

Reading Renaissance Teacher Intervention Strategies for Student Success

An Action Research Study

Lydia J. Brantley

Abstract: Helping children to become better readers is a tremendous responsibility faced by educators today. With students of varying abilities, reaching each child requires training, time, and dedication. The goal of this study was to improve the quality and quantity of the teacher/student relationship component of the Reading Renaissance program, which is the core-reading program in the elementary school in which I work. Consideration was given to teacher intervention strategies that were in use as well as those strategies that both teachers and students identified as effective. Staff development sessions were provided and through surveys, observations, and focus group sessions, third grade students and teachers demonstrated that participation in specific, planned staff development could be successful for changing reading instruction. Time limits of the study made it impractical to measure student reading growth.

Introduction

Reading Renaissance is a reading program that couples computer-based reading incentive software with specific aspects of teacher intervention to improve students reading abilities. In the school where I currently work, we have spent much time, effort, and money on Reading Renaissance (RR) software programs, the STAR Reading and Accelerated Reader programs specifically, with the intent of promoting students' reading motivation and growth. However, these programs alone were never intended to magically boost students' reading capabilities. They were intended to assist teachers in providing individualized reading instruction. The Reading Renaissance program, a program in which STAR Reading and Accelerated Reader are together only one component, emphasizes the importance of teacher intervention through conferencing, monitoring, and goal setting as vital for attaining maximum reading growth. After the program had been in place for approximately six years, I began to observe that some teachers had developed a blind dependence on the STAR Reading and Accelerated Reader software programs and had ceased to attend to the teacher intervention component of the Reading Renaissance program.

Reading Renaissance is designed for students to take a diagnostic STAR Reading test that determines their reading ranges by grade level, or Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). After taking the STAR Reading test, students read books within their ZPD's and take Accelerated Reader tests to measure reading comprehension. All second through fifth grade teachers at the school I serve use these components of the program regularly. However, the teacher intervention component, which is quite important, did not seem to be used as consistently as the software. There even seemed to be an acceptance of the software as "the law", leaving little room for teacher intervention.

Our school is a small elementary, kindergarten through fifth grade, school consisting of approximately 400 students. The school is located in an affluent community, with less than 25% of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch. Many community members serve as mentors, tutors, and guest speakers. Also, the PTA is committed to providing additional funds for the school. The staff consists primarily of veteran teachers with an average of 12-15 years experience, and the school experiences very little turn over in staff. The principal has been at the school for three years and has fifteen years of administrative experience. The school is the smallest in the county, and does not qualify for any special funding programs.

At the beginning of the 1999-2000 school year, two teachers, myself and one other, were sent to a Reading Renaissance seminar. For several years prior to that experience, our school had been using Accelerated Reader, which is a software program that motivates children to read by awarding points for passing tests on chosen books. Students had been encouraged to read any Accelerated Reader materials, take the accompanying tests, and earn points. The school was "point driven", and competitions existed between classes as to who could earn the most points. Teachers believed that students were successful when they attained a large number of points. Students read any book that was on the Accelerated Reader list, regardless of whether the book was appropriate for the child or

not. Fifth graders had cornered the market on banking Accelerated Reader points by taking mass quantities of tests on books which were far below their reading ability levels.

After attending the conference, the reading teacher and I thought we had learned how to break the point dependency and take the school to the next level. We learned that our focus had been on sheer quantity of earning points. We assumed that if children were able to earn points, they were reading. We agreed that our school needed to shift the focus from being point-driven to focusing on increasing students' reading abilities. We believed that if we began to attend to the learner-centered components of Reading Renaissance rather than just the software, we could help our students become better readers. The learner-centered components of Reading Renaissance that are intended to maximize student reading growth include time on task, which is essentially time spent reading, motivation, utilization of Learning Information Systems (LIS), and teacher intervention (Reading Renaissance Resources, 1999).

It is not at all surprising to learn that the more time children spend reading, the better readers they become (Clark, Pearson, Taylor, & Walpole, 1999). Recreational reading declines between grades one through five, and children spend many more hours engaged in watching television or talking on the telephone rather than reading for enjoyment (Reinking & Watkins, 2000). One particular study examined the effects of limiting television watching and encouraging reading instead. In the study, sixth grade students dramatically increased their reading time while decreasing their television watching time, and their reading comprehension rose significantly, as did their attitudes toward reading (Greif, 2000). Reading Renaissance recommends that children read, either individually or with others, at least 60 minutes daily (Reading Renaissance Resources, 1999). While none of these findings are surprising, they reaffirm the importance of tracking the amount of time students spend reading.

Motivated readers are those who participate in self-initiated reading, and become better readers as a result of increased exposure to literature (Morrison & Moser, 1998). Unfortunately, it has been shown that reading for pleasure declines throughout children's school years (Excellent Reading Teachers, 2000; Meece & Miller, 1997; Morrison & Moser, 1998). Consequently, an effective reading program should motivate students to want to read. Some suggested methods that have been proven effective in encouraging reluctant readers to read are: allowing more time for silent reading, offering a choice of reading materials, sharing of literature read with and by children, and providing adult modeling of reading (Morrison & Moser, 1998). An intent of Reading Renaissance is to foster reading motivation.

Utilizing Learning Information Systems (LIS), or the use of software, is the Reading Renaissance component that, in the beginning, our school utilized most often. An LIS is defined as "a system that provides information, most often by using computers" (Reading Renaissance Resources, 1999). The use of technology itself is motivating (Balajthy, 2000), therefore students were inspired by being able to use computers. By using technology, students were able to earn points according to how accurately they scored on an Accelerated Reader test. Every classroom had a computer, and teachers integrated the technological aspects of the reading program into the curriculum. As a result of increased frequency of computer use for reading, it has been suggested that the definition of literacy be altered to include the acts of reading and writing electronically (Case & Truscott, 1999). Because of the availability of the hardware and the ease of use of the software, the LIS component of Reading Renaissance seemed to almost run itself, which was one of the factors that led to its overwhelming acceptance, yet also contributed to a decrease in teacher intervention in reading.

Positive feedback from teachers to children about their reading contributes to an increase in confidence in their reading (Wang, 2000). Therefore, the teacher/student relationship is quite possibly the most influential part of the Reading Renaissance program. Researchers found that effective reading teachers generally provide individual assistance in helping students to read (Clark et al., 1999) and that when individual reading takes place daily with attention to skill development that reading skills are enhanced (Ferree, 1998). Consequently, if a teacher provides individualized attention to skill development, he/she can be one of the most important ingredients in the recipe for teaching children to read.

Through my observations, I concluded that my school primarily focused on the use of the software, or Learning Information Systems. Students who were successful, that is, were good readers and able to bank a large number of Accelerated Reader points, were motivated. Other students were frustrated and unmotivated. Reading has always been highly promoted and revered at our school. Students used much of the school day for reading and were assigned nightly homework in reading. Time on task seemed to be a component that our school valued. Of the four components suggested by Reading Renaissance, the area I sensed was most lacking was student/teacher relationships. Students were able to participate in Accelerated Reader on an individual basis. The good readers were successful, however struggling readers were frustrated. I observed very little teacher intervention in the process and after becoming curious about how I might improve the situation, I turned to action research to explore teacher intervention techniques. I designed staff development sessions for teachers in order to encourage and enable them to provide more individualized reading instruction for students.

The research questions I addressed throughout the action research project were:

1. Which teacher-intervention strategies do teachers currently use?
2. What teacher intervention strategies do students and teachers identify as effective for student gains in reading?
3. Can staff development alter the use of reading intervention strategies by teachers?

The Study

The participants of this study consisted of thirteen second through fifth grade classrooms teachers and three Early Intervention Program (EIP) teachers who also served grades two through five. The study focused specifically on third grade teachers and students. There were four third grade classroom teachers and one EIP teacher. There were approximately 85 third grade students of varying reading abilities. Observations were made during classroom reading time. A convenience sample of three students of varying reading levels from each class was selected by teachers to participate in the student focus group.

The school's leadership team, a team including administration and a representative from each grade level and special area team, granted permission for this study before work began. The materials and resources used in this study included administrative access to STAR Reading and Accelerated Reader programs, as well as human resources to deliver staff development. Staff development sessions were designed to instruct teachers in various methods of providing specific intervention practices within their reading classrooms. Teachers were invited to attend the staff development sessions, and throughout the project I observed in their classrooms looking for the interventions in practice.

To measure students' reading success, a variety of tools were used. At the beginning of the study, teachers were given a written reading intervention self-study to complete. This survey sought to determine which methods of reading intervention teachers currently used in the classroom. The survey asked teachers to indicate which strategies they believed were most helpful in ensuring students' reading success and why. They were also asked to indicate which interventions they believed were least helpful. To aid in planning for staff development sessions, the survey also requested that teachers indicate an area of reading-intervention in which they would like to be trained.

Two focus groups were held simultaneously; teachers who served grades two and three were in one group and teachers who served grades four and five in the other. The discussion of the focus groups was determined by the responses gathered on the initial self-study survey. This interaction included the following topics: (a) reading strategies that are most effective for emergent or struggling readers, (b) the amount of time spent reading per day at home as well as at school, (c) individualization of reading instruction, (d) reading instruction staff development needs, and (e) reading strategies for students reading below grade level. The sessions were audio taped for analysis, and each session lasted approximately 30 minutes.

Following the focus group sessions, teachers completed a simple written feedback survey that asked questions to determine if the focus sessions were helpful, and to identify one reading strategy heard in the sessions that they were willing to try in their classroom. After listening to the discussions, I created a needs assessment survey to determine how many teachers used each intervention. This Likert-style survey was given to all teachers who served grades two through five. Teachers were asked to rank each statement as to whether they never, rarely, sometimes, or frequently utilized specific reading intervention practices. The interventions included on the survey were: (a) individual conferencing with students, (b) sending information home to parents, (c) using diagnostic information from STAR Reading along with professional judgement to aid in the selection of reading materials, (d) pairing struggling readers with stronger readers or classroom volunteers, (e) using Accelerated Reader, (f) setting individual reading goals, (g) using motivation strategies to encourage reading, (h) modeling good reading practices, (i) allowing opportunities for reflective writing after reading, (j) allowing for peer collaboration after reading.

The tallied responses of these surveys showed that the least used interventions included using diagnostic information from STAR Reading, conducting individual conferences with students to discuss their reading progress, and helping students set individual reading goals. A need that was addressed at length in both focus group sessions but was not made evident on the survey was the need for training in guided reading practices. Therefore, staff development for teachers was planned to address these specific interventions.

Three staff development sessions were offered: How to Generate and Utilize Star Reading and Accelerated Reader Reports, Guided Reading Strategies, and Conducting Reading Conferencing with Students. Of the three, How to Generate and Utilize Star Reading and Accelerated Reader Reports was mandatory for all 2nd through 5th grade teachers, and for the other two, attendance was voluntary. Two EIP teachers conducted the Guided Reading Strategies session, and I conducted the other two.

After attending the staff development sessions, third grade teachers provided a convenient time for me to come observe them in their classrooms as they practiced skills they learned during the staff development sessions. I also asked them which intervention they would like for me to observe in practice. Each of the four classroom teachers was observed twice, and the EIP teacher who served third grade was observed three times. Specifically, I was watching to see these interactions in progress. I took notes on guideline forms that I had created for myself. These guidelines included observing (a) the type of reading intervention used, (b) how the intervention strategy was executed, (c) the number of students affected by the intervention, (d) related comments made by students, (e) similarities and differences in the way students respond to the intervention, and (f) similarities and differences in the way teachers used the intervention with different students. Each observation lasted 15 minutes.

After all observations were completed, three students from each third grade classroom came together with me for a focus group session. The students were chosen by their teachers, and represent various reading abilities. Questions were asked of students that gained information regarding their attitudes about reading and the types of things their teachers do to help them become better readers. Finally, students were asked to project what they would do if they were the teacher to help a student who was having difficulty reading. The 20-minute sessions were audio taped, which allowed me to analyze the discussions for recurrent themes and identify important quotations.

Toward the end of the study, teachers were asked to complete a final written self-study survey to help determine if the teacher believed the staff development sessions were helpful to their reading instruction.

A more informal method of data collection of casually talking with teachers throughout the three-week study helped me to get a more personal view from a teacher's perspective. Through these informal talks, I made ongoing notations, documenting their insight as to which specific intervention techniques were most helpful. I also talked with teachers about how they are utilizing the information given in the STAR Reading and Accelerated Reader reports.

Results and Analysis

Twelve teachers completed the initial self-study survey. Responses were categorized and listed in descending order with the interventions that received the most responses placed at the top of the list (See Figure 1). Teachers often listed several interventions for each of the three categories: Current Interventions, Least Effective Interventions, and those in which they desired additional training. The most commonly used interventions were ability grouping for reading, and the utilization of STAR reading and Accelerated Reader programs, both of which were used by all second through fifth grade classrooms. Modeling good reading practices was also frequently mentioned.

Order*	Current Interventions	f**	Least Effective Interventions	f**	Desire for Training	f**
1	Ability grouping for reading instruction	12	"Round-Robin" reading	10	More in-depth STAR Reading and AR reports training	10
2	The use of STAR and AR	12	Unmonitored independent book selection	9	Guided Reading techniques	7
3	Modeling good reading	10	Isolated vocabulary instruction	7	How to monitor and adjust a child's ZPD	6
4	Using rewards	9	Reading materials that are obsolete or uninteresting	5	Keeping poor or struggling readers from falling through the cracks	4
5	Thematic literature-based reading	8	Assigning non-purposeful reading for homework	3	Brain-based research reading techniques	4
6	Assigning purposeful reading for homework	6	Using rewards to benefit good readers only	1	Finding high-interest, low reading level materials	2
7	Individualized reading instruction/EIP	5			Finding high-level materials with appropriate content	2

8	Reading by interest	4				
9	Integrated vocabulary instruction	3				
10	Questioning during and after reading	3				
11	Individual student conferencing	2				

* Order indicates that responses are listed according to answers given most often to answers given least often.

**All frequencies relate to an n=12.

Figure 1: Initial self-study Results

The most commonly indicated interventions teachers believed to be least effective were "Round Robin" reading, which is embarrassing to poor readers and does not model good reading. Also, unmonitored book selection and teaching vocabulary words in isolation were listed as ineffective reading instruction as well. The top three choices indicated for the desire for additional training were more in-depth training on STAR Reading and Accelerated Reader reports, guided reading training, and techniques on monitoring a child's ZPD. The baseline data gathered from the self-study instrument was used to guide focus group discussions with teachers and develop a Likert-style needs assessment instrument to determine frequency of use of teacher interventions, in order to design needed staff development.

Responses from the needs assessment survey are organized in Figure 2, Responses from needs assessment survey. Twelve teachers completed the survey. Frequency of responses is used to indicate whether a teacher never, rarely, sometimes, or frequently used the listed reading strategy. Responses are listed in descending order, with the response with the highest average listed first.

As shown by the information presented in Table 1 and Table 2, it is evident that there are good reading instruction practices in effect. There was some discrepancy in comparing the responses from the self-study survey and the needs assessment. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the self-study survey incorporated open-ended questions, and the Likert-style needs assessment items were much more specific.

Strategy	n	Frequency				Percentage of Teachers who reported Frequent Use
		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently	
1. Use AR in classroom	12	0	0	0	12	100
2. Utilize motivation techniques	12	0	0	0	12	100
3. Model good reading practices	12	0	0	0	12	100
4. Reflective writing	12	0	0	3	9	75
5. Send information home	12	0	0	5	7	58
6. Peer collaboration	12	0	0	6	6	50
7. Pair struggling students with a peer or tutor	12	0	0	6	6	50
8. Help set reading goals	12	0	0	7	5	42
9. Use STAR diagnostics and professional judgment in materials selection	12	0	1	8	3	25
10. Individual conferencing	12	0	2	7	3	25

Figure 2: Responses from needs assessment survey

Whereas there was some disagreement as to which practices were most beneficial, such as assigning reading as homework, most teachers were in agreement in the areas of needed training. In both the initial self-study

survey and the needs assessment survey, the main topics that surfaced were concerning how to conduct individual reading conferences with students, guided reading practices, and utilizing the more in-depth reports available with STAR Reading and Accelerated Reader.

After teachers had the opportunity to participate in the staff development sessions, I observed in each third grade classroom. Each observation focused on a specific intervention determined by the teacher. As I visited classrooms, I observed these interventions in practice. In my observations, I was able to see individual conferencing, as well as guided reading techniques. Within the individual conferencing, some teachers used this time to discuss the reports they had generated from STAR Reading and Accelerated Reader. The teachers shared the information found in the reports with students. Many times, teachers made adjustments to the reports according to their judgements, and shared these changes with the children. It seemed obvious to me that the children with whom the teachers conferred were very aware of their reading ability status as well as their expectations. Guided reading practices included working with small groups of students. Teachers utilized various techniques, such as guided book selection, giving cues and clues to assist students in deciphering and decoding words, and continually stopping to ask comprehension questions throughout the reading lesson. Most children seemed cooperative and on task, while only a few seemed to be frustrated.

Following the observations, and after allowing time for teachers to have the opportunity to try out their newly learned interventions, I met with third grade students for a focus group session. The purpose of the session was to ascertain the students' perspectives as to which interventions helped them become better readers. When asked questions concerning their attitudes toward reading, some students replied that they read only when they were assigned to do so, and others exhibited a true desire to read on their own. They also indicated that they preferred to read books on interesting topics as well as books that were easy to read. Some students indicated that they resented being "made" to read and would rather read whatever they wanted to on their own. When asked how their teachers helped them become better readers, some of the responses included, "My teacher likes to listen to me read," "She makes us figure out a word if we don't know it," and "We take AR tests."

After the student focus group session, teachers were asked to complete a final self-study survey to reflect upon the reading intervention they had incorporated into their teaching. Most teachers found the strategy they incorporated to be at least somewhat helpful in their reading teaching. One of the questions asked was, "Do the numbers (quantitative indicators from AR and STAR) indicate success in the class where you applied the intervention strategy?" The response to the question was inconclusive, which is most likely due to the short time that was allotted for the intervention. However, each teacher concluded that Accelerated Reader "works" for each child in her class, primarily because it freed the teacher from having to read every book a child read in order to assess their comprehension.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceived value of teacher intervention strategies on students' reading and to determine if staff development sessions on the intervention strategies successfully helped teachers incorporate new strategies. Three specific questions were used to guide the study.

Which teacher intervention strategies do teachers currently use?

The teachers of this study indicated that they used a variety of quality intervention strategies. At the beginning of the study, each teacher reported that they used STAR Reading and Accelerated reader at least to some degree with their students. Most teachers also requested additional training in the use of these programs. Although they were at least somewhat familiar with how to use the software programs in reading instruction, they were unaware of additional functions of the programs, such as the specific reports that were available. During the staff development sessions, teachers learned how to create growth reports showing change in reading levels over time. Teachers also reported that they conference with every student individually about their reading ability, yet it was also clear that there was room for improvement in that area as well.

All teachers grouped their students for reading according to their reading abilities, and were able to adjust their teaching to meet the group's needs. Whereas this is not considered individualizing reading instruction, it is more individualized than whole-group learning. Other strategies used at the beginning of the study included encouraging students to read what they were interested in, getting support from EIP teachers, reading in every subject area, questioning students for understanding during and after reading text, and modeling good reading techniques. All used rewards of some kind connected to reading performance. Although most teachers assigned reading as homework, not all agreed it was a good practice for all students.

What teacher intervention strategies do students and teachers identify as effective for student gains in reading?

The dialog that transpired during the teacher focus groups indicated a disagreement concerning assigning reading as homework. Within the 4th and 5th grade focus group, although all teachers assigned reading homework, some perceived that this practice only benefited the good readers who had people to support them at home. Those opposed believed that it made the good readers better, and that it did little more than frustrate those who were struggling readers. All teachers also used some kind of reward system in their classrooms, yet some claimed that using rewards had the same effect as assigning reading homework. Those students who were good readers were rewarded, and those who struggled became more frustrated when they did not achieve enough to warrant a reward. Naturally, students liked receiving rewards, as they stated in their focus group session. What students seemed to find most helpful was when someone, either a teacher, mentor, or parent, spent one-on-one time reading with him or her.

Through my informal chatting with teachers, I found that teachers believed that there were many available, worthwhile reading intervention strategies. Because of time restraints within the classroom and teachers being pressured to cover many objectives, there was simply not ample time to do all that needed to be done. Therefore, teachers picked the methods they were most comfortable with and used them with their students. Each teacher would like to have had the opportunity to meet with each child on an individual basis more often than they were able to meet during the study.

Can staff development alter the use of reading-intervention strategies by teachers?

In a word, yes. After being exposed to the staff development sessions mentioned in this study, each teacher demonstrated the use of a new reading intervention strategy in her classroom. This was evident during my observations as well as through informal conversation. With each staff development session, teachers acquired another "trick" to pull out of their hats. The human aspect of teaching offers teachers the opportunity to use their own judgment to select the best tricks to get the job done.

I had not planned to share the students' response with the teachers, but upon completing this project, I decided that it would be beneficial to share the information that I had written with teachers. Teachers found the student comments to be entertaining, while at the same time to be in agreement with their own perceptions.

The findings of this research were presented to the teachers who participated via a PowerPoint presentation and a copy of this article will be available for teachers at their request.

Conclusion

A word of caution: today's teachers are burdened with far too many requirements. Having additional staff development sessions can be viewed as an additional burden if not presented in a positive light. Staff development must be for a purpose in order to be meaningful. The teachers who participated in this study indicated that they were willing to participate because they are committed to helping students become better readers. Additionally, teachers felt involved by being able to voice which areas they were interested in learning.

By using the components suggested by Reading Renaissance, time on task, motivation, the utilization of Learning Information Systems, and utilizing the teacher/student relationship, students can become better readers. This study evaluated the utilization of LIS and the teacher/student relationship in detail. Whereas due to the limited amount of time of this study, measuring true reading growth was not practical. By providing staff development sessions to teachers, reading instruction changed.

This study was limited to three weeks. It would be interesting to learn if teachers were still utilizing these new techniques in the future. A suggestion for future research is to conduct another focus group session with teachers at the end of the school year and actually measure student's reading growth. Another suggestion is to target only a portion of a grade level and have a treatment and a control group to see if the reading interventions make a significant difference in student achievement over time.

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