additional researchers have agreed on the importance of an instructional approach responsive to student data to meet students' needs efficiently and have concluded that LLI's benchmarking system provides a means to meet literacy learners at their level (Flood & Anders, 2005; Fountas & Pinnell, 2018; International Literacy Association, 2019; Majewski, 2018; Peery, 2021).

Fountas and Pinnell's LLI system has many positive attributes, but there are issues with the time and support required to implement LLI successfully. In addition, the fact that LLI is a supplementary, small-group intervention system presents limitations to implementation due to the training and scheduling of staff. Lastly, Thomas and Dyches (2019) found that "LLI materials are likely to perpetuate an oppressive status quo. Strict adherence to the LLI lesson guide will not result in challenging dominant assumptions" (p. 611). An example would be using the LLI system to support literacy learning in youth. In that case, it should promote the individuality of the learners using the system by providing access to literature and texts that do not promote majoritarian narratives that may de-motivate literacy learners.

Description of LLI

LLI provides a series of flexibly structured lessons that provide intensive literacy intervention to small groups, intended to assist students to achieve accelerated progress and reach appropriate grade-level literacy achievement (CCISD, 2015; Fountas & Pinnell, 2016, 2018; Majewski, 2018: Ransford-Kaldon et al., 2012). Fountas and Pinnell recommended using their Benchmark Assessment System 2 (BAS 2) to determine the instructional reading levels for each student in a classroom (CCISD, 2015; Fountas & Pinnell, 2008, 2016, 2018). Once teachers have determined their students' reading levels, they can develop "flexible guided reading groups … within the classroom setting, and using additional criteria, students are also placed into an LLI group" (CCISD, 2015, p. 8). The Teal LLI System provides 204 lessons for reading levels U-Z or expected reading levels spanning grades 5-8. The LLI system guides are comprehensive and provide text-based and online resources for teachers and students.

The system provides a prompting guide for oral reading, early writing, comprehension-based teaching about thinking, talking, and writing, professional development, and an online

data management system with tutorials (Fountas & Pinnell, 2022). As teachers and students use the system, the numerous lessons provide a variety of entry and access points so that students can be met where their learning needs are while also considering their strengths (Fountas & Pinnell, 2016, 2018). Each level in the LLI Teal system provides 30 lessons at each reading level: U, V, W, X, Y, and Z. Each level has a recommended instructional time of six weeks, with a 45-minute lesson daily for five days a week. This time is intended to supplement regular classroom literacy instruction (Fountas & Pinnell, 2016, 2018). When a teacher deems a student ready to exit the intervention because the student is reading well at an expected level, then a running record can be used as an indicator of the student's abilities (Fountas & Pinnell, 2016, 2018). Due to the built-in BAS 2 assessments, running record use, oral reading, writing, and discussion-based sharing involved with the system, a plethora of evidence of student learning is accessible to determine the program's success, most notably via students' growth across reading levels.

Applying the LLI system with fidelity requires research, training, and support at multiple levels: division office, school administration, literacy support teachers, classroom teachers, education assistants, parents, and students. This multifaceted team can provide the support needed to optimize the successful application of LLI, but creating and sustaining this support team may prove overwhelming within a school (Ransford-Kaldon et al., 2012). Also, Ransford-Kaldon et al. (2012) noted that even though the LLI program is flexible and responsive to students' success, strengths and needs, the high requirement of training and long-term dedication required at all levels (60-plus lessons, 30 to 45 minutes each per reading level) could prove to be a limitation.

In hindsight, my school division's choice to implement the LLI system within a school without training or support provided to teachers did not produce the successful application of the LLI program. LLI was not implemented with fidelity with Fountas & Pinnell's (2008, 2016, 2018, 2022) intended application of supplementary, small group instruction, nor was it applied to whole-classroom instruction as the division planned. The perceived reason for this failure is that the planning, training, and implementation were left to the already overburdened English language arts teachers at the school, with no leadership or support to assist with implementation. This experience showcases that professional learning and training must be provided to teachers before and during future implementations of the LLI program, in order to support teachers in the delivery of the various strategies, techniques, and assessments.

LLI's Merits for the Whole Classroom

"Many good ideas flounder and fail because of haphazard implementation, conflicts, unintended consequences, an inability to sustain effort, and a simple lack of communication" (Fountas & Pinnel, 2018, p. 7). Without appropriate professional development and training, teachers will not be knowledgeable enough to incorporate LLI's strategies and techniques into their classrooms. As Peery (2021) stated, "We must excise ineffective practices and zero in on what works" (para. 7). One ineffective practice that may occur at the division level is the desire to implement initiative after initiative to solve a perceived issue. However, because these initiatives are proposed as band-aid types of solutions, there are no investments in the program's permanence. As a result, training, support, and the longevity of a program that could provide positive student results can fail before it even begins – much like the implementation of LLI in the division discussed previously.

Another limitation presented by Thomas & Dyches (2019) is the idea that the "curriculum conveys messages about the world, how people are expected to engage with one another, and the positioning of individuals and groups of people within the broader social context" (p. 601). The LLI Teal system uses text choices that may support majoritarian narratives in a way that socializes students to accept certain societal imbalances and inequities. As a result, not identifying with the text, or having their ethnic or cultural identities perceived as unfavourable,

can negatively impact students' identity and motivation to learn. "Students learn much through the stories shared in schools and how those stories are discussed; they learn whose stories are valued and celebrated, and whose stories are ignored and distorted" (Thomas & Dyches, 2019, p. 611). Thomas and Dyches (2019) found that LLI materials will not challenge dominant assumptions within North American culture and that the materials as prescribed may perpetuate a status quo that many minorities may find oppressive. For example, the 20 books prescribed in the LLI Teal system present stories that celebrate white characters while demeaning characters of colour or regulating ethnic characters to the margins of the stories. As education moves forward with inclusive education and other initiatives such as the Truth and Reconciliation of First Peoples in Canada, it is even more critical that the stories we share in our classrooms are responsive and reflective of the identities of the populations we teach.

Despite the limitations of the LLI Teal system, it still has many merits regarding literacy instruction and professional development. In his research on Reading Recovery,[1] Stouffer (2016) found that classroom teachers' "Incorporating procedures, language, knowledge, and the beliefs developed in Reading Recovery training made them feel more 'effective' as literacy instructors (e.g., 'My students are far more successful in reading and writing than they were before I was trained.' (Grade 1 teacher, urban Manitoba)" (p. 31). Like Stouffer's findings with the Reading Recovery program, LLI may provide teachers procedures, language, knowledge, and structure for literacy instruction in the classroom. The skills teachers may learn by being trained in LLI and applying LLI with small groups could be transferable to literacy with the whole class. Teachers who experience training in a specific teaching method, whether it is LLI or Reading Recovery as presented by Stouffer, have the potential to increase the efficacy of teachers' literacy instruction in the classroom (Ransford-Kaldon et al., 2012).

Another merit of the LLI system is that it is data-driven. Students are grouped by ability to certain literacy levels, and when they display efficiency at their level they may move on to the next level. The pre- and post-assessments help teachers monitor not only student growth with literacy learning but also the efficacy of the program. The assessments and use of running records illustrate student progress and the program's efficacy (CCISD, 2015; Fountas & Pinnell, 2016; Majewski, 2018). By adjusting the instruction within LLI or literacy teaching in the classroom, teachers are more able to teach according to the strengths and needs of students, based on data collected from formative assessments. This process engenders instruction that considers and adapts to what students understand, can accomplish, and will need to learn next (International Literacy Association, 2019). The LLI program leads students to explore these three phases of their learning both orally through reading and discussion and with writing practice and communication.

Finally, the use of oral-based reading and discussion and writing in the LLI program provides a complementary overlap of literacy skills that can accelerate the learning process for reading and writing. Interrelating reading and writing to teach literacy instruction facilitates a double exposure to learning these skills, increasing the potential for skill-building and comprehension of texts, personal understanding, and literacy skills (Flood & Anders, 2005; International Literacy Association, 2019; Peery, 2021; Stouffer, 2016). The International Literacy Association (2019) identified the following areas of learning as critical to reading development: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, writing, listening and speaking. The LLI system addresses these aspects in their lessons. It provides a structure for educators to learn how to incorporate lessons on these different aspects, not only in small-group instruction (as LLI is intended) but also in the whole-class instruction, because teachers who become comfortable with the application of LLI in small groups can build literacy instruction skills and confidence that is transferable to whole-class instruction as well.

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[1] Reading Recovery is a trademarked program administered in Canada by the Canadian Institute of Reading Recovery established in 1993 (https://rrcanada.org/).

Conclusion

When the LLI system was "implemented" at my school, it was not truly implemented. The lack of training, support, and planning for implementation prevented English language arts teachers within the building from adequately implementing the LLI system. In answer to the question "Can LLI create effective and positive results when used as a whole-class approach?" yes, the LLI system could be implemented as a resource that teachers could use to enhance their literacy instruction in the classroom. However, there is a significant requirement of support and cooperation throughout the division, school, and school community to effectively implement a program like LLI. Despite the limitations of LLI being intended for small-group instruction and the texts possibly presenting majoritarian narratives, the LLI system may be transferable to whole-class instruction. The structures and skills teachers learn could be carried with them from small-group instruction into their classroom instruction, providing a more extensive knowledge base for literacy instruction. The texts do not need to be used as presented in the LLI system. Literacy support and classroom teachers can select more diverse literature to resonate with individual students' backgrounds and cultural experiences so as to provide equitable stories that do not perpetuate majoritarian narratives or an unintended hidden curriculum such as Thomas and Dyches (2019) presented. My colleagues and I failed to implement the LLI system in our classrooms. However, under different circumstances, if time or professional development, training, and ongoing support were provided to implement LLI, I believe both staff and students would have benefited.

In summation, the LLI system has demonstrated merit in enhancing student literacy learning as intended in supplementary small-group lessons, and has potential benefits for the whole classroom. In addition, teachers' professional knowledge base and confidence levels with literacy instruction may be increased through the LLI system, with the major caveat that time and support be provided at the division and school level to assist with appropriate training and application.

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