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Effectiveness of Direct Instruction on Struggling Readers

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Abstract

Fluent reading has become a national focus area in education. Research suggests the connection of fluent readers to economic success. Researchers revealed a link between academic failure, crime, and violence because of illiteracy. This literature review examines articles that address the importance of providing direct reading instruction to improve fluency. Researchers identified early identification, ongoing quality professional development, and quality direct instruction as key components to improve reading fluency.

Effectiveness of Direct Instruction on Struggling Readers

There is much discussion on what effective reading instruction should look like. There has never been a time in history where so much emphasis is placed on the foundational skills of reading and the importance in reducing reading difficulties. In a quest to provide the best instruction for all students, the district moved to the Response to Intervention (RTI) / Multi—Tier Systems of Supports (MTSS) model of instruction. Although the framework for instruction is in place, the Professional Learning Communities (PLC) work continues to be focused on how to use data to determine what support looks like. The findings of this literature review will influence instruction. The questions chosen are very specific and meaningful to the third grade team as well as the school. Do struggling students show more growth with direct reading instruction in a MTSS / RTI model of instruction? Which students show more growth from direct instruction? This literature review will examine scholarly articles to determine the effectiveness of direct instruction in the area of reading.

Literature Review

Wanzek and Vaughn (2008) state that in the past 30 years, reading intervention research demonstrated repeatedly that when students at risk for reading difficulties are identified early and provided with appropriate interventions, many students acquire the necessary skills to become successful readers (Foorman, Francis, Fletcher, Schatschneider, & Mehta, 1998; Torgesen et al., 1999; Vellutino et al., 1996). The National Reading Panel (NRP) (2000) was mandated by congress to report the converging evidence of effective instruction in teaching beginning readers. The report identified five critical components of reading instruction necessary for young readers to successfully reading fluently and comprehending text: (a) phonological awareness, (b)

phonics, (c) fluency, (d) vocabulary, and (e) comprehension (source). To begin with, one must understand the meaning of reading and the role of Response to Intervention model.

Response to Intervention

Gorski (n.d.) describes RTI as a multi-tier approach to the early identification and support of students with learning and behavior needs. The first step in the RTI process is universal screening of all students. Differentiated instruction is provided to all students in a multi-tier approach based on the results of the universal screening.

Tier 1: High-Quality Instruction, Screening, and Group Interventions

Wanzek and Vaughn (2008) explain all students in Tier 1 receive scientifically based, high - quality instruction. Students are screened with a universal screener three times a year to establish a baseline and to identify students who are struggling. Students who are identified “at risk” through the universal screening receive additional instruction within the regular classroom. A valid screening system is used to monitor student progress. Students who do not make adequate progress are moved to Tier 2.

Tier 2: Targeted Interventions

Increasing intensive instruction is provided for students not making adequate progress in the regular classroom. Instruction is based on student needs and levels of performance. Interventions are provided in small-group setting in addition to core instruction in the classroom. Students receive regular progress monitoring. Tier 3 intervention is considered when students continue to show little progress.

Tier 3: Intensive Interventions and Comprehensive Evaluation

Intensive, individualized instruction is provided to target the students' specific skill deficit. Students who do not demonstrate the level of response to intervention receive a comprehensive evaluation and consideration of eligibility for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA, 2004). The study by Wanzek and Vaughn (2008) shows that using this body of knowledge to design effective instruction for Kindergarten through third grade may help to reduce the incidence of reading difficulties (Torgensen, 2000). The National Assessment of Educational Progress report implies overall reading scores have increased from previous years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005).

Reading and Reading Fluency

The study by Jones-Carey (2013) made the claim that reading is the foundational skill that allows for information sharing in schools through textbooks, novels, and worksheets. Leipzig (2012) defines reading as a multi-faceted process involving word recognition, comprehension, fluency, and motivation. Reading is making meaning from print through word recognition (Leipzig, 2012). Literacy was once defined as the ability to read. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defined literacy as the ability to read and write a simple sentence about one's life (Ahmed, 2011). UNESCO expanded the definition of literacy to include the ability to read and write with the purpose of impacting the greater community (Ahmed, 2011). In 2005, the definition was expanded to include the ability to understand and communicate about what has been read.

Previous research by Jones-Carey (2013) states the National Reading Panel (2000) has defined reading fluency as the ability to decode symbols/words without continuous interruptions

so that reading comprehension is not impeded. Reading fluency has been identified as a key component in effective literacy instruction. The research also states that reading with fluency was identified as the second principle of reading in the well-known report, *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (1985). The report goes on to say, “Readers must be able to decode words quickly and accurately so that this process can coordinate fluidly with the process of constructing the meaning of the text” (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott & Wilkinson, 1985, p. 11).

Fluent reading is the focus of much attention in schools, however it is not often directly taught. One reason for this may be that oral fluency has not been a focus in teacher training courses. When addressing the issue of reading fluency and the lack of understanding by many teachers, Goldstein (1999) reported that Marjorie Lipson and Linda Bouffard Lang (1991) wrote,

Fluency is often defined as accurate, effortless and rapid reading. However, there is curious lack of agreement about the relationship between fluency and overall reading ability. What is especially surprising is how little attention is actually directed towards clarifying the nature of fluency or identifying fluent/non fluent readers for the purpose of either research or instruction. Teachers receive few guidelines to help them decide who could benefit from specific types of instruction. Similarly, with few exceptions, researchers generally offer only the most cursory information about how subjects were selected and identified as fluent and non-fluent. (p. 12)

Without a doubt, reading fluency is a crucial element in being an effective reader. The questions posed by Goldstein (1999) are how fluency should be assessed, identified and defined and what instructional methods should teachers use to encourage fluency in beginning readers. Previous studies have shown one of the ways that is proven to be effective is direct instruction.

Direct Instruction Defined

A study by Jones-Carey (2013) describes direct instruction as the explicit teaching of procedures and concepts that students need in order to be successful in learning new content (Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006). This explicit teaching must be done in such a way as to ensure that it aligns with the way the brain processes information (source). Becker and Camine (1981) postulate that the brain needs to take in information in an orderly and logical manner as opposed to those who argue that students can learn more by asking questions and creating hypotheses. By using direct instruction, students are able to apply the learned procedures and concepts to the different curriculum areas (Becker & Camine, 1981; Bereiter & Englemann, 1967).

The previous study of Jones-Carey (2013) has shown declining student proficiency when a district discontinued formalized direct reading instruction in sixth grade. The New York district made the decision to discontinue the direct instruction because of the belief that by grade six students should have the skills to be successful academically. Two years after the decision was made results from the 2011 and 2012 NYS ELA revealed more than 50% of students in grades three through eight are deficient in reading, and the case was made that direct instructional strategies were necessary to intermediate age students to improve literacy rates. Jones-Carey (2013).

According to the Jones-Carey (2013) report, Bessellieu, Cowardin, Koziuff, and LaNunziata (2000) explain in the research that direct instruction follows a formalized lesson structure and the learning target for the lesson is discussed and displayed to the students prior to the learning. Another key element of direct instruction is the teaching and modeling of how to

apply the new knowledge. To further explain direct instruction, Jones-Carey (2013) referred to the example provided by a model-led-test-delayed reading lesson may begin with a teacher modeling fluency by reading the passage aloud for the first time (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). The student or students would then choral read, read along as a group, the same passage. After the lead activity is completed, students would read the passage independently. In order to proceed to the next portion of the instruction students would be required to answer comprehension questions.

Direct instruction is measured by an on-going tracking of student progress. Progress monitoring is a short proficiency assessment that is based on student need. Additionally, student progress is also measured through formal tests. The teacher uses the results of the progress monitoring to determine if content needs to be re-taught through this model-lead methodology. The philosophy behind direct instruction is that learning takes place through explicit instruction in a mediated scaffolding framework and the model-led–test delayed methodology. The focus is learning the concepts, including the strategies that are necessary to apply the concepts to solve the problems (Bessellieu, Cowardin, Koziuff, & LaNunziata, 2000).

Significance

Jones-Carey (2013) states the ability to read in the United States has been a focus of education for over 30 years, starting in 1974 with the work of Engelmann and Brunner and it continues today. According to Brandt (2002), the ability to read provides access to economic success. Competency in spoken and written language contributes largely to success in school and life. The development of language is a central focus of school in the United States. Sadly, 75% of children who are unable to read adequately by the end of fourth grade will end up in jail

or on welfare (Baer, Kutner, Sabatini & White, 2009). Sixty percent of prison inmates are functionally illiterate. Baer, Kutner, Sabatini, and White (2009) stated that the link between academic failure, delinquency, violence, and crime is a result of the inability of adults to be functionally literate.

Research by Kamps, Abbott, Greenwood, Wills, Veerkamp, and Kaufman (2008) suggests that challenges center on pedagogy, resources, and changing systems to support early reading intervention, particularly in kindergarten through second grade. In spite of clearly defined, evidence-based interventions for children who show early reading problems, few school systems are set up to provide adequate reading screenings and the well trained staff to provide preventative interventions. Research also shows that general education teachers are reluctant or otherwise struggle to make adaptations that accommodate individual students in their instruction, particularly in early grades (Baker & Zigmond, 1990, Chard & Kame'enui, 2000; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Bishop, 1992; O'Connor, 2000).

Research by Goldstein (1999) suggests that when a reader has unrewarding reading experiences it will lead to a decrease in reading related activities. They conclude that nonfluent reading leads to less reading. Jones-Carey (2013) states that unfortunately many teachers may believe that students have achieved all that they need by grade three and believe that there will be no further benefit from providing reading direct instruction in grade four or beyond (Torgesen, Houston, Rissman, & Kosanovich, 2007). Studies by the National Reading Panel (2000) and Torgesen et al. (2007) suggest that continuing to provide direct instruction in reading produces benefits for students in late elementary or early middle school.

Teacher Content Knowledge

In the report by Binks-Cantrell, Joshi, and Washburn (2012), Spear-Swerling and Brucker, (2003) have attributed poor classroom instruction to a lack of teachers' basic understanding of the concepts related to the English language that are necessary to teach reading skills. This basic understanding commonly referred to as teacher content knowledge, is described as the knowledge needed for teaching a specific content area, for example reading (Shulman, 1986).

Analysis of probable cause data by Goldstein (1999) indicates that reading fluency is often a misunderstood aspect of reading instruction. Despite an awareness of its importance by educators and researchers, oral reading fluency is a neglected aspect of regular classroom reading instruction (Allington, 1983 as cited in Zutell & Rasinski, 1991). The literature has made it clear that there is a need to educate teachers in the area of reading fluency instruction. There is a need for a clear definition of reading fluency. Goldstein (1999) proposes that teachers use a reading fluency rating scale offered by Zutell and Raskinski (1991). Once a universal definition is established, each student could be rated on the reading scale and students could receive explicit direct instruction to match the specific need identified on the scale.

A further concern noted by Goldstein (1999) is that teachers unwittingly discourage fluency. Fowler (1993) states that teachers often think of decoding as using phonics to sound out words not recognized by sight. This definition is too narrow and may cause limitations to the decoding strategies made available to readers. If too much focus is given to exact word matching, students may attend to individual words at the expense of other aspects of fluency. Similarly, poor readers usually receive word recognition instruction. Word recognition alone does not directly facilitate fluency (Lipson & Lange, 1991).

According to the report by Jones-Carey (2013), Buehl (1998) noted trends in declining secondary reading skills across all schools in the United States. Additional authors for example, Ivey, (1998); Vacca and Alvermann, (1998) offered several factors that contributed to the ongoing reading crisis at the middle and high school levels including a teacher and administrator belief system that students should have learned to read in the elementary grades, insufficient preparation of secondary teachers to teach the necessary reading skills to students, and insufficient time in the day to teach reading skills to students.

O'Connor, Fulmer, Harty, and Bell (2005) reported in this study that students and teachers participated in a layered approach to reading intervention in kindergarten through third grade that included professional development for teachers in scientifically based reading instruction, ongoing measurement of reading progress, and additional small-group or individual instruction for students whose progress was insufficient to maintain grade-level reading achievement. The goal of increasing reading performance of students most at risk was met as well as raising the reading achievement of students who were not at risk. The research suggested that professional development sessions should include modeling intended behaviors, discussing implementation issues, planning for adopting new strategies, and providing ongoing feedback on observed instructional changes (Darling-Hammond, 2000; McCutchen et al., 2002).

O'Connor, Fulmer, Harty, and Bell (2005) explain the first layer of intervention had two distinct features: professional development to increase the competence and confidence of teachers to teach reading, and periodic analysis of performance data on students' progress toward reading acquisition. During PD, teachers discussed trajectories of students. By the end of the third year of the study, teachers were skilled readers of data spreadsheets and could identify the students in all areas of growth.

Research Results

The research by Jones-Carey (2013) concluded that when direct instruction was compared with 12 other instructional models by the U.S. Department of Education from 1967 through 1995, and involving more than 75,000 children in 120 communities, direct instruction was shown to be more successful in fostering basic reading and math skills, higher – order cognitive-conceptual skills, and even higher self-esteem than any other models (Bessellieu et al., 2000). Jones-Carey (2013) also noted when direct instruction was measured for its impact on student performance, there was a strong positive correlation based on teacher fidelity to implementation and the performance of students (Englemann, 2008).

The findings by O'Connor, Fulmer, Harty and Bell (2005) indicate that by first teaching students with well-designed direct instruction in general education, then intervening in smaller groups, and then – when necessary with pull-out instruction, that the goal of increasing the reading performance of children most at risk was met as well as significantly raising the reading achievement of the students who were not at risk. Binks-Cantrell, Joshi, and Washburn (2012) address recent national reports stressing the importance of teacher knowledge in reading instruction. In the study, an instrument was developed to evaluate whether teachers had the basic knowledge and expertise related to basic language constructs related to effective reading instruction. The implications for professional development of in-service for teachers as well as preservice teacher education are also discussed. The study concluded that there is great complexity in demonstrating relationships among teacher knowledge, teacher performance, and student achievement. Once areas of strength and weaknesses are identified, instruction and/or professional development can be targeted based on the needs (Binks-Cantrell, Joshi, & Washburn, 2012).

Simmons, Kame'enui, Harn, and Coyne (2007) address the following research questions: Firstly, how much time is necessary to develop phonological and alphabetic proficiency? Secondly, do programs that vary systematically in the amount of instructional time result in different outcomes? The objective of the study was to evaluate instructional variables required to accelerate learning rates for children who enter kindergarten with pre-reading performance indicators that place them at risk for later RD. Findings suggested that optimal early reading growth and prevention of RD requires more than starting early; it requires designing instruction and using instructional time strategically to accelerate learning (Simmons, Kame'enui, Harn, & Coyne, 2007).

In summary, the findings of Kamps et al. (2008) are encouraging in that students with direct intervention improved in critical early literacy skills, and some advanced to grade-level performance. Findings also suggest the utility of the three-tier, RTI model to manage interventions, that is, determining for whom, when, and what intervention is appropriate and monitoring progress through systemic data collection. Additionally, it is important to demonstrate that teachers can provide the intervention, given appropriate professional development and sufficient resources (Abbot et al., in press). If school staff can provide intervention at the early stages, far fewer children will need costlier services later, or worse, receive no intervention at all (Kamps et al., 2008).

Kirschner, Sweller, and Clark (2006) concluded that after more than 50 years of research on direct instruction, it remains almost uniformly supported as the best way to teach novice to intermediate learners. Furthermore, direct instruction benefits students with considerable prior knowledge and is equally effective when compared with other approaches. Therefore, in order to reduce the ongoing failure of students to become independent readers, it is imperative that

students, whether deemed to be novice or intermediate learners, are engaged in direct reading instruction (Jones-Carey, 2013).

Further Studies

This review of literature reveals a number of gaps in the research. Jones-Carey (2013) made the case that while there is ongoing research regarding the impact of direct reading instruction in elementary grades, there is little research regarding its impact in the intermediate grades. Several studies suggest that this lack of research may have resulted with the continuation of illiteracy by not providing research and support necessary to effectively target the problem areas.

O'Connor, Fulmer, Harty, and Bell (2005) posed some questions that may be considered: What effect does professional development of teachers have on literacy development of students? What is the effect of combined professional development and direct intervention on students' literacy outcomes? Wanzek and Vaughn (2008) suggested that further studies comparing the effects of standard intervention protocols and individualized interventions that are designed to provide more differentiated instruction might provide valuable information regarding effective instruction for students with significant reading difficulties. Further investigation in these areas is vital to providing researchers and practitioners with much needed information on effective intervention for struggling readers.

Conclusion

This literature review reveals the importance of identifying struggling readers early. When students are identified early, explicit direct instruction can be received to meet the students' specific needs. The significance of being a fluent reader is too important to not

address. Effective and continuous professional development and support is a key element in increasing teachers' content knowledge as well as confidence to provide effective direct reading instruction. Schools will see increased success when they focus efforts on early identification of struggling readers and providing explicit direct instruction by highly trained, confident staff.

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