Literacy Tutors and Striving Readers: Enhancing Literacy through a Graduate Reading Methods Course

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of a literacy tutoring program provided to K-5 children by graduate students enrolled in a reading methods course. Graduate students in this study were taught to implement literacy strategies through modeling and scaffolding of various activities in components of reading emphasized by the National Reading Panel (2000). The results of the study confirmed that the tutoring sessions were effective in increasing the skills of striving readers. The data from post-tests and graduate student reflections revealed that 100% of the children made substantial gains in their instructional reading levels and that graduate students' experience and training affected the growth in reading skills in a relatively short period of time.

Introduction

Research on reading has demonstrated the importance of addressing the needs of striving readers, who often experience difficulty learning to read via the instructional methods typically employed in schools (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2006). According to Lane, Pullen, Hudson, and Konold (2009), reading instruction requires an emphasis on use of appropriate comprehension and fluency strategies, vocabulary knowledge, the phonological structure of words, and regular spelling-sound relationships. The urgent call for effective reading instruction (Gersten & Baker, 2000; Slavin & Cheung, 2005) is supported by the view that negative academic outcomes can be prevented if strong evidence-based practices are in place early on. Contributing to the urgency to ensure that effective reading instruction is in place very early for striving readers are current reforms that place heavy emphasis on evidence-based practice and accountability. To that end, during the past two decades, a number of tutoring program interventions designed to increase students' reading performance have been examined (Ehri, Dreyer, Flugman, & Gross, 2007; Miller, 2009; Vadasy, Sanders, & Abbot, 2008). The results of these studies have suggested that literacy tutors help striving readers improve comprehension and fluency abilities as well as phonemic and orthographic knowledge.

School districts, especially in rural areas, may have difficulty hiring literacy tutors due to budget or availability constraints. In addition, they may not have the necessary infrastructure to support a viable tutoring program with proper training, supervision, and other support. One solution is for school districts to form partnerships with universities that offer teacher preparation programs and pull from that program's qualified individuals. Literacy tutoring offered through teacher preparation programs can help school districts improve the reading performance of striving readers by incorporating the following features: (a) a faculty to coordinate the program, (b) continuous feedback to the tutors, (c) high-quality strategy instruction for the tutors, and (d) structured tutoring sessions. In turn, the university benefits by offering its graduate students hands-on experience in helping students improve literacy. Although this approach can be beneficial for both the school district and university, additional research is needed to identify how graduate students' instructional and tutoring decisions as they interact with striving readers in a one-on-one tutoring experience can strengthen their instruction and thus help alleviate reading problems. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine how graduate students enrolled in a reading methods course provided one-on-one literacy tutoring that employed multiple strategies to facilitate changes in children's reading performance in a partner rural school district.

The Research

Reading skills should be acquired in a relatively predictable way by children who have normal or above-average language skills. Children in primary grades need experiences that foster motivation and provide exposure to literacy. They need information about the nature of print through opportunities to learn letters and to recognize the internal structure of spoken words, as well as explanations about the contrasting nature of spoken and written language (McCormick & Zutell, 2015). Many researchers have identified phonemic segmentation and blending as necessary prerequisite skills for learning to read (Klingner & Edwards, 2006; National Reading Panel, 2000). The National Reading Panel (2000) found that systematic and explicit instruction in phonemic awareness should be an important component of classroom reading instruction for children who have not been taught phoneme blending and segmenting with manipulatives or who have difficulties understanding that the words in oral language are composed of smaller speech sounds—sounds that will be linked to the letters of the alphabet. However, it has been emphasized that phonemic awareness instruction alone is not sufficient for reading success. Researchers also determined that poor decoding ability is a main factor in preventing striving readers from increasing their reading achievement. Young readers, who are still struggling to decode words, have fewer cognitive literacy strategies to comprehend what they have read (Linan-Thompson, Mathes, Cirino, et al., 2006; Vaughn, Mathes, et al., 2006).

The National Reading Panel (2000) found that reading comprehension of text is best facilitated by teaching children a variety of evidenced-based literacy strategies to assist in recall of information, question generation, visualization, and summarization. Striving readers need training in three areas that are regarded as essential to developing reading comprehension: vocabulary development, text comprehension instruction, and comprehension strategy instruction (Lane et al., 2009). There is much evidence and many rich theoretical orientations that demonstrate that vocabulary is tightly linked to reading comprehension (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013). The quality of children's word knowledge as well as meaning is crucial to comprehension, and there are significant differences in vocabulary knowledge among striving readers from different reading levels or socioeconomic groups (Beck et al., 2013).

Overall, striving readers appear to benefit from instruction in which multiple strategies are infused (McLaughlin & Rasinski, 2015). In this sense, well-planned and well-implemented tutoring programs can make a difference (Padak & Rasinski, 2005). In fact, one study found that a tutoring program based on fundamentally sound literacy instruction followed by simple word study improved striving readers' reading performance (Rasinski & Stevenson, 2005). Based on findings, the researchers suggested that tutoring should be provided through one-on-one sessions because the experience provides unparalleled opportunities for targeting instruction to address individual student needs (Hughes, Brooker, Gambrell, & Foster, 2011; Rasinski & Stevenson, 2005). Well-trained, closely supervised, and supported tutors can provide individual students with clear strategies and contextual application of those strategies that can lead to significant growth in reading achievement (Lane et al., 2009). This study examined a related tutoring component of a reading/writing literacy program offered by a Midwestern university's Department of Early Childhood and Elementary Education. The following section provides an overview of the program.

Reading/Writing Literacy Program

The university summer reading/writing literacy program included in this study was designed to increase the phonemic awareness, phonics, comprehension, fluency, writing, and sight word vocabulary of enrolled children, as well as to develop their language and thinking skills. The program offered activities that comprised reading and rereading texts, having cognitively challenging talks, discussing vocabulary words, summarizing texts, evaluating responses about texts, and making connections between texts and real-life experiences. Tutoring was provided by elementary education teachers enrolled in a graduate reading methods course at the university. The course was designed to provide graduate students with approaches and techniques that research and practice have indicated to be successful. The basic premise of this course was to allow graduate students to implement a variety of research-based reading strategies for building the literacy skills of primary-grade students.To practice research-based reading strategies, the graduate students worked with individual children enrolled in the summer reading program during their first reading period of the day, which took place early each afternoon. The graduate students spent the remaining time (1 hour) with the graduate course instructor in a classroom discussing how to integrate skills with strategies and provide strategic instruction. As each instructional component was systematically implemented, the children's performance was monitored.

Literacy strategies that facilitated progress remained in the tutoring program, while components that produced minimal or no effects were removed. The graduate students were well trained to teach skills and strategies that have been proven effective for improving reading skills, such as modeling, demonstrating, prompting, correcting errors, and providing other forms of feedback to the children. The graduate students implemented scaffolded instruction to move children progressively toward stronger understanding and, ultimately, greater independence in the learning process. The scaffolded instruction offered the relevant context: if children were not at the reading level required to understand a text being taught, the graduate students used instructional scaffolding to provide successive levels of temporary support that helped children reach higher levels of comprehension and skill acquisition. The goal was to give children a simplified version of a reading lesson or reading and then gradually increase the complexity, difficulty, or sophistication over time until they could read the required text independently and without assistance.

Methods

The study used quantitative and qualitative evaluation tools to assess the overall effectiveness of the literacy tutoring program, both in terms of its effects on children's literacy progress and graduate students' instructional abilities. Quantitative measures were most appropriate for conducting needs assessments and comparing pre-test/post-test outcomes with baseline data. The graduate students who enrolled in the reading methods course participated in professional reading and completed a series of literacy assessments for the university coursework. The course-designated assessments were designed to help them internalize literacy knowledge, collect authentic data in the field, administer progress-monitoring tools, analyze data, and reflect on learning. Literacy assessment processes and protocols were used to focus on common curriculum standards as the primary assessment goal. The assessment results were used for instructional planning and decision making. The progress-monitoring assessment was used for seeking out various sources of evidence to determine children's mastery and next instructional steps. There was ongoing evaluation of the continuous development of the overall literacy growth.

Qualitative research methodologies were utilized to provide the researcher with the perspective of target audience members through immersion in situations and direct interaction with the graduate students under study. Qualitative methods used in this study included observations, in-depth reflections, and discussions. The advantage of using qualitative methods was that they generated rich, detailed data that left the graduate students' perspectives intact and provided a context for determining behavior. In an effort to increase understanding of the overall nature of literacy among the children, the researcher, who was also the graduate course instructor, chose to emphasize the use of the qualitative tools during teaching and mentoring—such as observing tutoring sessions and debriefing both the process and artifacts that were observed. The researcher modeled identification of key qualitative indicators and the value of those qualities to help determine overall progress. By using a professional learning process and breaking down what happened during tutoring sessions into observable components, the researcher was better able to recognize key elements of teacher effectiveness, which increased the opportunity to build upon graduate students' growing strengths and identify pressing needs.

Participants

The participants of the study included 10 graduate students, ranging in age from 25 to 40 years, who were enrolled in the practicum reading methods course at the university. All were white female classroom teachers, 85% of whom had taught for 3 years or less and 15% of whom had over 5 years of teaching experience. Data from this study were collected during the summer of 2014 and included a case study project report, end-of-program or exit reflections, and group discussions that took place in a classroom between the graduate students and the instructor, who was also the researcher. All data were part of regular course practices and assignments. The ultimate purpose of the summer reading/writing literacy program was to provide instruction for motivating striving readers through the use of authentic literacy instruction. Ten K-5 children were enrolled in the literacy program. Out of the 10, seven were male and three were female. These children were drawn from general classrooms in predominantly rural elementary schools in the Midwest. With regard to ethnicity, all children enrolled in the program were white from middle-class families.

Data Collection and Analysis

Initially, the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA; Beaver & Carter, 2006), and running records were used to measure children's reading behaviors and to detect patterns of abilities and needs. These classroom assessment methods were reasonably quick to administer and provided graduate students with needed information for planning instruction. These children differed from skilled readers in their use of general knowledge to comprehend text, in their ability to draw valid inferences from texts, and in their comprehension of words. They exclusively used sounding-out strategies for figuring out unknown words rather than multiple strategies such as meaning, structure, picture cues, and background knowledge. They did not know how to focus on meaning, how to monitor, how to reread when the text was confusing, or how to use context to help figure out unknown words. Their comprehension suffered from a lack of relevant word knowledge.

The DIBELS subtests identified children as either needing further assistance or intensive instruction (i.e., low risk to some risk, respectively) in the areas of phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, and oral reading fluency. Two test booklets, benchmark and progress monitoring, were used to measure early literacy development. The benchmark books were comprised of nine passages divided into groups of three parallel passages. During each administration, a child read aloud for 1 minute in each of the three parallel passages, while the graduate student marked the frequency of errors. The median score was then recorded based on a predetermined criteria as to whether the child was low risk, some risk, or at risk for reading difficulties. By determining the classification, the graduate students then provided varying amounts of support. For instance, if a child in first grade read below 70 words per minute, a graduate student then provided intensive intervention.

Based on DRA and running records results, the graduate students determined that children's fluency disappeared at their instructional level and errors in word recognition were numerous. A majority of the children's comprehension was faulty, recall was sketchy, and signs of emotional tension and discomfort became evident. Both comprehension and reading growth itself were impeded because too many of the words of a text were problematic. Children were capable of learning little from text that was beyond their independent level because error rates for younger striving readers exceeded one word in 40. Following initial assessment, the graduate students implemented appropriate instructional strategies in individual tutoring sessions to help the striving readers learn to read with understanding and independence. The program provided activities in instructional areas that research has identified as critical to reading success. Strategies related to phonological awareness, fluent reading in a variety of texts, comprehension, vocabulary development, decoding, and word analysis were implemented to improve children's reading and writing proficiency. The study included three conditions based on the length of the tutoring sessions to determine which components were necessary to promote reading achievement with the striving readers. In Condition 1, the graduate students took 30 minutes to demonstrate how to make letter-sound correspondences while helping children read a word, providing verbal prompts to encourage them to answer comprehension questions, or providing timed oral reading practice. They gave corrective feedback or supplied words when children read words inaccurately. They also provided verbal praise for applying the strategies and reading words correctly.

Research has suggested that children who struggle with acquiring reading skills tend to respond more favorably to evidence-based reading instruction (Vaughn, Wanzek, Woodruff, & Linan-Thompson, 2007). Thus, in Condition 2, the graduate students implemented evidence-based instructional strategies with fidelity to increase the likelihood that children would respond favorably to instruction (i.e., improve their reading performance). Progress monitoring was used daily for 10 minutes to assess children's reading achievement, to quantify a child's rate of improvement, and to evaluate the effectiveness of instruction. Running records and DRA were used to chart progress and responsiveness to tutoring. In Condition 3, the graduate students helped the children become less dependent on instructional supports as they worked on tasks and encouraged them to practice the task in contexts (Dennen, 2004). They used a variety of supports for 30 minutes as children progressed through a task (e.g., prompts, questions, hints, stories, models, and visual scaffolding) and monitored children's progress through feedback. The graduate students used consistent, immediate, ongoing, incremental, targeted, and formative feedback to accomplish outcomes. The researcher asked graduate students to respond via email to a variety of questions regarding their tutoring (e.g., How does your teaching affect children's learning, both positively and negatively? Which children are learning well and which are not?).

This feedback was instrumental in the researcher's ability to assist graduate students in accomplishing reading achievement goals through data-based decision activities. Progress in reading achievement was determined and benchmarks on expected performance were derived by assessing the children's reading performance at the beginning, middle, and end of the tutoring sessions using reliable and valid reading measures. At the end of the semester, graduate students administered a number of reading measures, including measures of individual word reading, reading comprehension, word comprehension, and reading fluency. Results of assessments provided the impetus for employing different strategies to improve learning.

Results

At the end of the program, the assessments were re-administered to determine program effectiveness. On the DIBELS, the 10 children scored in the higher end of the mastery level on the phoneme segmentation fluency. This meant that when they heard a word, they could break it into phonemes. For nonsense word fluency, all children scored in the above-average range. On this test, they had to read CVC pattern words. They could say either the whole word or each phoneme. They got 15 out of 15 onsets as well as 15 out of 15 rimes correct. On the phoneme segmentation fluency, they scored in the benchmark level. On the nonsense word fluency, they scored in the strategic level. On oral reading fluency, their middle score of the three tests showed no risk. On their retell fluency, their retell included 85 to 98 words, and their word use fluency score was between 120-170. The number of correct words per minute from the passages was between 120-170.

On running records, the children's reading accuracy rate put them in the independent level at the end of the program (see Figure 1). They were able to recall 35 to 37 out of 38 ideas. Finally, they scored 7 and 8 out of 8 on the question portion of the assessment. They had more self-corrections and fewer omissions and substitutions than before. There were 3 to 4 total miscues and 1 to 2 meaning-changing miscues, which put them in the independent level for their grades. On DRA, the children scored in the independent range in comprehension and oral reading accuracy. The reading accuracy rate was 98-100%, determined by counting the number of uncorrected miscues and words given by the graduate students during the oral reading of a portion or the entire text for the selected DRA text level. The 10 children were recognized as early readers based on the level of the text they read and other descriptors circled on the DRA continuum. The children's reading rates were adequate for their reading stages of development based on information checked in the DRA observation guide.

Figure 1: Comparison of Pre-Test and Post-Test Running Records Accuracy Rates

As part of the course, the graduate students learned to reflect on the ongoing evidence of children's learning and their needs. As a result, they were better able to teach efficiently and effectively for long-term retention and deep mastery, and their accountability for instructional quality increased. For instance, one of the graduate students reported:"DIBELS was used to assess the child's early literacy skills to inform ongoing instructional decision making. The assessment of early literacy skills helped me determine beginning reading success. The coursework along with training had positive effects on improvements in quality practices." As the course and program progressed, the graduate students developed a deep understanding of what effective literacy practices look like in the classroom. Another graduate student enrolled in the course revealed:

"I implemented comprehension monitoring strategies that included such activities as applying known to unknown, cross-checking information, rereading for clarification, making inferences, reading in chunks, using structural analysis, and self-correcting to resolve comprehension problems. Results from the assessments indicated that this type of instruction in which children monitored their understanding by stopping at regular interval to ask questions, summarize, predict, and clarify could be very successful with striving readers."The course instruction combined foundational literacy pedagogy with specific classroom strategies for vocabulary development, fluency, decoding, reading comprehension, and writing to demonstrate learning. Through the training process, the researcher supplied the background knowledge, tools, and strategies for teaching literacy at the primary level including individual literacy strategies as well as planning and data collection tools and processes. Graduate students were also provided with assistance on how to apply the strategies. During final reflections on the course and program, one graduate student noted:"I implemented comprehension strategies which included identifying key vocabulary, activating relevant prior knowledge, answering thought-provoking questions, comparing texts by theme, and generating questions on a literary level when reading. Findings from assessments revealed that child #6 made significant progress in both understanding text and learning content."

Discussion

Instructional efficiency is defined as instruction that yields high rates of performing an academic skill accurately (Skinner, Belfiore, & Watson, 2002). The results of this study confirmed that the tutoring sessions were effective in increasing the skills of striving readers. Children who received the entire tutoring model (Conditions, 1, 2, and 3) performed better on the phonemic awareness test of DIBELS, the comprehension and fluency test of DRA, and the word accuracy test of the running records. Analyses of data revealed that the striving readers made greater growth in the word identification measure; they also scored higher on measures of reading fluency and word comprehension at the end of the semester.

Feedback from graduate students revealed two activities that they found to be particularly successful: (a) the running records were shared with the children, so accurate responses were realized and areas of improvement were addressed by setting goals; and (b) the graduate students taught word attack skills in context with an emphasis on basic sound-symbol associations of individual letters, digraphs, and blends. In addition, two forms of verbal interactions were found to be particularly successful: (a) scaffolding of reading and writing, and (b) modeling of how to read and spell unknown words. This finding was consistent with the previous research (Pullen, Lane, Lloyd, Nowak, & Ryals, 2005; Pullen & Lane, 2007).

The case study analysis revealed that 96% of graduate students tried to match striving readers' reading needs with instruction and evaluated the effects of the instruction to determine if the match was effective for helping children make sufficient progress. The reflections on tutoring sessions revealed that 98% of the graduate students demonstrated and modeled how to make letter-sound correspondences while helping children read a word, providing verbal prompts to encourage children to answer comprehension questions, or providing timed oral reading practice (Condition 1). Children's accuracy rates improved as assessed by running records. All children made sufficient progress in fluency as assessed by DRA and DIBELS (Condition 2).

As children progressed through a task, the graduate students used a variety of scaffolds to accommodate children's different levels of knowledge (Dennen, 2004). Ninety-eight percent of graduate students said that their teaching style provided the incentive for children to take a more active role in their own learning. Children shared the responsibility of teaching and learning through scaffolds that required them to move beyond their current skill and knowledge levels (Condition 3).   Ninety-eight percent of graduate students said that they implemented instructional scaffolding to promote learning through dialogue, feedback, and shared responsibility.

The instructor/researcher's feedback had a positive impact on graduate students' tutoring and learning. Although convictions about the usefulness of the multiple literacy strategies and other personal motivation provided the springboard for experimentation, it became evident from the analysis of conversations and reflections that the researcher's feedback was essential to foster the development of the graduate students' ability to innovate in their teaching approach (McCormick & Zutell, 2015). Ninety-eight percent of the graduate students revealed that they became more confident to implement targeted programs and strategies that addressed specific needs of the striving readers and to help children achieve desired reading achievement goals within a month.

Limitations and Future Research

The generalizability of the results of this study is limited due to the small number of participants. A study with a large sample would allow more valid conclusions about the prevention strategies necessary to support striving readers. In addition, the tutoring program was conducted in one-on-one sessions with K-5 children. Additional research is needed to determine if these tutoring strategies would be appropriate with small groups of struggling readers. Finally, the study was conducted with graduate students who were in-service teachers. Additional research needs to be done with aspiring teachers to ensure that tutoring by graduate students results in meaningful benefits to striving readers.

Conclusion

The data from post-tests and graduate student reflections revealed that 100% of the children made substantial gains in their instructional reading levels and that graduate students' experience and training affected the growth in reading skills in a relatively short period of time. It is hoped that the findings from this study can be used as an impetus for leaders in school districts and university teacher preparation programs to establish related tutoring literacy programs in an effort to address our nation's need to improve the literacy rates of striving readers early in their education.

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