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# **Using Guided Reading to Improve Reading Achievement**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of guided reading on the reading achievement and growth of third grade students. The hypothesis was that students ( $n = 12$ ) would achieve at greater levels with a guided reading curriculum than a control group using a traditional basal reading curriculum ( $n = 15$ ). The instrument used to test achievement was the 2005 Georgia Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT). The students' results were compared using the 2004 Georgia CRCT results as a pretest. The research showed that students who were taught reading using the guided reading format were more likely to show gains than students who were taught reading using a traditional basal reading program. Not only did students make gains in reading, but the benefits also extended into the areas of math and language arts. The findings of the study indicated that students taught using the guided reading approach achieved as well as or better than their counterparts in a traditional class.

## **INTRODUCTION**

With the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act and the resulting high-stakes testing environment, teachers have become more challenged than ever before. Of particular importance is the area of reading. For schools to achieve adequate yearly progress (AYP), they must show that current delivery methods improve reading skills for students in all subgroups (Georgia Department of Education, 2005).

## **TRADITIONAL READING PROGRAMS**

In a traditional reading program, all students read the same story for a week (Cunningham & Allington, 2002). They have the same spelling words and the same skills focus. Reading practice usually occurs as silent reading or in a round-robin format. Round-robin reading can occur with the whole class or in a small group setting. Each child reads a portion of the text out loud then reads silently while another child reads the next portion of the text out loud. The reading proceeds in a set format across the group or classroom.

The advantage of a traditional basal reading program is that all children receive an equal amount of attention from the teacher. The disadvantages, however, are myriad. First, students who are reading at a level above their instructional level are not challenged. They become easily bored, fail to pay attention, and fail to achieve at higher levels than the current comfort zone. Students who are reading below their current grade level are often frustrated by the difficulty of the text. They do not receive sufficient amounts of individualized instruction and often do not attain reading success. In addition, the basal reader's moderate nature does not prepare students for mandatory content reading in science and social studies. Consequently, students are unable to read or comprehend these more difficult reading passages (Short, Kane, & Peeling, 2000).

## **THE BALANCED LITERACY APPROACH**

The balanced literacy approach (Balanced Literacy Institute, 2002) helps students achieve literacy success by focusing on several components: guided reading, shared reading, reading aloud, writer's workshop, and word study. In guided reading all students do not read the same book at the same time (Pinnell & Fountas, 2002). Instead, the teacher evaluates the student's reading level and places each student in a group where they are reading on their "just right" reading level (Balanced Literacy Institute, 2002). They are placed in a group where they can achieve 95% decoding accuracy while still comprehending the text. Students are grouped with other students whose skills needs are similar to their own. They move to more difficult books as their skills improve. Students who are reading at lower levels meet with the teacher more often. Students who are reading on higher levels work more

independently. Readers at all levels are challenged to gain competency and increase their reading skills (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). The teacher supports and monitors students in small groups which are comprised according to each child's instructional needs (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). The teacher chooses the appropriate book to use based on the student's observed needs. As students become more proficient, instruction changes to meet student needs (Fawson & Reutzel, 2000). Reading materials challenge each child's instructional level. This approach supports students who need a larger amount of more intensive instructional support.

## **RELEVANT RESEARCH**

The main advantage of guided reading is that students are matched with books that support the development of their own reading strategies (Fawson & Reutzel, 2000). Other benefits of guided reading include children with comparable needs working together in small groups to expand their reading practice using reading strategies combined with teacher support (Short, Kane, & Peeling, 2000). According to Fawson & Reutzel (2000), guided reading provides teachers with the flexibility and scaffolding necessary to concentrate on students' instructional requirements. The main disadvantage of guided reading is that it necessitates access to large quantities of texts at varying reading levels (Fawson & Reutzel, 2000). According to Arkenbauer, MacDonald, and Palmer (2002), using a balanced literacy approach that includes guided reading helps students increase comprehension and fluency levels. It also promotes a positive influence on reading behaviors and overall feelings about reading as a positive experience. In their study, students enhanced their ability to make associations between reading and their personal experiences. Balanced, all-inclusive literacy, including guided reading, leads to increased reading expertise (Johnson, Dunbar, & Roach, 2003). While guided reading builds comprehension and fluency, accessibility to a large volume of books is essential to success.

Research shows that elementary students, who receive explicit instruction of reading strategies through the successful execution of guided reading, improve processing and understanding (Smith, 2003). While traditional methods simply require students to provide minimal feedback about the story, guided reading provides more support and more meaningful exploration of

the story. Reading ability rests on the teacher's capacity to provide reading instruction that meets each child's distinctive requirements (Allington, 2002). Therefore, it is crucial to student reading development that teachers carefully match students to texts (Allington, 2002). Guided reading allows this match up to occur. Instead of all students reading the same story and receiving the same literacy instruction, students are matched with other students who have similar instruction needs. Students are also matched to text based on those instructional needs.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of a guided reading strategy on the reading achievement and growth of third grade students. I expected to find that third grade reading students who were instructed using guided reading achieved higher scores than those who received traditional reading instruction. Reading, language arts and mathematics scores on the 2005 GA CRCT served as a posttest while the 2004 GA CRCT was used as pretest.

## **METHODS**

### **PARTICIPANTS**

This study took place in a community school located in a middle class neighborhood in Macon, Georgia. At the time, 54% of the students in this school received free or reduced meals (Georgia Department of Education, 2004). The racial make-up of the school was 52% African American, 38% Caucasian, 5% Asian, 3% Hispanic, and 2% Multi-racial. The students who participated in the study were 15 third graders from another teacher's 2004-2005 class as the control group and 12 third graders from my 2004-2005 class as the experimental group. They ranged in age from eight years old to almost eleven years old.

The control group contained 8 African American students, 4 Caucasian students, and 3 Asian students. There were 8 male and 7 female subjects in the control group. Two of these students were inclusive special needs students who were mildly autistic. They were included in all phases of the classroom's activities. Both of these students did receive extra support from speech services. One student from the control group was in the gifted program. The experimental group contained 4 African American students, 5

Caucasian students, 2 Multi-racial students, and 1 Asian student. There were 5 male and 7 female subjects in the experimental group. One of these students was emotionally behaviorally disordered and did leave the classroom for support services. Another student received speech services. While both classrooms did include other students, their data could not be included because they had moved to this school from out of state. Consequently, they had no baseline data from the Georgia CRCT for the previous year.

## **INSTRUMENTATION**

This study compared each student's 2005 results for the Georgia Criterion Referenced Competency Tests (GA CRCT) to 2004 results for the GA CRCT. Millicans (personal communication, October 13, 2004) stated, "The validity is supported by alignment of the assessment to the GA CRCT. Each item specifically relates to a standard in the GA CRCT." Reliability was established based on Cronbach's alpha coefficient with a Second Grade Reading reliability rating of 0.86 and a Third Grade Reading reliability rating of 0.91 (Millicans, personal communication, October 13, 2004).

## **PROCEDURES**

I received permission to conduct my research from my school principal and from the assistant superintendent of schools. The reading curriculum, Georgia's Quality Core Curriculum, was the same for both groups. Each group was given the GA CRCT at the end of their second grade year of study and again at the end of their third grade year of study. Data for each student was retrieved from the student's cumulative folders. Each data entry was assigned a number in order to ensure anonymity of all students. All data was kept confidential.

The control group received reading instruction via traditional reading methods. The whole class read the same story in the same week. Reading practice occurred in a round-robin format. In round-robin format, students take turns reading the story. The reading proceeds around the room with each child reading in turn. The experimental group received reading instruction using a balanced literacy approach with guided reading as the specific delivery format. Each student was placed in a small group where other group mem-

bers had similar instructional needs. Each small group read a different book based on the Fountas and Pinnell system of leveled readers (Pinnell & Fountas, 2002). Guided reading books are leveled based on difficulty. They range from level A to level R. Students are placed in a level based on decoding, fluency, and comprehension skill abilities. Each child was placed into a group where they could read and comprehend at a 95% accuracy rate. Reading groups were designed to be fluid. As students gained skills they could move to higher-level books or if needed they could be moved to a level where they decoded very accurately, but they could gain comprehension skills. Ideally, third grade students would be at level M when they begin third grade. In reality, many third grade students came to third grade without basic reading strategies. Several students were placed in level J to allow them to develop more complex reading strategies. The small groups worked together to read their stories and practice their reading strategies.

The students in the lowest groups met with the teacher 2-3 times per week for mini-lessons and additional instruction. They read 2-3 stories each week with their group. They were also encouraged to choose library books that were on their reading level. This allowed them to continue to practice new skills during independent reading time. Students who were reading on grade level met with the teacher 1-2 times per week. They read 2-3 new picture books per week. They were also encouraged to read chapter books on their current reading level. This activity was often accomplished with partners from their guided reading group, but it also frequently occurred across group levels. Students, who were reading above grade level, met with the teacher once per week to discuss their story. They were encouraged to read more difficult text and often worked on chapter books and informational texts. Even though they were allowed to read together with partners from their group, they were more likely to enjoy independent reading.

## **DESIGN AND DATA ANALYSIS**

The 2004 GA CRCT scores of both groups were compared using t-tests to determine if the scores for the groups were roughly equal at the beginning of the study. The 2005 GA CRCT scores of both groups were compared to see if there was a statistically significant difference between the means of the control and experimental groups. Analysis of covariance was done for each test

using the pretest as the covariate to mathematically partial out preexisting differences in the students. The alpha level was set at .05.

## **RESULTS**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of guided reading on the reading achievement and academic growth of third grade students. The average CRCT reading scores from the prior year were examined to see if the two groups were equivalent at the beginning. The control group mean of 357 (SD = 29) was higher than the experimental group mean of 334 (SD = 48). See table 1. A two group t-test however was not statistically significant ( $t(25) = 1.53, p = .14$ ; but Levene's test for equality of variance approached significance at  $p = .07$ ). After doing the guided reading for the entire school year, the students took the CRCT tests again. Using ANCOVA with the 2004 reading test as the covariate, the difference between the groups was still not statistically significant [ $F(2,26) = 2.92, p = .10$ ]. However in the control group 40% of the children (6 of 15) improved their scores from the previous year while 58% of the experimental group (7 of 12) improved. See figure 1. In raw gain score points, the experimental group's mean improved 8 points in reading while the control group mean improved 5 points. In language arts, the experimental group gained 14 points while the control group gained 13; in math the experimental group gained 6 while the control group gained 3. See table 1.

In addition, the average CRCT language arts scores from the prior year were compared to see if the two groups were equivalent at the beginning. The control group mean of 346 (SD = 27) was higher than the experimental group mean of 321 (SD = 28). See table 1. A paired t-test was statistically significant [ $t(25) = 2.40, p = .02$ ] in favor of the control group. After doing the guided reading for the entire school year, the students took the CRCT tests again. Using ANCOVA with the 2004 language arts test as the covariate, the difference between the groups now was not statistically significant [ $F(2,26) = 1.54, p = .23$ ]. In the control group 73% of the children improved their scores from the previous year and 75% of the experimental group improved.

Finally, the average CRCT math scores from the prior year were examined to see if the two groups were equivalent. The control group mean of 346 (SD = 23) was higher than the experimental group mean of 324 (SD = 29). See



table 1. A paired t-test was statistically significant [ $t(25) = 2.12, p = .04$ ] again in favor of the control group. After doing the guided reading for the entire school year, the students took the CRCT tests again. Using ANCOVA with the 2004 math test as the covariate, the difference between the groups was not statistically significant [ $F(2,26) = 0.67, p = .42$ ]. Again in the control group 60% of the children improved their scores from the previous year while 75% of the experimental group improved.

In all three of these tests, the mean scores for the children in the experimental group improved and their standard deviations decreased. Reading scores for the experimental group had a very heterogeneous set of scores at the beginning with a standard deviation of 48. The effect size for the reading improvement of both the experimental group and the control group (Cohen's  $d$ ) was .22 which equates to a 7% percentile gain. For language arts for both groups, the effect size (Cohen's  $d$ ) was .52. This is an improvement of 18% (percentile gain). For math in both groups the effect size (Cohen's  $d$ ) was .22. This is an improvement of 7% (percentile gain).

## **DISCUSSION**

The results showed that a higher percentage of the students who were taught reading using the guided reading model improved academically than students who were taught reading using the standard basal model. The hypothesis of this paper was that third grade reading students who were instructed using guided reading achieved at a higher growth rate than those who received traditional reading instruction. While both groups showed improvement in CRCT scores, the differences between the means of the groups at the end of the year were not statistically significant. However, the difference in both the language arts and math CRCT scores was statistically significant in favor of the control group at the beginning of the year. So in effect, the experimental group "caught up" with the control group in these two areas. In addition, a higher proportion of the experimental group improved their scores. Since the experimental group both began and ended the school year with lower mean scores than the control group, it may be too soon to tell the overall effects of the guided reading, but these results are promising.

In addition, the students in the experimental group improved their

decoding, comprehension, and fluency skills. The students who were reading below grade level made the greatest strides. When school started in August, they were reading on levels I or J. These levels are considered to be late first or early second grade levels. By the end of the year, they had moved through level M and were beginning level N. They were reading solidly at third grade level and were well prepared to read fourth grade texts. More importantly, they increased their confidence level as readers. According to anecdotal notes, the students in the lowest groups did not like to read out loud at the beginning of the year. They knew they were poor readers and did not want their classmates to hear them stumbling through the text. By the end of the year, they were volunteering to read out loud. They were proud of their abilities and wanted to share their newfound skills with their classmates. Students who had considered themselves to be poor readers no longer labeled themselves negatively by the end of the year. Since the goal of any reading curriculum is to encourage students to grow as readers and to learn to love reading, guided reading proved itself to be a very successful medium for growing confident, successful readers. The biggest bonus, however, was the unexpected gains the experimental group made in both language arts and math. Since both these subjects require extensive reading, an increase in scores in these areas was an unexpected benefit of better reading abilities.

The results of this study compare favorably and accurately with results achieved by other researchers. Short, Kane, and Peeling (2000) found that third grade students significantly improved both accuracy and fluency skills through the use of guided reading. In his overview of guided reading research, Smith (2003) not only found that guided reading helped students improve their fluency rate but that the more times a student reread a text the more their fluency rate increased. Johnson, Dunbar, and Roach (2003) used three different sites for their research into the effectiveness of guided reading. At each site, students showed significant gains in fluency, comprehension, and decoding ability.

Teachers who might wish to implement guided reading in their own classrooms need to consider the challenges to success. While the rewards of helping students develop successful reading strategies are great, the road to guided reading success is paved with many obstacles. First, for the program to be successful, a large number of multiple-copy books must be available to each classroom teacher using the program (Fawson & Reutzel, 2000). Each class-

room teacher, using the program, needs access to 10 different texts on each level. Since guided reading groups range in size from 3-6 students, at least 6 copies of each text are required. Due to the diversity in reading abilities in each classroom, several different levels will be used. For example, my classroom had students reading from as low as level H to as high as level Q. That is a span of 10 levels that we covered at some point during the year. At 10 different texts per level and 6 copies per text, it was necessary to have access to 600 books.

For guided reading to be successful, the teacher must make a much larger time commitment, than they would when using basal readers. It is necessary to cover all genres in each level; so much time is spent in finding texts, leveling text, and previewing literature for skills to be taught and grade level appropriateness. The greatest help for a teacher who wishes to implement the guided reading approach is to have an entire school committed to this approach.

In reviewing the research, I believe it would be more effective to test the results using a different pretest and posttest method. While both the control and experimental groups had average size classrooms, results from all students were not usable. Many of the students transferred into our school system from systems outside Georgia. These students did not have 2004 CRCT scores and their results could not be evaluated because of lack of baseline data. By using a different pretest and posttest, it would have been possible to evaluate the growth of all students and get a better picture of the effectiveness of guided reading. The resulting usable scores did not show a good match of the control and experimental groups at the beginning of the year.

This study was significant in that it allowed teachers and administrators to recognize the benefits of teaching reading using guided reading. This research showed that a higher number of students who were taught reading using the guided reading format increase their scores than students who were taught reading using a traditional basal reading program. The results were more pronounced in language arts and math. The mean scores of the control group children were statistically significantly higher than the mean scores of the experimental group children on the pretest (2004 scores), but by the posttest (2005 scores) the experimental group children had caught up and the differences between the mean scores of the two groups were no longer statistically significant. These findings support the use of guided reading as an

effective way to increase third grade student test performance. Anecdotal evidence revealed a corresponding increase in self-confidence in the area of reading. Specifically, the children also improved their decoding, comprehension, and fluency skills.

**TABLE 1**

*Control Group CRCT Average Scores*

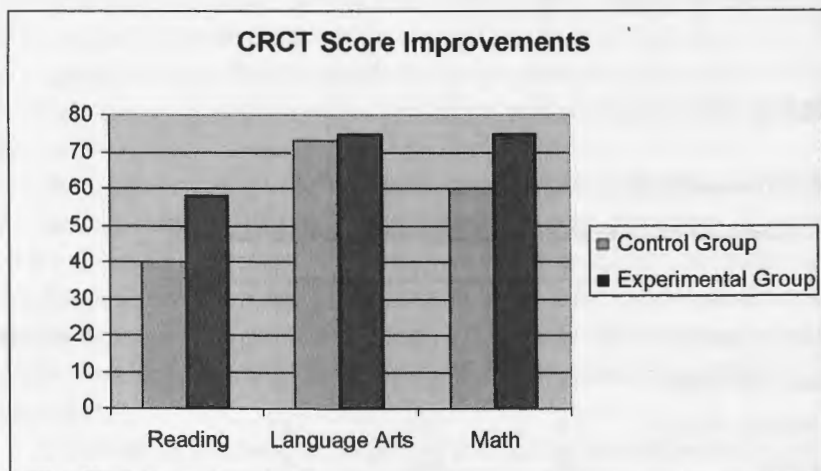
	N	Mean	SD
CRCT Read04	15	357	29
CRCT Read05	15	362	17
Language Arts04	15	346	27
Language Arts 05	15	359	23
Math04	15	346	23
Matho5	15	349	20

*Experimental Group CRCT Average Scores*

	N	Mean	SD
CRCT Read04	12	334	48
CRCT Read05	12	342	26
Language Arts04	12	321	28
Language Arts 05	12	335	26
Math04	12	324	29
Matho5	12	330	26

## FIGURE 1

*Gains in reading, language arts and mathematics*



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