

THE EFFECTS OF READER'S THEATER ON FLUENCY OF ELEMENTARY STUDENTS
WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

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Abstract

Fluency is an important part of reading and comprehension. This study examined the use of reader's theater as an intervention to increase fluency. Students' oral reading fluency was measured using the Dynamic Indicators of Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), specifically using the progress monitoring passages. The results showed a possible relationship between the use of readers' theater in the classroom and an increase in students' oral reading fluency.

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Why is fluency so important? Fluency is “a bridge between word identification and comprehension” (Bashir & Hook, 2009, p. 196). Comprehension is the end goal for every reader. Why would a person read if they gained nothing from the experience? Students are generally fluent readers by the third grade (Martinez, Roser, & Stricker, 1999). Not all students will attain fluency on their own and will need some form of explicit instruction as fluency is an important part for successful reading (Worthy & Broaddus, 2002). In today's context of high stakes testing, students are expected to read and comprehend on grade level. The reality is that not all students will be able to meet this objective and it is the teachers' job to help students in reaching this goal.

Review of Literature

Defining Fluency

According to Meyer and Felton (1999), fluency can be defined as “the ability to read connected text rapidly, smoothly, effortlessly, and automatically with little conscious attention to the mechanics of reading, such as word decoding (p. 284). Others focus on accuracy and prosody when discussing fluency. Rasinski and Young (2009) define accuracy as word recognition, and pronouncing words correctly. Prosody is the ability to read with correct expression and phrasing. Most agree that when a student is able to read fluently, they are able to use their cognitive abilities to focus on the meanings of the words and phrases. Students that are slow, pause frequently, and try to sound out words are working so hard to decode the words on the page, that they lose the meaning behind the words. Researchers agree (Bashir & Hook, 2009; Rasinski, 2002; Tyler & Chard, 2000; Young & Rasinski, 2009) that fluency and comprehension are linked. However, there is disagreement whether fluency produces gains in

comprehension, or if improved comprehension leads to greater fluency. A connection is seen between students who read with good oral expression and good comprehension, and reversely, those who read with little or no oral expression, who are more likely to have poor comprehension (Rasinski & Young, 2009).

One of the most common reading problems are experienced by students whose reading is slow, disfluent, or inefficient. Rasinski (2002) states, "slow reading is associated with poor comprehension and poor overall reading performance" (p. 92). Most people would agree that if one is a good reader, he/she is more likely to read more frequently, while those who struggle with reading, avoid doing so whenever possible. Some may argue that even though a student might be a slower reader, he/she can still comprehend what he/she are reading. This may be true in early elementary ages, but as students move into middle school and higher grades, Rasinski (2002) points out that lengthier and more complex material is given to students to read and understand. Students with a slower reading rate frequently have a hard time keeping up with their peers which can likely cause frustration, and they may fall behind. Taking this point into consideration, reading rate, (i.e., the speed at which words are read correctly), does matter, especially as students get older.

One evidenced-based strategy to help students increase fluency is repeated reading. A strategy introduced by Jay Samuels in the 1970s. Samuels brought fluency to the attention of many in the education and reading fields with his 1979 article entitled "The Method of Repeated Reading" which was republished in 1997. Samuels (1997) described the process of repeated reading as, "rereading a short, meaningful passage several times until a satisfactory level of fluency is reached"(p. 377). Several researchers have reported that repeated reading increases

students' fluency, word recognition, and self-confidence (Chard, Vaughn, & Tyler, 2002; Mercer, et al., 2000; Rasinski & Young, 2009).

Reader's Theater

One form of repeated reading that helps students remain motivated is reader's theater. According to Trainin and Andrzejczak (2006), reader's theater has three benefits. The first is motivation is students enjoy performing and want to do a good job. The second is that reader's theater provides meaningful text to the students which Samuels' requirement (1979/1997) that the text needs to be meaningful to students. The third benefit of reader's theater is that it focuses on prosody, which is the use of expression and tone when reading.

Tyler and Chard (2000) note that the use of reader's theater naturally lends itself to the strategy of repeated reading, a strategy with demonstrated effectiveness. Reader's theater not only provides a purpose for repeated reading, it allows students to read age and content appropriate material (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 2002). Reader's theater is different from other performance types in that the players do not have to memorize their lines or act out the parts they are playing (Corcoran & Davis, 2005 ; Worthy & Prater, 2002). Instead students are asked to use their voices to bring the characters to life and use expression to tell the story (Corcoran & Davis, 2005; Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 2002; Worthy & Prater, 2002). Teachers have reported that using reader's theater is one of the most motivating and effective reading strategies used in the classroom (Worthy & Prater, 2002). Reader's theater also gives teachers a "vehicle for direct explanation, feedback, and effective modeling" (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 2002, p. 104).

Curriculum Based Measurement (CBM)

Curriculum-based measurement (CBM) is one method to systematically monitor student growth in academic areas, and to determine how instruction affects that growth. CBM was developed by Stanley Deno, at the University of Minnesota in the mid 1970s. The purpose “was to develop measurement and evaluation procedures that teachers could use routinely to make decisions about whether and when to modify a student’s instructional program” (Deno, 1985). When designing these measures, Deno decided these measures must have four characteristics. He proposed all measures must be reliable and valid in order to be used to make instructional changes. Next, the measures must be simple and efficient. If teachers are going to use a tool, it needs to be easy and fast. Third, the results must be easily understood. Specifically, he stated, “In special education, the need for clear and effective communication of student performance is extremely important because of the critical nature of decisions being made about our students” (Deno, 1985, p. 224). Finally, the measure has to be inexpensive. Even though these components were thought to be important in the 1970s, they are even more important today as schools are forced to cut budgets and teachers are made to do more with less.

Curriculum-based measurement data is gathered through a series of probes. Probes are short assessments given to students that generally only take one to three minutes to administer, and are easy to evaluate. Probes can be given in reading, math, and spelling and written expression. A baseline is established and an end goal is determined. The data is then put into a graph showing the baseline data for the student, as well as the end goal. The line between the baseline to the end goal is called the aim line which is used to determine whether a change is needed in the child’s instruction. If the probes demonstrate that a student is achieving above the

aim line several times, the student may need a higher end goal. However, if the student achieves below the aim line, the instruction may need to be changed.

Curriculum-based measurement data has a variety of purposes. One major use is for progress monitoring. Frequently, teachers use CBM probes to measure how students are doing. The information gathered is used to make instructional decisions based on where the data is plotted along the aim line as described above. CBM data can also be used for screening students who might be at risk. Local norms can be established by testing the rest of the class, and a comparison can be made between the at-risk student and the local norms.

In the Individuals with Disabilities Act 2004(IDEA), response to intervention (RTI) was written into the law. RTI is an integration of assessment and instructional intervention designed to help teachers and students. Teachers design an intervention and then track students' success or failures for that intervention. This information can often be used in helping to determine whether a student needs to be tested. Curriculum-based measurement is a tool teacher's can use to track a student's progress. Cusumano (2007) reported that, "The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) and the Individuals with Disability Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) have further shaped educational goals with requirements that students' academic experiences be enriched with high quality and research-based instructional strategies"(p. 24). As a result, many schools are using CBM as an intervention and data collection to help make a determination about special education services.

If a student is already receiving special education services, CBM data can be used to support IEP goals. By establishing a baseline and an end goal, the end goal becomes the IEP goal. "By including criteria for success, the professionals and family know exactly when the

objective has been met” (Jung, Gomez, & Keramidas, 2008, p. 29). The IEP goal is then clearly written based on the student’s present levels of performance, with a clear, measurable goal at the end. Another purpose for CBM data is to communicate with parents. The graphs representing CBM data provide an easy-to-read visual for parents to see where their child started, and their current standing versus the goal set for the end of the year.

Deno (1985) has shown that teachers generally rely on their own observations and interactions with students to determine whether a student has met an objective or not. This same study demonstrated that teachers often give students credit for meeting objectives when they really have not. “The overall discrepancy between actual student performance and teacher judgments of student performance proved to be statistically significant” (Deno, p. 220). However, the reliability and validity of teacher observations is not known, and is likely not very strong. Curriculum based measurement provides teachers with concrete, reliable, and valid information to make data-based decisions. The use of CBM allows teachers to track students’ learning throughout the year. As stated before, this is also very useful for parent communication. It has also been noted that, “students who are aware of their own CBM data, appear to be more knowledgeable of their own learning” (Hosp & Hosp, 2003, p. 16).

Additionally, CBM can be used to measure a student’s oral reading fluency (ORF). Oral reading fluency is the “combination of accuracy and rate” (Hasbrouck & Tindal, 1992). This measurement is made by giving students a passage they have not previously read, and asking them to read for one minute. The teacher then counts the number of words read correctly, which provides a measure of ORF or words correct per minute (WCPM). This measurement can be taken and graphed to show a child’s growth in fluency.

Measuring Fluency

One of the widely available assessment tools is the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). This tool edited by Good & Kaminski (2002), includes probes that can be used with preschool-aged children and higher. Most schools that use DIBELS are using it at the early elementary level. Some of the different probes include Letter Name Fluency, Phoneme Segmentation Fluency, and Oral Reading Fluency. The Oral Reading Fluency is the section of probes that were used in the present study. The ORF probes have been based on the CBM work done by Deno and associates (Good & Kaminski, 2002).

Research has been done to evaluate the validity, reliability, and the predictive quality of the ORF probes of the DIBELS (Goffreda, Diperna, & Pedersen, 2009; Hagans, 2008; Roehrig et al., 2008). Roehrig et al. (2008) studied DIBELS' ability to predict the Florida third grade state comprehension test and the Stanford Achievement Test. Roehrig and colleagues' study found the ORF scores correlated with the test scores on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test and the Stanford Achievement Test. The authors stated, "DIBELS is related equally to a common measure of reading comprehension used across states as it is to a state-developed measure" (p. 360). Contrary to these studies, Shelton, Atlwerger, and Jordan (2009), conducted a study to determine if ORF scores related to the students' comprehension of "authentic literature" and found that even though some students scored well on the ORF, they were not able to comprehend other literature well.

The literature supports the use of reader's theater and the importance of fluency as part of a reading curriculum. Curriculum-based measurement and DIBELS work together to determine a students' oral reading fluency. The purpose of this study was to look for a relationship

between the use of reader's theater and students' oral reading fluency. Specifically, the question addressed by this research was, does the use of reader's theater effect a student's oral reading fluency score as measured by DIBELS?

Method

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of the use of reader's theater in the classroom and students' oral reading fluency (ORF) scores. The hypothesis was that students' overall ORF scores would increase with the use of reader's theater. Each week, the students performed a reader's theater with an assigned part. Daily, the students were given time to review their part, ask for clarification of words they did not know, and help with phrasing or intonation. The class would then read through the reader's theater giving students the opportunity to practice with the rest of the class reading aloud. On Friday of each week, the students would be given time to review their parts again, and the reader's theater would be performed by the class.

Participants

This study was conducted in a third and fourth grade resource room in a rural elementary school. The participants were 10 students with learning disabilities, three of whom were third graders and seven were fourth graders. All participants had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for reading and were reading at least one grade level below current placement. Consent was give by the parents and the students to participate in this study.

The first three students were enrolled in third grade. Student A was a third grade male reading at the end of kindergarten to beginning first grade level. He struggled with sight work knowledge and wanted to sound out every word that was unknown. Student B was a third grade female reading at an end of second grade level. She read with short pauses and some emotion.

Student C was a third grade male reading at the second grade level. He spoke very softly and was a speech student at one time. His speech was sometimes cluttered, combining words together into one word.

Students D through J were fourth graders. Student D was a female reading on a second to third grade level. She struggled with some high frequency words and often left endings off words while reading. Student E was a male reading on the third grade level. He read quickly, but with no expression or phrasing. Student F was a male reading close to grade level. He was a new student to this group and had previously been in a regular education room before being moved. Student F read with some expression and phrasing and overall was a good fluent reader. Student G was a male reading on a second grade level. He struggled with sight words and often wanted to sound out unknown words. Student F was a female reading on the third grade level. She read with expression, but her phrasing was misplaced in the text. Student I was a male reading on a second grade level. He tended to rush through the words leaving off endings. Student I made many errors during his assessments. Student J was male reading at a second to third grade level. He made few errors when reading, tending to self-correct his mistakes. The fourth graders had a wide range of abilities and oral reading fluency scores depict these differences.

Instrument

The instrument used to collect data was the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). The Oral Reading Fluency progress monitoring probes were used. The ORF probes are short passages on a variety of topics. Some are fiction and some are nonfiction. The

probes range in length between two hundred and two hundred sixty words. They are standardized and were given in order.

There are no large-scale norms currently available for ORF (Hasbrouck & Tindal, 1992). Hasbrouck and Tindal (1992) conducted a study and found median scores for ORF for grades two through five. In the study, they found that students in the third grade at the fiftieth percentile would be 114 WCPM. The fiftieth percentile for fourth graders was 118 WCPM.

Procedures

A letter of explanation of the study and consent forms were sent home from school with the students. Students were told about the study and explained that the consent form had to be returned in order to participate. The consent forms were returned to school within a day or two signed by the parents and the students.

The probes were administered by the researcher. All assessments were done individually with students. This study was done in the spring after the state assessment. The assessments were done either in the back of the classroom, or in another room with little distractions. Each assessment was only 3-4 minutes in length per student.

A baseline was determined using the first three probes. The probes were given at the same time, one after another. The student's scores were determined by the words correct per minute (WCPM) for each probe, then all three were averaged. Students were then assessed twice weekly, with one day in between assessments for three weeks. During each assessment, students were asked to read two probes going in order of the DIBELS progress monitoring for Oral Reading Fluency. Each probe was scored for WCPM and the two scores were averaged together. This data was graphed to show the students progress.

Intervention

On Monday, during the group reading time in the morning, students were given a reader's theater with an assigned part. The reader's theater was reviewed indicating the different parts and sections. For example, students explored to find where the different scenes were and the role of the narrator. Students were given approximately five minutes to look over their parts and ask questions concerning unknown words. Next, the students did a read through together, each reading their own parts as assigned.

On Tuesday during group reading time, the same procedure as Monday was followed. After reading through as a group, expression and phrasing were discussed and students practiced reading a few lines with expression. The same procedure was followed on Wednesday and Thursday. On Friday, students got out their reader's theater, were given a few minutes to look over their part again, and then a performance was given. Each day the intervention lasted twenty to thirty minutes.

The consent was given by both parents and students. This study lasted three weeks, with three different reader's theater readings. Students followed the same procedure each week and were assessed twice weekly. The following are the results from the data gathered.

Results

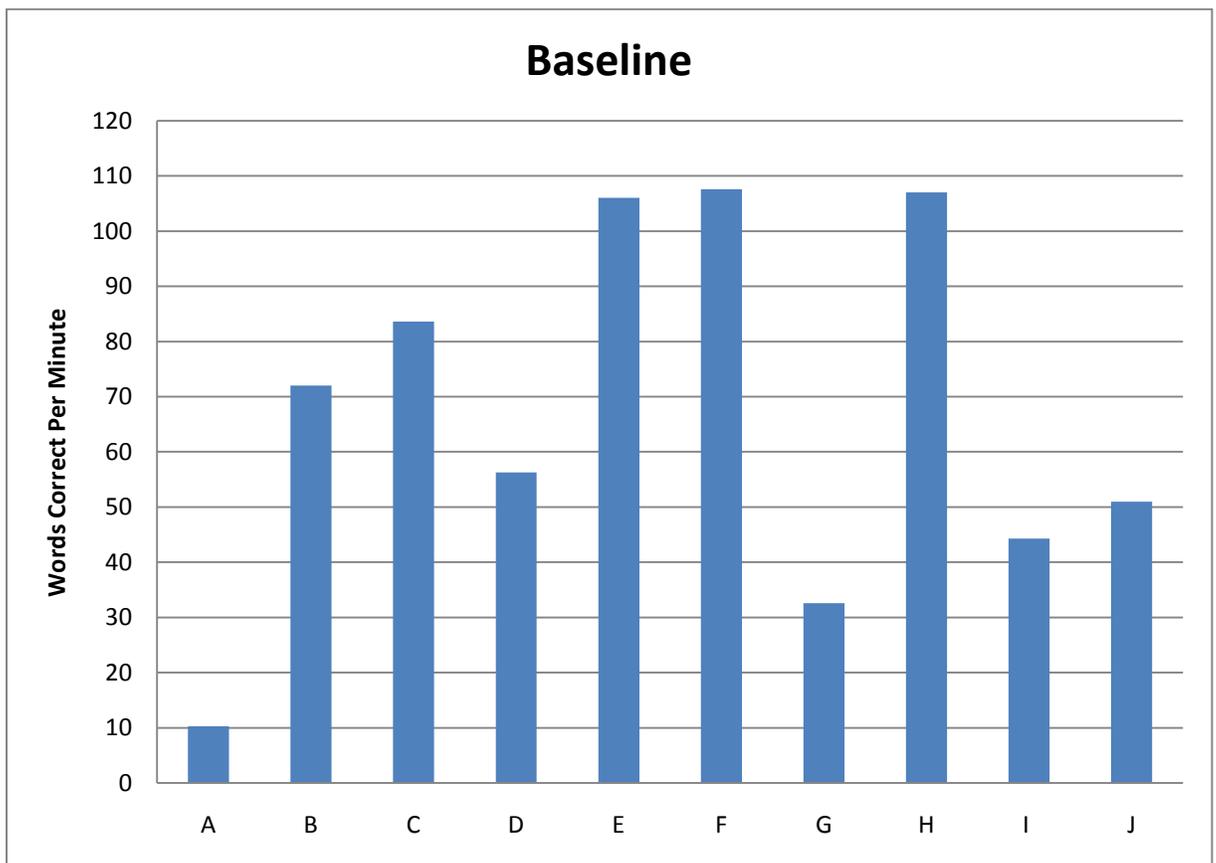
The results of the oral reading fluency data gathered for each student showed a possible relationship between the use of readers' theater in the classroom and students' oral reading

fluency scores as measured by DIBELS. Seven out of the ten students' assessed increased the number of words correct read per minute (WCPM).

Figure one provides a summary of the baseline data for each student. Each letter represents one of the students described in the participants section. The third grade students were letters A, B, and C. The fourth grade students' were letters D through J.

Figure 1

Baseline Fluency for Each Student Based on DIBELS Oral Fluency Probes



All students were above forty words correct per minute (WCPM) with the exception of students G and A. Student A scored the lowest with only ten WCPM. In contrast, Student F scored the highest with one hundred seven WCPM .

Table one shows the students' averaged scores throughout the data collection process.

Table1

Data Collected During the Study, Scores for Each Assessment

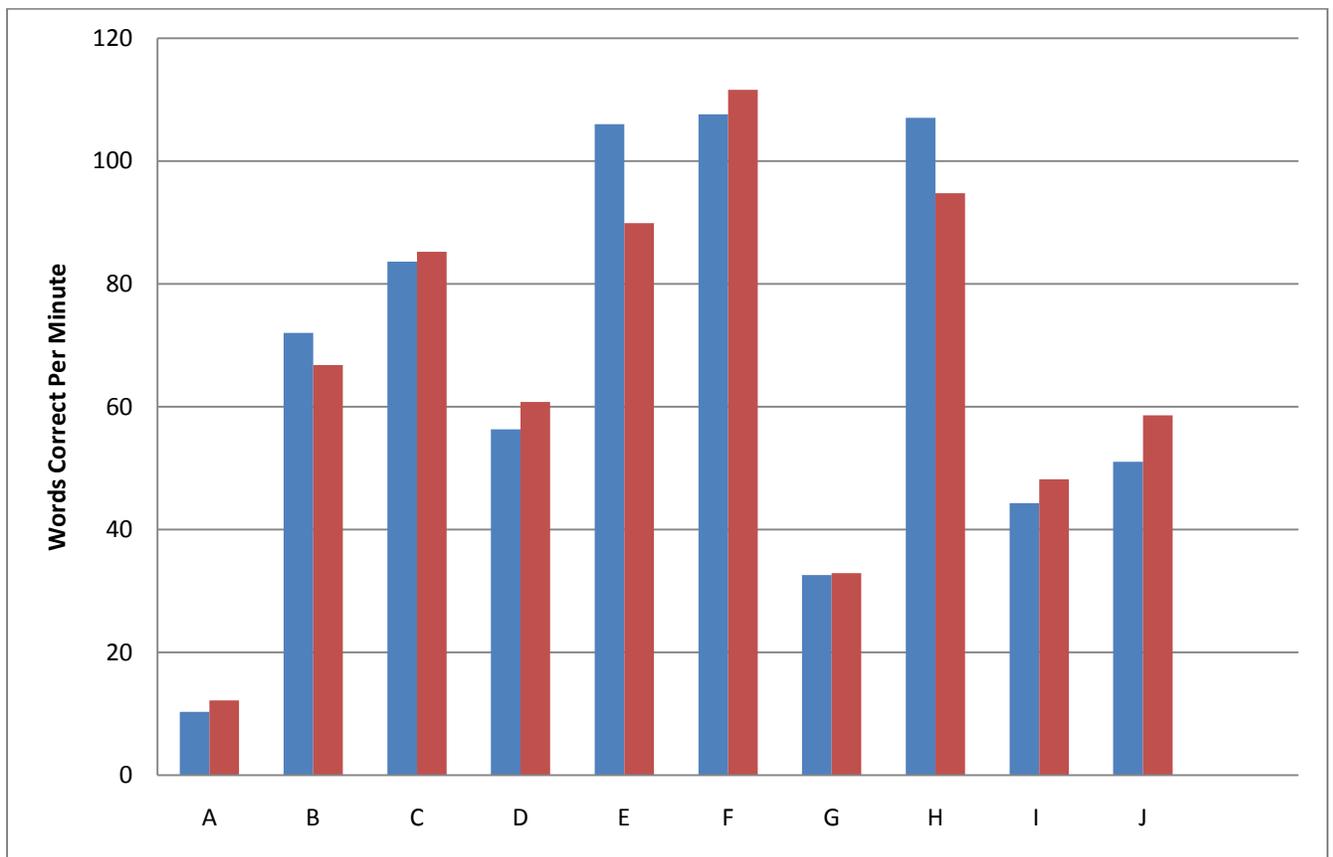
	Baseline	Wk 1-1	Wk 1-2	Wk2-1	Wk 2-2	Wk 3-1	Wk 3-2
A	10.3	15.5	14	11.5	8	11	13
B	72	81.5	72	60.5	46	71	69.5
C	83.6	87.5	92	78.5	77	91	ab
D	56.3	57	72	55	60	52	68.5
E	106	91	ab	77	103	94	84.5
F	107.6	110.5	115.5	103	117	108	115.5
G	32.6	40	43.5	27	37	18.5	31.5
H	107	88.5	92.5	81	101	108	97.5
I	44.3	45	77	34.5	48.5	36.5	47.5
J	51	56	69.5	56	61.5	49.5	59

During the data collection process, there were two occasions when students were absent on the day of the assessment. Those days are marked with “ab” in the chart. All the other students were assessed on every occasion. The chart shows Wk 1-1. This describes the data taken during the first week, the first assessment. The Wk 1-2 describes the data collected during the first week, but the second assessment that week.

In order to provide a meaningful comparison, each student’s scores were averaged across the three week period. The average score for each student was compared to that student’s baseline score. Figure two shows a comparison of the baseline scores the final average score.

Figure 2

Comparison Between Baseline and Final Average Scores



For figure 2, the expectation would be for the average weekly score to be above the baseline scores. However, this is only true for seven out of the ten students. In three cases, the baseline scores were higher than the average weekly score following the intervention. Table two shows the baseline scores, the weekly averaged scores, the change score, representing the difference between the beginning and average weekly score following intervention.

Table 2

Scores for Baseline, Average Weekly, and Difference From Beginning to End

	Baseline	Ave. of weekly scores	Change
A	10.3	12.16667	1.866666666666667
B	72	66.75	-5.25
C	83.6	85.2	1.600000000000001
D	56.3	60.75	4.45
E	106	89.9	-16.1
F	107.6	111.5833	3.983333333333333
G	32.6	32.91667	0.3166666666666663
H	107	94.75	-12.25
I	44.3	48.16667	3.866666666666667
J	51	58.58333	7.583333333333334

Student J experienced a large change in his Oral Reading Fluency score. Students D, F and I experience an expected change. Students' A and C showed small changes in their scores. Student G showed almost no change in his score. Unexpectedly, students B, E, and H showed a loss in the number of words correct per minute.

Overall, the results showed a possible relationship between the use of reader's theater in the classroom and a students' oral reading fluency. The relationship is not definitive, but the possibility exists. This data, along with the supporting literature makes a good case for the use for readers' theater. It would be important in future research to include control students who receive typical instruction and not reader's theater to determine if changes in WCPM can be attributed to the reader's theater intervention, or just to natural increases due to reading instruction.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of reader's theater on fluency levels for third and fourth grade students with learning disabilities. The results of this study indicate a positive impact of reader's theater on reading fluency for the majority of students. Seven out of the ten students made gains in their Oral Reading Fluency scores as measured by the DIBELS. According to a study by Hasbrouck and Tindal (2006), students should gain an average of approximately one word per week. With that in mind, one would expect to see an increase of approximately three words over the course of this study. Four students met and exceeded this expectation. Although not all students made gains, the possibility of a link between the use of reader's theater and oral reading fluency is obvious. Previous studies suggest the use of reader's theater does increase reading fluency (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 2002; Trainin & Andrzejczak, 2006; Young & Rasinski, 2009).

Implications for Teaching

A review of the literature indicated many positive outcomes resulting from the use of reader's theater in the classroom. Teachers would benefit all students with the use of reader's

theater, not just those who struggle in reading. This study demonstrated that some students will increase their fluency with the use of reader's theater at rates at or above the expected rate of change.

Limitations of Study

One limitation of this study is the short amount time over which the intervention took place and data collected. Ideally this study could be conducted over the course of a whole school year. Another limitation is the small number of participants, in one elementary classroom, and only from one school. As this study was conducted during the researcher's professional internship at the end of a master's program, this study only included ten students who were all served in one resource room in the same school.

Conclusion

This study, along with others, points to a positive relationship between the use of reader's theater in the classroom, and overall improvements in students' oral reading fluency. Reader's theater not only benefits struggling readers in the classroom, but all students in the classroom. Further research needs to be done to determine best practices for implementing readers' theater in the classroom. Young and Rasinski (2009) reported on Young's implementation of reader's theater in the classroom, but more studies are needed to determine best practice. Knowing that reader's theater is a good tool, how can teachers' best put the practice into use in their classrooms? Another area for further study would be how to use teachers' existing curriculum materials to convert them into a reader's theater format.

All teachers want their students to become good readers. This is but one component of a comprehensive reading curriculum. Reader's theater allows students to have fun playing

characters, becoming better readers, and growing as students. With the reported benefits, one cannot help but ask, why not use reader's theater?

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