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Using Choral Reading with Students with Exceptionalities to Improve Reading Fluency

Reading is one of the requirements that enhances individuals' ability of adaptation to social life and fulfilment of their needs (Kodal & Akyol, 2018). From engendering listening and speaking skills in very young children, to the shepherding of young learners toward "beginning" reading and writing, educators use what they know to assist in the emergence of capable and enthusiastic readers. Individuals use the reading skills learned from childhood to engage in the active process that builds new learning by combining new information with current knowledge (Mokhtari, Neel, Kaiser, & Le, 2015) and hopefully, a path of enjoyment throughout one's lifespan.

Kodel and Akyol (2018), who describe the five basic elements of reading as sound awareness, phonemic awareness, word recognition, reading comprehension, and fluent reading, agree that reading fluency contributes significantly to the reading success of learners of all ages. Students with varying abilities, including students with exceptionalities, increasingly receive a majority of their reading instruction in general classrooms (Schmidt, Rozendal, & Greeman, 2002), making the adoption of effective teaching methodologies to ensure that all students make adequate progress in all academic areas especially crucial. Increasingly, teachers of striving readers have come to realize that a foundational problem for learners is the ability to read sight words, decode words, and read phrases and sentences automatically and rapidly (Ming & Dkes, 2008). These skills are crucial for learning content at all education levels, including primary, intermediate, middle grades, and secondary, the significance of which will have a resounding impact on future learning and academic achievement, particularly among students with exceptionalities (Rasinski & Young, 2017). How these skills may be achieved for students with exceptionalities through choral reading is the topic of this paper.

In my preparation program to become a general educator, I was taught the primacy of reading for increased academic achievement of all children. At least 18 hours of reading courses were required in my undergraduate program, which included literacy development, relevant practica, and special education courses that drew me into the world of exceptionality, dyslexia, and the full array of perceptual and conceptual disabilities and corresponding etiologies, including the evidence-based teaching practices that were most effective with children with exceptionalities. Providing specialized learning experiences to students with disabilities became my goal as a general education teacher, and, gradually realizing my heart as a special educator, I obtained a Master's degree in special education. I spent the majority of my teaching years as a special education teacher, learning disabilities learning specialist, and speech and language specialist. Throughout my teaching career, I found myself engaged in teaching reading to all my students. It wasn't, however, until I began supervising student teachers in a preservice special education preparation program during my doctoral program in curriculum and instruction, that I began to read about use of choral reading in my supervisee's reflections - and the success, albeit anecdotal, that they were having with their reluctant readers, most of whom exhibited or were diagnosed with some form of specific learning disability - as an intervention for students receiving specialized reading instruction. It seems reasonable now, as a preparer of special education teachers, to reinvestigate the possibilities afforded by choral reading as an intervention for students with exceptionalities. As the literature that follows will reveal, choral reading has remained a vehicle for helping striving readers increase reading fluency and may play a role in today's classrooms in building reading proficiency among students with exceptionalities.

Strategies Addressing Fluency Difficulties

In the United States, a significant number of learners struggle to achieve fluency in reading (Rasinski & Young, 2017). More than an academic frill, fluency is a necessary requisite for acquisition of critical reading skills, including increased rate of reading comprehension, word recognition, and academic achievement among both striving (Block, 2019) readers and students with exceptionalities (Begency, Levy, & Field, 2017; Feldman, Feighan, Kirtcheva, & Heeren, 2012; Guerin & Murphy, 2015; Mehigan, 2020; Merimee, 2017; Park, Kiely, Brownell, & Benedict, 2019; Vaughn, Solis, Miciak, Taylor, & Fletcher, 2016; Wood, 2020). Fluent reading, recognized as reading words correctly, fast, and automatically without additional effort (Kodan & Akyol, 2018; Rasinski & Young, 2017), is related to many aspects of reading. It includes both word recognition and vocalization. Additionally, it is determined by oral reading, a skill many striving readers feel reluctant to try. Reading fluency requires skills such as expression, clarity, accuracy, and speed.

Two instructional strategies for improving fluency, silent reading and Round Robin Reading (RRR) have not led to increased reading fluency as practitioners have traditionally expected (Vaughn, Solis, Miciak, Taylor, & Fletcher, 2016). Silent reading cannot provide the teacher with an accurate accounting of what meaning the learner is gleaning and the requirement to read aloud to classmates as in Round Robin Reading, can put striving readers and those with exceptionalities in a stressful position by displaying their disfluent reading skills in front of others. As Hasbrouck (2007) avers:

When children read too slowly or haltingly, the text devolves into a broken string of words and/or phrases; it's a struggle just to remember what's been read, much less extract its meaning. So it's important that teachers determine if their students' fluency is at a level appropriate for their grade. If not, how should it be developed? If a student is appropriately fluent for her grade level, how does a teacher help maintain that student's fluency? And, how does a teacher make these determinations? (p. 2).

Repeated reading, the re-reading of short, meaningful paragraphs until student reaches a satisfactory level of fluency, has also been used to assist both striving and accomplished readers alike. During this activity, the accomplished reader begins by reading text orally to the striving reader, and then the striving reader reads the text aloud. The good reader corrects the mistakes when the other vocalizes the text. In this way, striving readers develop both fluent reading and comprehension skills (Mutia, 2018; Paige, 2011; Rohmah, 2019). While this “parroting” process may prove successful for some learners, as in Round Robin Reading, it also can make striving readers and those with exceptionalities uneasy by putting their disfluent reading skills on full display. The student is still reading solo before a more accomplished reader and unprotected from criticism, no matter how constructive it is or how gently it is offered. The purpose of any strategy should be to encourage reading and the enjoyment that comes from it. When an emergent or striving reader's confidence is disrupted, it could lead to uneven skill achievement making reading a seemingly unattainable goal (Paige, 2011). Helping younger students develop proficiency in word recognition, reading fluency, and ultimately comprehension, while using whole class strategies that aim to create a meaningful context for inclusive literacy education, may lead to greater reading success.

Choral reading, a reading strategy that involves two or more students reading a passage in unison, where striving readers following the reading model provided by more proficient readers in a group, has long been recognized as a vehicle for improving fluency among students with

exceptionalities (Kodal, & Akyol, 2018). This instructional strategy, which is the topic of this paper, provides the interpersonal modeling needed by learners with exceptionalities, while providing a safe space for internalization of fluency skills to occur.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual intricacies of choral reading, an instructional strategy for improving reading fluency, may be explained through a theoretical framework based on the work of Vygotsky (1978) and Wertsch (1985; 1991). Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is often applied to educational phenomena to explain the gains that students (and adults) are able to cognitively achieve when engaged in learning with a more knowledgeable other, who takes on a modeling role. Vygotsky's (1978) notion of socio-cultural learning holds that learning takes place on two cognitive planes – the interpersonal and intrapersonal planes of cognition. The interpersonal plane of cognition is characterized by a verbal interchange between two or more individuals. An example would include two individuals having a conversation where information is exchanged while both are engaged in active listening. The intrapersonal plane of cognition is characterized as the process of “internal” learning, when new understanding is gained as a result of verbalized information that is intercepted, internally mediated and manipulated, and eventually given meaning. It is here where Vygotsky's (1978) and Wertsch's (1991) theories intersect. Wertsch (1985) posited that learners use cultural or mediational tools in gaining understanding. These tools shape both social (i.e., interpersonal) and individual (i.e., intrapersonal) processes. Appropriating these processes is language and/or “voice.” When applied to the process of choral reading, we can postulate that both interpersonal and intrapersonal planes of cognition are taking place. During choral reading, students of varying reading abilities are engaging in a social, yet simultaneously personal, level of oral reading. Oral reading, embodied as interpersonal speech happens during the initial phase, followed by intrapersonal speech, where the mind manipulates and mediates the speech intercepted by the learner. The social nature of oral, or choral reading, therefore, can provide a mediational means that can shape the social and individual processes that are receptive to reading fluency.

Unique Struggles for Students with Exceptionalities

The variables that affect a learner's acquisition of language pose significantly higher challenges to students with exceptionalities, particularly those with specific auditory and/or verbal disabilities, as well as those lacking integrity in the areas of auditory comprehension, auditory memory, auditory discrimination, sequencing, and/or closure, and phonemic awareness. These difficulties manifest in the classroom in the learner experiencing difficulty in comprehending oral directions, putting meaning to stories read to him/her and developing sound-symbol relationships, a critical prerequisite for beginning readers. Children with specific learning disabilities that affect language development and usage cannot read what they are unable to sense and perceive. The result is interruption in reading fluency, frequently observed as slow, labored, and staccato-like decoding, and comprehension difficulties. As Stevens, Walker, and Vaughn (2016) remind us, “When word recognition is slow and labored, cognitive load is occupied at the expense of understanding text” (p. 1).

Shaywitz and Shaywitz (2005) provide a biological explanation for reading fluency difficulty as related to *dyslexia*, which they describe as a “disorder within the language system and more specifically within a particular subcomponent of that system, phonological processing” (p. 1). They refer to magnetic resonance imaging, or MRI, as providing evidence of a neurobiological “signature” for dyslexia, specifically a disruption of two left hemisphere posterior brain systems, one parieto-temporal, the other occipito-temporal. They cite evidence

that indicates that the left occipito-temporal system is responsible for the development of fluent (automatic) reading (p. 1), a key component in the development of reading comprehension. Low auditory memory, particularly among students with dyslexia, compromises the student's ability to answer comprehension questions, grasp a selection's main idea, and sequence events – skills associated with higher order thinking and inferential thinking (Torgesen & Hudson, 2006). Effective central auditory processing skills are needed for learners to recall details in oral and written verbal assignments, draw inferences from what has been read, and grasp the meaning of written material before the read to the end of a sentence, paragraph, or chapter. Combined with low visual memory, visual sequencing, and visual closure, central auditory processing difficulties often lead to the learner's inability to recognize and pair letters with sounds and blend sounds into words, negatively impacting his/her ability to read, either silently or aloud. When a learner is unable to recall a symbol, sound, or word he has just seen, reading orally or silently becomes a monumental task, leading to disturbances in revisualization which affect spelling and writing in addition to reading (Reutzel, 2015). In the absence of auditory and/or visual integrity, auditory and visual processing generally is compromised, affecting not only phonemic awareness and acquisition, but reading fluency as well. For children with exceptionalities, other variables that compromise reading fluency, including environments in which learners have not received appropriate reading instruction, feel unsafe to take risks, or experience a climate of distrust, unfairness and non-acceptance of mistakes, only exacerbate their challenges and often lead to reading avoidance due to unsuccessful reading performance (Damico et al., 2009).

Choral Reading for Students with Exceptionalities

For students with exceptionalities who are striving readers, the benefits of choral reading may be even greater than for their typically developing peers (Merimee, 2017). Authors agree that choral reading increases reading fluency among culturally and linguistically diverse learners as well as those with exceptionalities (Paige, 2011; Raddi, 2018; Rasinski & Young, 2017; Turner, 2010, 2012), and the evidence appears to be growing internationally (Itani, 2017; Kodal & Akyol, 2018; Mutia, 2018; Nasution, Zulkarnain, & Suhariyanti, 2020; Rohmah, 2019). For students who are culturally or linguistically diverse, choral reading provides opportunities for learners to benefit from modeling by a more knowledgeable other (Vygotsky, 1978). Choral reading strategies appear to work well for increasing fluency among culturally and linguistically diverse learners, along with initial instruction in English, highly contextualized experiences, varied opportunities for practice, and peer assisted learning strategies. For students with exceptionalities engaged in choral reading, peer-assisted modeling provides a *scaffold* for learning word identification, pacing, intonation, expression, and prosody. The choral reading context provides reassurance and creates a safe space for learners to try, learn, and develop many of the skills essential for successful reading. What a child with an exceptionality can achieve with guidance and encouragement from a skilled partner during choral reading, surpasses what the child can achieve on his or her own. As a result, aver Vadasy, Sanders, and Peyton (2005), students with exceptionalities approximate the skill of decoding as modeled by others.

Further, Rasinski (2017) posits that, along with modeling fluent reading, choral reading can guide the development of appropriate fluency instruction in the classroom, particularly for those with exceptionalities. Hasbrouck (2006) affirms that choral reading group members may be teachers, parents, students, or others, stating that “it is possible that the lowest performing students may have difficulty keeping up with even a moderate pace. However, they can follow along, participating when they can, and still hear the text being read accurately and with good pacing and phrasing” in choral reading (p. 3). In choral reading, typically all students read the

same text aloud – in unison - in the presence of the teacher, who serves as their model. At the end of the activity, the teacher provides feedback to students in terms of vocalization, reading speed, and prosody (Raddi, 2018). According to Richards (2000), for example, prosodic cues such as those provided in a choral reading activity during a study by Rasinski, Padak, Linek, & Sturtevant (1994), gave students a way to hold onto grammar patterns – a critical skill for students with exceptionalities - and concluded that this skill was necessary for fluent oral reading to occur. Choral reading, asserts Hodges (2015) is successful when students not only are able to identify their own deficiencies, but recognize what they are doing correctly.

Choral Reading Benefits

Carbo (2007) contends that choral reading promotes appreciation for literature, increased interest in - and enjoyment of – reading. Choral reading strategies are recognized as improving reading fluency by positively influencing reading ability among secondary and middle grades students by expanding vocabulary, sight word recognition, and decoding skills (Faver, 2009; Guerin & Murphy, 2015, Paige, & Magpuri-Lavell, 2014). Adolescents may be more reluctant to engage in choral reading initially, but soon discover that there is a prosody and rhythm to choral reading that are akin to recitation of song lyrics in a variety of music genres (Harris, Marchand-Martella, & Martella, 2000). Jennings, Caldwell, and Lerner (2014) assert “because students find choral reading enjoyable, they willingly practice the word recognition that helps them to give a polished performance” (p.213). If students enjoy choral reading they might have more motivation when they are reading, and this is very important for striving readers and those with exceptionalities. Providing students with an activity that gives them the satisfaction of delivering a “well-rehearsed, expressive rendition" (p. 213) is especially significant for those with learning disabilities.

Choral reading has been observed to have benefits beyond increasing reading fluency in the area of classroom management (Haydon, Border, Embury, & Clarke, 2009) as well as reaching striving readers with emotional and behavioral disorders (McDaniel, Duchaine, & Jolivet, 2010). Poetry reading, for example, when used as a conduit for choral reading, is especially helpful to readers, including adolescents with disabilities, due to its dual effect as stimulant and equalizer (Hodges, 2016). Poetry may serve as an appropriate vehicle for incorporating choral reading in the curriculum, making it possible for all students, including students with exceptionalities and students who are culturally and linguistically diverse, to reap the benefits of this reading strategy. Specifically, learners with exceptionalities and diverse learners can gain a sense of visual control, especially through orally reading poetry, where there are just a few words on a line with ample white space.

Additionally, poems are often predictable, through rhythm, a rhyming pattern, or a repeated phrased. Predictability is an immense boost to a student with a disability, for whom learning is anything but predictable. The teacher should choose a poem that is appropriate for all instructional reading and interest levels before engaging students in a lively conversation regarding the poem (i.e., anticipatory set). Electronic or paper copies of the poem should be provided to all students and then read aloud while students listen. The teacher should read with all the expression, sound effects, or movement that the poem evokes. Prosody (patterns of stress or intonation) and body language are important elements of the reading and provide interest and motivation for learners with exceptionalities. The poem should be read a second time – slowly – while students follow along using a larger visual, such as a Promethean Board. The reading speed can be gradually increased depending on the reaction of the students. When students appear to feel comfortable with the words and movements, the teacher can elicit volunteers to

begin reciting the poem themselves. Solo reading should only be given to those who volunteer. If no one appears to be ready to read alone, allow each line to be read by two or more individuals in the class or group (i.e., choral reading). Students can practice reading the poem or section of the poem with assigned parts (i.e., rereading), especially if it will be performed for others. These steps in the choral reading process can be followed by simple naming questions, followed by increasingly more complex or inferential questions that encompass cognitive skills associated with sequencing, predicting, forming conclusions, thinking metaphorically, analyzing, and generalizing to other mediums.

Conclusion

In the U.S. and globally, students are exposed to increasingly higher reading demands, making effective comprehension of a variety of academic texts and topics across content areas an expectation, and accurate and automatic word recognition, prosody, and reading fluency a necessity (Stevens, Walker, & Vaughn, 2016). For those students who transition from the elementary grades to middle and secondary grades as fluent readers, when they encounter new syntax, vocabulary, and divergent meanings, most, if not all, will typically navigate these new learnings successfully. For students with exceptionalities who are not fluent readers, however, the stakes are even higher and the challenge to gain meaning from what they read will be that much greater. Students with exceptionalities often find it challenging to reach a level of word recognition automaticity and when word recognition is laborious and their energy is largely expended on decoding, reading fluency is compromised. Thus, fluent reading is critical for students to be able to pivot their attention from the decoding process to comprehension of text. This is important not only for the understanding of academic text, but for personal reading enjoyment and the motivation to become a lifelong reader as well.

Choral reading has been found to be an effective method to improve reading fluency of learners with exceptionalities (Kodal & Akyol, 2018; Mutia, 2018; Paige, 2011; Rohmah, 2019). This strategy is wholly consistent with the underpinnings of ZPD, or Zone of Proximal Development (1978) and Vygotsky's principles of socio-cultural learning in that learners with exceptionalities who engage with more able reading peers can approximate decoding with the help of a model that can scaffold future learning. The difference between what students can do without help and what they can do with help is brought to the fore during either peer assisted or teacher-led choral reading. In addition to having a positive impact on the development of word recognition, reading comprehension skills, and academic achievement, this strategy has the potential to encourage peer interaction, provide opportunities for improved reading comprehension, and increase overall academic achievement for all readers, including those with exceptionalities (Raddi, 2018).

Hasbrouck (2006) reminds us that reading fluency is not a singular skill necessary for successful reading and educators will continue having ongoing debates about which strategies most effectively increase reading success. Questions regarding repeated reading, round robin, or reading the same or several different passages that have much of the same vocabulary, do not negate the need for fluency practice, particularly how it affects reading comprehension, academic achievement, and reading enjoyment. In the classroom setting, choral reading may just provide the exhilarating mix of listening, vocalizing, and motivation that today's students with exceptionalities both need and deserve.

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