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The Role of the Teacher in Moving Students from Below Grade Level to Grade Level

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to research some of the challenges that teachers face when teaching students who are reading below grade level. The study involved third grade students at Southwest Laurens Elementary School in Laurens County, Georgia. The study revealed that through the intense use of some basic reading strategies that students’ fluency, reading comprehension, and reading levels increased more than basic sight word recognition. The study recommends that teachers continue to spend time each day allowing students to read aloud individually to the teacher. The study further recommends that since it is difficult for one teacher to have time for all students to read to him/her each day, the teacher should solicit the help of volunteers for this daily reading time.

CONTEXT

I am currently a third grade teacher at Southwest Laurens Elementary School in Rentz, Georgia. This is my ninth year teaching third grade, my twelfth year teaching, and my twenty-fifth year with the Laurens County School system. Prior to becoming a teacher, I worked as a Social Worker with a federally funded preschool program. I obtained my teaching certification in 1995 and my masters in Early Childhood Education in 1996. I have taught all twelve years at Southwest Laurens Elementary School (SWLE) and have taught pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, second and third grades. I was selected as the 2006 Teacher of the Year for Southwest Laurens Elementary School and serve as grade chair for third grade, a position I have held for three years.

There are nine third grade classes at SWLE. The students are homogeneously grouped by ability based on Criterion Referenced Competency Testing scores and teacher recommendation. Two of these nine classes are identified as Early Intervention Program classes. The students in these classes function below grade level and have been identified as students at risk to fail third grade. I teach one of these classes.
My research was conducted at SWLE. The school serves a large rural population, including three small towns. Our community can be described as a working poor community. The school serves students pre-kindergarten through fifth grade with a student population of 1,079. Because the school has such a high eligibility rate for free and reduced lunches, all students receive free lunch and free breakfast each day. SWLE is a SACS accredited school and a Title 1 School.

The research was conducted in my third grade EIP classroom. There are nine students in this class, six boys and three girls. There are two African American students and seven Caucasian students. A paraprofessional assists my students and me for one and a half hours each day. Three students receive additional support services from the Title 1 reading and math teacher. The implementation of the research project extended over a five-week period in the fall of 2007.

My passion has always been to help children become life-long readers. To become life-long readers, children must be able to read with proficiency. I believe the love of reading and the enjoyment of reading bring a wealth of knowledge and experiences to the reader. The ability to read proficiently seems to be the very basis of an educated and knowledgeable community and society. It is my goal that all my students will attain this level of competency and be able to be productive citizens who make a difference in their world. With this desire, I approached my research as I do my teaching: with a yearning for the students to begin this educational, and hopefully life-long, journey through books. At first, I had some specific hunches about why these students could not read at grade level. I decided to expand these feelings into a broader range of ideas. These thoughts, along with my years of experience teaching third grade, helped me to focus on some of the challenges that teachers face when teaching students who do not read at grade level. Some of these challenges include children not being able to read fluently, not understanding what they read, and reading below grade level. Working with these ideas and ideals, I began my action research.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

This research project looks at the role of the teacher in moving students from below grade level to grade level in reading, thereby enabling the students to become proficient readers. This research addresses three sub-problems: students reading without understanding, not focusing on fluency, and not recognizing basic sight words. One elimination of the research is that the study will include only third grade students in one remedial class at Southwest Laurens Elementary School in Laurens County, Georgia.
The Role of Teachers in Moving Students to Grade Level

The terms to be defined are fluency, comprehension, proficient, and grade level. Fluency is the ability to read a text accurately and quickly. Comprehension is making meaning of what is written. Proficient refers to competence or ability in reading. Grade level refers to the grade in which the student is placed at a specific age and time.

My assumptions are that third graders can read aloud and silently and can select books independently. This research is important to me because it opens a way for me to improve skills of analysis and understanding. I learned from previous studies what could be done to help below grade level readers become fluent readers. I discovered ways to assist these students in their attempt to become proficient readers. Through analysis and understanding, I gained insight and skills in the area of teaching reading.

Southwest Laurens Elementary School is a rural Title I school. The result of this research will benefit the students and the community by contributing to a better understanding and expanding knowledge of strategies that work for below grade level readers. Because the school has excellent community support, the research will provide active, school-based information to the community. Since reading is a vital part of daily life, the research focuses on assisting third graders in becoming fluent readers. Proficient readers potentially offer benefits to the community.

I believe that reading is an important life skill and is an essential part of being an educated person. This research project brings into focus the problem of third grade students reading below grade level. Since third graders are required to pass the reading part of the Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) in order to be promoted to fourth grade, this research project promotes fluency and understanding in reading. Further more, I believe that since reading is necessary for a successful and productive life, this research project not only benefits students, but also teachers and the community.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teachers today face increasing challenges to ensure their students achieve high levels of literacy. These demands and challenges are at times overpowering, but the teacher must persevere to help students learn to read and learn to love to read. Learning to read has many challenges. These challenges include, but are not limited to, the following: students must know letter sounds, be able to put these sounds together to make words, be able to read a list of sight words, read with fluency, and comprehend what they read (Wilber, 2000). All of these skills help to make students into proficient readers, which is both a goal and a challenge for the teacher. However, the challenges compound because students have such diverse backgrounds and often enter
the classroom reading far below grade level (Raphael, 2005). With my years of experience, I certainly agree with these statements and challenges about the phenomena of teaching reading, especially as they relate to the students reading below grade level.

One of the challenges facing teachers is that students are unable to read fluently. The National Reading Panel (NPR, 2000) concluded that fluency, defined in terms of speed, accuracy, and proper expression, is a critical part of proficient reading (Hiebert, 2005). LaBerge and Samuels (Hiebert, 2005) described the construct of fluency as a foundation of proficient, fluent reading. Automaticity, they suggested, was the point at which decoding processes do not require conscious attention. LaBerge and Samuels argue that when readers devote considerable attention to identifying the words, their comprehension suffers (Hiebert, 2005). I agree with LaBerge and Samuels in that I have seen evidence to support their views within my own classroom. Some students struggle to read with ease and confidence because they have difficulty pronouncing and recognizing certain words. As stated above, when students devote considerable attention to identifying individual words, the meaning of the sentence being read is lost.

Wilber (2000) defines fluency as reading smoothly with expression at the same speed that your child talks, not just calling words quickly. A fluent reader reads in phrases allowing his brain to retain much more information. A non-fluent reader spends extra energy decoding words (Wilber, 2000, p.6). The non-fluent reader also reads in word fragments without retaining meaning (Wilber, 2000, p.30). I have seen this many times in my classroom. Just this year I had a student who could “read,” calling words so quickly that I could hardly keep up, without being able to explain one thing about what he had just read. Wilber (2000) adds that it is important that students recognize sight words quickly in order to promote fluency (Wilber, 2000, p.140). Another student struggled over simple sight words and then had to reread to get the meaning correct. She worked without giving up, but great effort was required.

In McCormick (2003), Clay reported in his study that good readers in the first grade read about 20,000 words while poor readers read only 5,000 (p.222). This is an astounding difference, yet one that I see as plausible. I feel that once students begin to lag behind it is difficult for them to catch up. Brabham (2002) states that gaps in vocabulary increase to about 5,000 words by third grade.

Though I do not have exact numbers, over the years in various classes that I have taught, I have seen similar differences in students’ abilities to recognize and call words. Reading without automatic recognition of certain vocabulary can become laborious (McCormick, 2003, p.223). I agree that reading without word recognition can be arduous but have often wondered if it is more laborious for the student or the teacher. So often students are pleased to have
assistance calling the word and want to continue to read or attempt to read. In past years, my low level readers loved reading an old first grade reader and often said, “Mrs. Beck, this is such a good book. I love it.” Why? Because they could read it.

Students will not become proficient readers unless they master a basic sight vocabulary. According to Johns (1986), students who know the 220 words on the Dolch List will be able to pronounce over 50% of the words in all reading materials. This certainly seems to support the importance of students knowing and recognizing all basic sight words. The average child needs between four to fourteen exposures to learn a new fact. Others need more than twenty exposures (Wilber, 2000, p.15). Wilbur (2000) gives repetition, repeating, and reinforcement the credit that I feel the methods deserve. Children must have repeated exposure to the words, in order to be able to recognize them. I feel this is especially true for a student who is reading below grade level.

Throughout kindergarten through third grade, students learn to read. Teachers provide reading instruction, reading materials, and reading practice. Fourth graders are expected to read to learn and these students will be expected to learn new information by reading independently (Wilber, 2000, p.8). Even though I agree with these thoughts, here lies a major challenge for teachers: to get students to this point of reading by the fourth grade.

In order for students to be able to learn by reading, they must be able to comprehend what they are reading. Comprehension is a goal of reading, and if that goal is to be realized, the student must have vocabulary knowledge (Johns, 2000). I believe that students should not only have vocabulary knowledge but also have time for reading in order to improve comprehension. The amount of contextual reading and the number of opportunities for response are important to word recognition growth (McCormick, 2003, p.222). Adding to what McMormick stated, I feel that the more time students spend with and in books, the more their word recognition improves, and thus their comprehension levels and abilities increase.

There is an unprecedented emphasis in the United States on improving the teaching of reading in elementary classrooms, increasing the pressure for improvement with the Reading First provisions of the Title I No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Taylor, 2003). The improvement of U.S. students’ reading achievement is a national goal (Bush, 2001; Taylor, 2003). As a teacher, I feel the challenge to help improve students’ reading abilities. Three-fourths of children with reading difficulties in third grade will be poor readers in high school (Wilber, 2000, p.xiv). As a third grade teacher, I find this tremendously disappointing, but I can see the truth in it if nothing is done to improve reading skills. A research study found that the reading skills of third graders
can be significantly improved through instruction in word-level skills and their word reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension improved (Torgesen, J., et al. 2005). Wilber (2000) adds that 90 - 95% of third grade students who receive proper intervention become able to read at grade level (p.xiv). Herein lies encouragement and the basis for my research project: the role of the teacher in moving students from below grade level to grade level in reading, thereby helping them to become proficient readers. My feelings on teaching reading are best summarized in a quote by Celia Rudolph (1990), “Reading experiences should be pleasurable and beneficial.”

**METHODOLOGY**

With a goal of helping students to be able to read on grade level, I planned to begin with pretests, then complete the four to five weeks of intense intervention strategies, and conclude with posttests. I chose to give the students tests in the areas of sight words, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. It took several days to complete the pretests because of the length of the tests and the different kinds of tests. I felt that it was best to complete the pretests over a longer period of time so that students would not be overly tired from the testing and would give more accurate results. I felt that the range of testing would be beneficial to my research, as it would give a broader perspective on particular areas of strengths and weaknesses for each student. Since these tests were objective tests with little room for human error, I felt that they would enhance the validity of my research.

I began by having each student read the DOLCH word list, which consists of 226 sight words, to me and recorded his/her score. Then students were given the Standardized Test for Assessment of Reading (STAR), a computer based test with results ranging from grade equivalent scores to independent reading levels (Paul, 1996). Students were given a third grade placement test reading comprehension test and a fluency test (Pearson, 2004). All tests were scored and the results were placed in a portfolio.

The methods of intervention used were varied and intense. Students were drilled daily on all 226 DOLCH sight words. This was done with the use of sight word flash cards. Speed and accuracy were emphasized. These daily drills took place in small groups with only three students per group. A second intervention was the use of daily sight word readers. The students selected three sight word readers to read independently to the teacher each day. These readers were black and white and used sight words repeatedly. The little books used only high frequency sight words (Flora, 2005). A third strategy that was employed was students read orally from a third grade level reader each day. This reading was also done in a small group with three students.
The Role of Teachers in Moving Students to Grade Level

These reading strategies were in addition to the daily use of a basal reader and twenty minutes of Accelerated Reader time each.

RESULTS

In my research, I was surprised to find that sight word recognition changed very little. My pretest results showed that no student could recognize all 226 DOLCH sight words; neither could they at the end of the study. There was a slight increase on average of one to three words. One student decreased greatly which can be seen in the submitted two charts. One chart includes this student’s score and the other excludes this student’s score. I did this to better reflect the class as a whole because I felt that perhaps this student might have had a bad testing day. The sight word results show a slight percentage gain of .29%. These results are shown in Figures 1 and 2, found in the Appendix and Figures section.

The fluency test, which is a part of our Harcourt reading series, gives a target rate of 120 words per minute for third graders. The pre- and posttest results for fluency amazed me. All students showed improvement. The range of improvement was from 30 words per minute to 82 words per minute, with no child reaching the target rate of 120 words per minute. The bar chart, Figure 3, shows the individual pre- and posttest scores, and the line chart, Figure 4, depicts the comparison of the pre- and posttests for the entire class. Fluency showed an overall increase of 45.83%.

Comprehension test scores showed an increase of 21% based on a test with twenty questions. The average score for the pretest was 8.8 correct and the posttest average score was 12 correct. One student exhibited no change or improvement while all other students demonstrated some improvement. These results are displayed in Figure 5.

The final test that was administered to students in pre- and posttest form was the STAR (Standardized Test for the Assessment of Reading). This test is normally used in the classroom to access and establish Accelerated Reader reading levels. The results of this test (illustrated in Figure 6) showed a minimum growth of four months, a maximum gain of two years, with one student remaining the same. Overall, the class average improved by 0.5.

CONCLUSION

The results suggest that intense intervention strategies can make a difference in helping students to reach the goal of reading on grade level. I observed that the students seemed to enjoy this concentrated assistance and looked forward to this extra one-on-one time with the teacher. I was surprised
to learn that students did not see any stigma attached to reading the little black and white low level readers. They seemed to enjoy reading them and could read them fluently. The children loved reading these little books over and over because they could read them quickly and correctly and fluently. It seems that the classroom teacher might easily overlook such a simple thing.

The increase in the fluency test truly amazed me. I expected to see a small increase but not the nearly 37 percent that I found. An interesting indication seems that fluency increased when students were able to read orally at least twice per day. This indicates that the more the child reads aloud, the better his/her fluency will become. The final test results from the STAR test was equally surprising. I felt that there would be a minimum increase, but I did not expect one child’s reading level to increase by two years. From this table, it is clear that an increasing pattern is evident. The pattern indicates that students were able to read fluently and with understanding even though they were sitting at a computer reading silently. I did observe that some students were moving their lips and some had to be prompted to whisper if they were reading aloud. However, each student read and read with accuracy.

Plan of Action

I feel that to move forward, we as teachers should always be aware of the importance of our one-on-one time with each student. I further feel that each teacher should not limit students by the teacher’s own thoughts and preconceptions about the ease or difficulty of materials presented to students. Since the results were so positive, I plan to continue some of the methods employed during this research project for the remainder of the year with the hope and desire that my student will be reading on grade level by the end of the year.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Even though I fully expected to see progress from this action research, I did not expect to see the gains in fluency and comprehension that I found. I realize that I work in a wonderful school setting and work with dedicated, knowledgeable teachers; however, this research has helped me to see that it is easy to overlook some basic strategies for helping students to become fluent readers. This research project caused me to examine my own methods of teaching and how much individual time that I daily dedicate to each child.

I recommend that each teacher find the time to allow each student to read aloud to him/her every day. Through my research I have discovered that this time is priceless and the results will be astounding. I further recommend that teachers solicit the help of volunteers to enable the teacher to have time for
The Role of Teachers in Moving Students to Grade Level

this one-on-one reading with the student. I feel that there are grandparents, retired persons, and even young people who have the time to give to schools and would be willing to assist in the effort to bring these students up to grade level in their reading. The students need someone to listen to them read every day. My final recommendation is that teachers keep the vision for each student.
READER}

DIRECTIONS
Read each selection and answer the questions that follow. Fill in the circle beside the best answer to each question.

At the Museum

One Saturday afternoon, Keitha Robbins and her mother went to a big museum. They saw dinosaurs and glass flowers and stuffed birds and many other wonderful things. At three o’clock they decided to have a cold drink. When Keitha turned around, she suddenly could not find her mother. The museum was very crowded. Keitha was frightened, and she knew her mother would be worried too. Keitha wanted to find her mother as quickly as she could.

Keitha found a map next to the stairs. The map showed all the rooms in the museum, and it showed where the offices were. Keitha walked through room after room until she found the office. Keitha told the man in the office that she had lost her mother. The man smiled. He said, “That’s funny. We have a mother here who has lost her daughter.”

When Keitha looked up, she was so happy she wanted to cry.

Farm Families

Farmers and their families work hard because there are many jobs to do on a farm. In the spring, everyone helps plant seeds for corn, beans, squash, and grain. The family harvests the vegetables and cuts the grain when the plants are ready. Most of the vegetables are sold, but the family keeps some to eat. Most of the grain is used to feed the farm animals.

Cows, horses, sheep, and pigs live in the barn. The farm family must keep the barn clean so that the animals stay healthy. The pigs like it best outside the barn where they can roll in the mud to stay cool.

Chickens have their own building called a chicken coop, and each chicken has its own nest. Getting the eggs from the nests is a job for the farmer’s children. They have to collect the eggs carefully, though. The family can’t eat or sell broken eggs.

What Did Columbus Really See?

About five hundred years ago, Christopher Columbus wrote in his ship’s log that he saw three mermaids. A mermaid is an imaginary creature. Many old stories say that a mermaid is half woman and half fish. Mermaids are also quite beautiful. No one has ever proved that mermaids are real, but many people have seen real sea animals called manatees.

A manatee has a large tail, and it looks very different from what a mermaid is said to look like. Unlike a mermaid, a manatee does not have a woman’s head, neck, back, and arms. A manatee has flippers instead of arms and looks a bit like a large gray seal.

From far off, though, a manatee might look like the imaginary mermaid in some ways. Like the mermaids in the stories, manatees come to the surface of the water to breathe. They also splash the water with their tails. With its flippers, a manatee mother rocks a pup in the water the same way a mermaid might rock her baby.

What do you think? Did Columbus actually see manatees and think they were mermaids?

Anansi and the Hen

Long ago, there was a queen named Five who had magical powers. The queen did not like her name, so she decided that anyone who said “five” would be changed into a bug.

When Anansi the spider heard what the queen said, he thought of a clever plan. First, he made five piles of yams. Then, whenever an animal came by, he would say, “I can’t count very well. Could you tell me how many piles of yams I have made?”

The animal would count the piles: “One, two, three, four, five.” When the animal said “five,” it would turn into a bug, and we all know what spiders do with bugs.

Anansi lived quite well in this way for some time, until one day a hen came by.

“Excuse me, Hen,” said Anansi, “I can’t count very well. Could you tell me how many piles of yams I have made?”

“How can you not count?” said Hen, as she sat down on one of the piles. Then she counted: “One, two, three, four, five.”

Anansi turned into a tiny red bug, and the hen laughed all the way home.
The Role of Teachers in Moving Students to Grade Level

Appendix 2: Reading Comprehension Test

1. Where does this story take place?  
   a. in a park  
   b. at a zoo  
   c. in a museum  
   d. at school

2. How did Krishna feel when she lost her mother?  
   a. angry  
   b. pleased  
   c. glad  
   d. afraid

3. Krishna looked at the map to —  
   a. find her way to the office  
   b. see what room she was in  
   c. find out where her mother was  
   d. see where the dinosaurs were

4. Why did the man in the office say, "That’s funny"?  
   a. Krishna had a funny look on her face.  
   b. Krishna’s mother was already there.  
   c. He did not think anyone could be lost.  
   d. He thought Krishna was joking.

5. The next time Krishna and her mom go to a museum, they probably will —  
   a. read the map first.  
   b. go straight to the office.  
   c. stay together better.  
   d. meet by the glass flowers.

16. Which sentence gives an opinion?  
   a. "About five hundred years ago, Christopher Columbus wrote in his ship’s log."  
   b. "Mermaids are quite beautiful."  
   c. "A mermaid has flippers instead of arms."  
   d. "Manatees come to the surface of the water to breathe."  

17. The author of this selection organizes information mainly by —  
   a. telling events in the order they happened.  
   b. giving causes and effects.  
   c. giving problems and solutions.  
   d. comparing and contrasting.

18. According to this selection, how are manatees like mermaids?  
   a. They come to the surface to breathe.  
   b. They look like seals.  
   c. They are half woman and half fish.  
   d. They have flippers.

19. The author of this selection most likely thinks that —  
   a. mermaids are very shy.  
   b. Columbus was mistaken.  
   c. manatees are very beautiful.  
   d. Columbus really saw mermaids.

20. You can tell from this selection that —  
   a. manatees are imaginary creatures.  
   b. Columbus did not write in a ship’s log.  
   c. mermaids are not real.  
   d. manatees do not have babies.

14. Which part of this story could not really happen?  
   a. A hero sees a spider.  
   b. A spider talks to a hero.  
   c. A queen does not like her name.  
   d. A spider finds a yarn.

15. What lesson does this story teach?  
   a. Good things come to those who wait.  
   b. You should save your money for a rainy day.  
   c. You must work hard to be successful.  
   d. You get what you deserve.
Appendix 3: Fluency Test

Reading Fluency

A Wolf's Howl

The sound of a wolf's howl is frightening to some people. Why do wolves howl? The reason has nothing to do with people.

Wolves live with other wolves in packs, which means they are social animals. Because wolves are hunters they need a large area of land to hunt enough food for the pack to eat. One of the ways a pack claims its territory and keeps other packs away is by howling. Usually, all the members of the pack join in. This lets other wolf packs know that a territory has been claimed and that they had better stay away. A howl can be so loud that it can be heard as far as six miles away.

Sometimes a wolf pack will howl back in response. It is a way to announce where they are and avoid meeting their neighbors. It is more common for a pack to not respond. That is because a pack occasionally will attack another pack. By keeping silent, a pack can avoid danger and slip away safely. However, sometimes a pack may choose to stand its ground and not move on. The pack may not want to abandon young pups or move away from freshly killed prey.

The Stray Cat

Every night for a week, Quinn spotted a stray cat just outside his bedroom window. At breakfast the next day, Quinn asked his dad if he could catch the cat and keep it as a pet.

Quinn’s dad shook his head and said, “You know we can’t keep a pet. Maybe some day, but not right now. But I will help you catch it and take it to the animal shelter.”

This was not the answer that Quinn wanted to hear, but that Saturday they went to the shelter and borrowed a safe trap. They put some smelly tuna in the trap, and the trap worked like a charm.

The ride back to the shelter was a sad one for Quinn. While a shelter worker took the cat and Quinn’s dad filled out some papers, another worker asked Quinn his name and tried to cheer him up.

A week later, Quinn was still worried about the cat. He asked his dad to call the shelter and find out what happened.

“Guess who?” his dad said as he put down the phone. “The cat has a home. And the shelter staff helped nome him. That lucky cat is now called Quinn.”
The Role of Teachers in Moving Students to Grade Level

Figure 1: Adjusted Sight Words

![Adjusted Sight Words](image)

Figure 2: Sight Words

![Sight Words](image)
Figure 3: Words Per Minute (Bar Graph)

Figure 4: Words Per Minute (Line Chart)
The Role of Teachers in Moving Students to Grade Level

Figure 5: Comprehension Percent Correct

![Comprehension Percent Correct Chart]

Figure 6: Independent Reading Levels

![Independent Reading Level Chart]
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The Role of Teachers in Moving Students to Grade Level
