

Action Research Proposal

Central Junior High School

ELPS 737
December 12, 2007

Ashley Andreas
Darcy Austin
Thomas Fulbright

Parker Guidry
Tyler Harnett
Michael Karlin

Reading Advisory Program (RAP)

An Action Research Proposal

❖ Introduction and Rationale

Language is the vehicle of human interaction. It is the primary way in which we communicate, participate, and learn. Without the necessary skills to decipher and interpret language, it would be nigh impossible to ingest new experiences in the correct context and perspective. It is no wonder then that reading, an important derivative of language, is essential to educators when considering the learning capacity and aptitude of students. Reading is an activity intrinsic to all learning situations, though it is often taken for granted that all textbooks are just that: *books*. Reading not only provides the basis for learning, but can also be used to expand a child's understanding of the mundane and literal to the complex and abstract. Reading can provide that understanding, but only through the cultivation of effective reading can we guarantee an exceptional educational experience for our young people.

For the purposes of our action research, we have selected to address this issue by focusing on reading styles and proficiency within Central Junior High School in Lawrence USD 497. Central administrators and reading specialists have noticed a steady trend within the school of declining performance on reading competency. This observation has been corroborated by both the state standardized assessments as well as the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) exams given annually within the school. As a result of this apparent deficiency, the school has made reading proficiency the highest priority within the school improvement plan. Though steps are being taken to alleviate the problem with the lowest performing students, the primary force of their efforts is concentrated only on those students. The majority of these students are already receiving support from Individualized Education Plans (IEP) and Applied Reading classes, but there was a growing concern for those students without identified learning disabilities that were still performing inconstantly on reading assessments. The application of a specific program targeting these students could be designed to instill and practice effective reading techniques that can bolster their performance in this area of cognitive understanding.

After careful deliberation of the circumstances and concerns at Central Junior High, we have developed the following research question to focus our action research:

Can we improve Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) reading scores for a selected group of students by implementing a collaborative and sustainable reading advisory program that focuses on using comprehension and vocabulary strategies?

Any study, regardless of breadth or intensity, is not without certain limitations. While it is not necessarily the job of the research party to eliminate all limitations, it is imperative that we state them explicitly and descriptively. The limitations are as follows:

- The time allotted to work with students is limited due to the advisory period and Mustang Round-Up program already in place. While practical, it sets constraints of possible times available to students.
- The student selection for the Reading Advisory Program (RAP) is based off of the MAP reading scores which serve as the only form of common assessment upon which to identify individuals for the program.
- MAP is not necessarily the best indicator of reading success. Further correlation with other assessments is impractical, but could lead to more definitive conclusions.
- The focus of the Reading Advisory Program will not be geared towards improving general reading ability but rather the program will focus on teaching students how to improve reading comprehension skills on timed, standardized tests, such as the MAP assessment.
- Selection of sample is based on recommendation/selection rather than randomization, which hampers statistical validity.

❖ **Review of Literature**

Introduction to Reading Ability

Every educational discipline requires, at the very least, some degree of literacy. Yet for many students, reading in school is something to be avoided at all costs. Why are so many students, at all levels and in all subject areas, discouraged by reading, especially when students who have difficulty reading are seldom educationally successful? “The characteristic most prominently associated with the student having a history of poor grades...is a deficiency in reading skills” (Mingoia, 1960, p. 27).

There are numerous reasons why students may develop into reluctant readers. For some, “reading difficulties may be intertwined with factors such as cultural background, language barriers, learning disabilities, emotional disturbances, family disruption, teenage pregnancy, fear of failure, and peer pressure” (Stringer, 2003, p. 71). Distaste towards reading may also have developed in students from feelings of, “failure throughout their schooling. Reluctant readers have probably been told or have received the message that they are poor readers, and as a result, they have felt frustrated, inadequate, confused, and ashamed” (Hebb, 2000, p. 22).

Many students see reading as a punishment and teachers are left to find some means of motivating and, “encouraging less-than-enthusiastic readers.” (Beckman, 1984, p. 84) These students often fail to see the necessity of improving their reading ability and resort to whatever means necessary to avoid reading in the classroom. Teachers, “are faced with readers whose levels of reading skill range from near fourth grade through college,” (Beckman, 1984, p. 84), and yet are expected to provide a reading environment where all students can benefit.

However, while all these issues may indeed lead to a student developing poor reading habits, the, “central problem for reluctant readers is that they do not use metacognitive and self-monitoring strategies.” (Stringer, 2003, p. 72) In other words, the students lack the necessary internal dialogue and monitoring habits that ensure what is being read is also being processed and understood. Fortunately, regardless of why students often develop poor reading habits, there are steps schools can take to ensure all students reach the level of literacy that is necessary to succeed both educationally and developmentally.

Examination of Reading Strategies

There are many reading strategies that research has proven to be effective. However, before specific strategies are introduced to students, instructors must stress the importance of such strategies. According to Oka and Paris, “Subsequent research revealed that many students were unconvinced of the importance or necessity of using strategies following demonstrations or directions to use particular procedures” (1998, p. 34). These findings show that providing students with a rationale for the strategies being used will allow the students to see the significance of implementing these strategies once they have left their designated reading programs.

It has been noted that the main abilities students with reading problems lack are metacognitive and self-monitoring skills (Stringer, 2003). Educating students on metacognitive skills will, “...enhance maintenance and generalization of strategy training by conveying conditional as well as procedural knowledge about strategies” (Oka and Paris, 1998, p. 34). In one study, Schunk and Rice provided metacognitive instruction to fourth and fifth graders. Here, “students practiced finding the main ideas in passages using explicit strategies...received multiple sources of information about the value of the strategies for enhancing reading comprehension...and students were encouraged to attribute their success to personal effort” (Oka and Paris, 1998, p. 35). The results from this study showed an improvement in reading comprehension as well as an improvement in self-efficacy scores.

Schunk and Rice also recommend another approach to increase metacognitive and self-monitoring skills. Here, teachers should communicate, “a self-instructional approach that includes modeling, guided practice, faded self-guidance, and convert self-instruction,” to promote self-regulated learning (Oka and Paris, 1998, p. 35). Edwin Mingola gives an example of a reading program where the students take full responsibility of their learning. Mingola suggests a self-selection program where, “the student keeps records of materials read, new vocabulary, and ways he reconstructed the reading experience” (1960, p. 28). This program could easily incorporate the approach given by Schunk and Rice; the teacher could demonstrate the self-selection program, guide students as they begin this process, provide less guidance as the students read more books, and finally provide no guidance when students leave the reading program and begin to use this model on their own.

Attribution training is another instructional method that teachers can implement to increase metacognitive and self-monitoring skills. This type of training “focus[es] on enhancing students’ awareness of the effort required for effective reading” (Oka and Paris, 1998, p. 36). Attribution training can be applied to any reading strategy. For example, Short and Ryan used attribution training along with teaching summarization

strategies (Oka and Paris, 1998). Research has shown that incorporating motivational training with strategy instruction will increase the likelihood of students using reading strategies once they are no longer being instructed (Oka and Paris, 1998).

Reading Improvement Programs

Reading strategies implemented in the classroom can be beneficial for all levels of readers. There is a system that is driving school accountability which places great weight on high-stakes testing. These tests measure reading skills, but also focus on the ability of the student to present these reading skills in a narrow way. There is no debate that a good reader can do well on a test, but a reluctant reader may have unnecessary difficulty. Judith Langer reviewed a large number of school observations to see patterns. In terms of test preparation, successful schools,

“... involved relevant teachers and administrators in a careful deconstruction and analysis of the test items themselves, which led to a deeper understanding of the literacy skills, strategies, and knowledge needed for students to achieve higher levels of literacy performance. This was followed by a review and revision of both the curriculum and instructional guidelines to ensure that the identified skills and knowledge were incorporated into the ongoing English program the students would experience,” (2001, p. 860-1).

This “review and revision” can be supplemented by classes for remedial readers. This process can also be supplemented by a tutoring system.

Timothy Shanahan wrote a meta-analysis of studies on tutoring. He discusses the benefits and drawbacks of tutoring programs,

“We simply do not know why tutoring programs work, although there are many hypotheses and a few empirical clues. Several explanations of tutoring have been proposed, including greater individual involvement, improved attention, increased time on task, teacher explanations that are more likely to match the prior knowledge of the students, greater match of curricular demands to student needs, more appropriate individual pacing, more immediate and relevant feedback to student attempts, and greater opportunity for student identification with the tutor,” (2008, p. 229).

Shanahan emphasizes the role of the tutoring program and not only the role of the tutor. He says, “In establishing tutoring programs, care must be taken to ensure adequate time on task for students, high quality of instruction, and appropriateness of curriculum” (2008, p. 223). This argument is supported by the fact that, “Several of the reviews [Shanahan read] maintained that well-structured tutoring programs work best (Cohen et al., 1982; Ellson, 1969; Rosenshine & Furst, 1969; Wasik & Slavin, 1993)” (2008, p. 230). He also focuses on the length and sustainability of the program, “The claim that amount of tutoring is negatively correlated with educational gains is especially troubling given that many studies have shown that gains from tutoring are not well maintained after the tutors are withdrawn” (2008, p. 228).

The tutor also has the capacity for individualization that the classroom teacher may not have. Shanahan’s research, “suggest[s] that the tutored children gained substantially more than control comparisons” (1998, p. 220). There are also certain students who would benefit greatly from the help of a tutoring program. The programs that Shanahan researched formulated programs that reinforced Langer’s ideas about the

“review and revision” of the curriculum. He shows, “The individual nature of this instruction [the tutoring program] made it possible for tutors to construct sufficiently supportive situations in which the children could successfully participate in the various reading tasks” (1998, p. 230). Overall, tutoring programs are an effective alternative for reluctant readers to perform on standardized tests.

❖ **Research Method**

Pre-Implementation

Central Junior High’s School Improvement Plan has many of objectives. One of its highest priority objectives is the school’s reading and vocabulary scores. For Central Junior High reading has been a main concern for some time now, but its recent scores on the Measures of Academic Progress assessment (a test administered district wide) have increased the schools desire to confront the problem. The School Improvement Plan and the MAP assessment have provided the motivation and the means for this action research.

The MAP test is administered once in the fall and again in the spring. The Action Research Problem created in November for the 2007-2008 school year will be using the MAP scores from September 2007 as means of data collection. These scores provided a means of selection for a number of students to be adopted into the Action Research and acted as a base line upon which to compare the selected students’ spring scores. The selected students have been taken from a spreadsheet of scores produced by the MAP reading test. Students eligible were those who scored in the low percentile (scoring lower than 30%) but are not currently receiving any support through the school’s Applied Reading class or Individualized Education Plans.

Since there will only be 30 students admitted to this program, there will be many additional students who meet the criteria (low MAP scores and not receiving additional support) who can be used as the control group. Once new MAP scores are obtained in May, those students not in RAP who initially had low scores can be compared to those students who were involved in RAP.

In November 2007, these 30 eligible students were divided into groups of ten and paired with three selected qualified teachers. Prior to this, all three cooperating teachers attended several training sessions in which our specific reading strategies were introduced and explained. The three selected teachers have committed to continuing the program if it proves successful during the spring semester.

Implementation

In January 2008 RAP, will go into effect. The selected student groups will be transferred from their first semester advisories to their new advisory teachers and classrooms. Each classroom will have not only a cooperating teacher, but will also include 2 student interns. This will give each of the RAP classrooms a 1 to 3.3-instructor to student ratio. Each of these classrooms will be equipped with the necessary tools and resources to conduct the research and teaching methods in a self-contained environment, with the exception of occasional computer usage. With the initial implementation of RAP in January 2007, the cooperating teachers and the student interns will begin to interact with the participating students- discovering their likes and dislikes in regards to reading,

and learning more about the individual as a person (see attached questionnaire). This relationship building process is crucial to knowing how to better serve the students and create a more individualized learning environment to help improve their reading ability. The material covered and the manner in which the strategies are presented will initially be based on the students' interests. The specific reading strategies will be taken from, but not limited to, the strategies described in full on pages 7-8.

Twice a week, starting mid-February, these students will participate in different reading activities inclusive of comprehension and vocabulary strategies based on the needs of the individual students. Once each classroom has established which reading strategies work best, the Interns and cooperating teachers can pare down the multiple strategies being used to the 3 most effective ones. The low instructor to student ratio will help ensure each student participant receives ample guidance. The low number of students in the classroom will also facilitate a smaller, more intimate learning community.

At the conclusion of the Reading Advisory Program, students will take the end-of-the-year MAP assessment between April 28th and May 9th. The Interns will use this data to gain insight into the effectiveness of their Action Research. Furthermore, the Interns can breakdown the received scores into sub-categories allowing them to evaluate what areas of focus (comprehension, vocabulary, etc.) improved. This will allow the Interns to evaluate different instructional methods, discovering which may have been more effective, ultimately allowing the Interns to predict which changes could be made in the future to make the program more successful.

After the collection and analysis of the student scores, the Interns will present their findings to the staff of Central Junior High. The presentation will explain what strategies were used in RAP, which ones may have been more helpful and which strategies could be used across the curriculum in the general classroom. Lastly, the Interns will offer suggestions on how to make the Reading Advisory Program a sustainable and beneficial part of the school.

Legitimacy

This sequence of events has been selected both for its practicality and necessity. The first steps of viewing the school's improvement plan and collecting the Fall's MAP scores will allow for the selection of students and the focus of areas to research for methods. These initial numbers directed the Interns toward a focus on comprehension and vocabulary. By breaking students up into different advisories for the second semester, all of the selected students will be moved to a location where the teaching and research methods can be used more effectively.

❖ Reading and Best Practice Strategies for Action Research*

*Developed for RAP implementation. Strategies may include, but are not necessarily limited to, these strategies and will be chosen based on individual student needs.

Pre-Reading

Teachers use pre-reading to help students get a grasp of contexts, experiences, biases, and background knowledge. This is an important strategy that can help teachers understand what students bring with them to a reading activity. There are several important aspects of pre-reading activities:

- a) *Brainstorming*- In this step, students begin discussing what they already know about certain issues, locations, characters, etc. that will be brought up in their reading activity. For example, if students are reading a book about cells, the teacher would have the students create a list of facts that relate to this.
- b) *Graphic Organizers*- In this step, the teacher organizes all the information students have come up with during the brainstorming stage. Creating webs, outlines, or categorizing the information is an excellent way to show students how all the material is connected.
- c) *Pre-reading Questions*- Along with brainstorming and creating graphic organizers, teachers should also ask students some “warm-up” questions before reading begins. These questions are designed to get students thinking critically about what they are about to read. Examples of pre-reading questions would be, “What do I already know about this topic?” “What do I need to find out while reading?” “How do these graphs relate to what I am going to read?” “Is there anything else I need to find out before I begin to read?”
- d) *Guided Reading*- For guided reading, students attempt to search their material for deeper meaning with the help of the teacher. Teachers assist students in analyzing and synthesizing material by asking students to present different interpretations of what they have read.

Reciprocal Teaching

The goal of reciprocal teaching is to help students construct meaning from texts and provide a system where the teacher can monitor student progress. Reciprocal teaching includes:

- a) *Summarizing*- Students find, list, and discuss the most important or relevant information.
 - b) *Questioning*- Students generate a series of questions about the text that reflect what problems they are currently having with understanding.
 - c) *Clarify*- Using the answers to the above questions, students reconcile what they do not understand with the solutions the teacher suggests.
 - d) *Predicting*- Students hypothesize about what will occur next in the text and why.
 - e) *Flag and Tag*- Before reading, students are given a set of post-it notes that they can use to “tag” certain items in the text. Suggestions for items to tag:
 - a. *Main Idea*- Sentences that give good summaries of a passage
 - b. *Difficulty*- Any sections that are confusing or difficult to read
 - c. *Prior Knowledge*- Any section that covers something you have learned or previously discussed
 - d. *Road Block*- Any part of the text that is so confusing or difficult you cannot go any further without clarification
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❖ **Resources**

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- Mingoia, E. (1960). Improving the Reading of Academically Untalented Students. *The English Journal*, 49, (1), 27-34
- Paris, S. G. & Oka, E. R. (1989). Strategies for Comprehending Text and Coping with Reading Difficulties. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 12, (1), Learning Strategy Instruction, 32-42.
- Shanahan, T. (1998). On the Effectiveness and Limitations of Tutoring in Reading. *Review of Research in Education*, 23, 217-234.
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Student Questionnaire

What are your favorite types of materials to read?
(For example, do you like books? Magazines? Newspapers? Internet Sites?)

What sort of classroom reading activities do you enjoy?
(For example, reading aloud? Reading silently? Book circles? Reading worksheets?)

How many hours a week do you spend reading *outside* of school?
(Please circle one)

0 Hours a week 1-3 Hours 4-6 Hours 7-9 Hours Over 10 Hours

In one day, how many classes usually have reading activities in them?

1 2 3 4

How many books do you think you read in a year?

0 Books 1-3 Books 4-6 Books 7-9 Books Over 10 Books