

Reading Teachers' Perceptions of the Factors that Impact Reading Achievement

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore reading teachers' perceptions of the factors that impact student reading achievement at selected North Carolina elementary schools.

The participants for this study were reading teachers who were employed at four Title I schools in

North Carolina. The study used a qualitative design. The study collected data by phone interviews with elementary reading teachers on their perceptions of the factors that promoted or inhibited reading achievement. This study examined two school districts.

Several recurring themes and patterns surfaced from the data gathered from the participants. The overarching themes that promoted reading achievement were (a) teacher effectiveness, (b) early literacy exposure, and (c) cooperative learning. The overarching theme that inhibited reading achievement was (a) class size. The implications for change based on the findings were to expose children to literacy early on and school wide initiative for integrating cooperative learning in the classrooms.

Keywords: teacher effectiveness, early literacy exposure, cooperative learning

Introduction

“A shocking number of our nation’s children are not learning to read anywhere near as well as they need to in order to succeed in school and negotiate the realities of our increasingly information-based and verbal world.” (Mead, 2010, p. A2). Suarez-Orozco, Onaga, and Lardemelle (2010) implied that a positive educational outcome was imperative for youth; they also stated that there were limited numbers of jobs to accommodate the undereducated. The inability to acquire reading skills contributes to academic failure and drop out (Hernandez, 2011).

Over the past decades, many programs have been implemented to address the concerns of low reading achievement in elementary students. Programs such as Head Start, Reading Recovery, Burst, and Leveled Literacy Intervention have been federally funded to help aid in reading achievement by providing early reading identification and intervention. However, in spite of these programs implemented in order to catch our struggling readers early on, some elementary children continue to be non-proficient readers. According to a report published by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2010), failure to read proficiently by the end of third grade is linked to higher rates of school dropout.

Materials and Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore reading teachers' perceptions of the factors that promote or inhibit student reading achievement at selected North Carolina elementary schools.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are reading teachers' perceptions of the factors that promote students' reading achievement at selected North Carolina elementary schools?
2. What are reading teachers' perceptions of the factors that inhibit students' reading achievement at selected North Carolina elementary schools?

This study used a qualitative design, as this enabled the researcher to answer exploratory questions. The school sites were purposefully selected based on their Title I designation. After the researcher obtained permission to conduct the study, the superintendent from each school district was contacted. After going through the superintendent, the researcher then reached out to the reading teachers of the purposely-selected school sites. The phone interviews were recorded to ensure that the researcher captured the essence of the interviews and for clarity purposes. Each interview was conducted during one session and took approximately 45 minutes each. An interview protocol was created by the research to gather rich and meaningful data from the participants, which consisted of fourteen questions.

Results and Discussion

Reading teachers voiced that (a) cooperative learning, (b) teacher effectiveness, (c) and cooperative learning were factors that promote reading achievement.

Teacher Effectiveness

McCormick and Zutell (2011) expressed that teacher expectations seemed to be a leading variable of academic failure in the school system. Educators must not assume that a child's socioeconomic status is a predictor of failure; instead, they must instruct each child to perform to the best of his or her abilities.

Flynt and Brozo (2009) stated that teachers of literacy who make a positive impact on student achievement possess a toolkit of strategies for enhancing engagement; they develop academic vocabularies, and they understand the importance of building relationships with their students, which serve as a context for greater enthusiasm and participative learning. They also noted that effective teachers in the reading content area have the common sense to seek out new innovative ways to reach out to their students, which in return encourages student involvement and success in content literacy activities. Harri (2011) attributed high student achievement to a positive and motivating climate within the building and a vision that all students can be academically successful. The leader and staff within an elementary setting must believe in the child if they expect the child to believe in him or herself. It is crucial that our educational system ensure that all classrooms across North Carolina are staffed with highly potent teachers, in order to give every child a chance to become a lifelong learner.

The reading teachers stated that teacher effectiveness promoted student reading achievement. Reading teachers shared that high quality instruction, along with providing opportunities for students to read, differentiated instruction, engaging lessons and technology make a difference in reading achievement.

Reading Teacher A-1 added:

It [reading proficiency] has to do with stimulation from the teacher, and the intervention and support from the teacher.

Reading Teacher B-3 expressed:

I think in a Title I school the number one influence on reading performance is the classroom teacher. Teachers that provide high quality instruction, where the teacher has a firm grasp on her content knowledge, I think that makes the biggest difference. Also, teachers who provide differentiated instruction based on the benchmarks and progress monitoring data and give each child an opportunity to learn at his or her own pace promote reading achievement. Teachers who provide engaging lessons where the kids are actively involved are the key factor to literacy. Last, using technology and digital literacies will help get kids engaged.

Cooperative Learning

According to McNair (2006), cooperative learning implemented in many schools has shown a positive influence on students' academic achievement. Zarei and Keshavarz (2011) reported that cooperative learning had statistically significant effects on both vocabulary and reading comprehension. The researchers further voiced that cooperative learning is imperative to our school curriculum and academic success for children.

Reading teachers voiced that cooperative learning was an important factor that promoted reading achievement. They shared that children can learn from each other and that collaboration can promote reading achievement.

Reading Teacher A-1 stated:

I believe cooperative learning can be effective in promoting reading achievement when students are grouped with others who are reading on the same level. Also, you can create mixed ability grouping, where students learn from each other. I believe this helps children achieve more because they are learning from each other. However, there are situations where I believe the child should be treated individually as opposed to the group.

Early Literacy Exposure

Shue, Shore, and Lambert (2012) implied that many studies have shown that the types of experiences children have in the early years can have a lifelong impact on them. It has been stated that preschool programs can assist in closing the achievement gap and shaping many children's futures by increasing school readiness skills (Herman-Smith, 2013). Miller (2007) stated that many fear that kindergarten may come too late and preschool is key to a successful academic path. The author later noted that many researchers claim prekindergarten leads to financial efficiency, law-abiding lifestyles, and higher academic success.

Reading teachers shared that early literacy exposure should be promoted and encouraged by the family at home. They stated that parents should reinforce literacy skills early in order for children to be successful in the content area of reading.

Reading Teacher A-1 stated:

When students are exposed to reading at home and they see their parents reading, they tend to want to read more. Students who grow up in homes where there is always reading material available, they tend to be high academic achievers.

Reading Teacher B-4 expressed:

Head Start and Preschool are very good programs that parents can utilize to help their child get ready for school and help with reading achievement.

Reading Teacher B-2 mentioned:

Parents reading to them [children] early and even while they're in the womb help promote reading achievement.

Class Size

Reading teachers shared that (a) class size impacts a child's reading ability, and that teachers are able to provide more differentiated and individualized instruction when class size is reduced.

Reading Teacher A-1 stated:

I believe class size is very important to reading achievement. When students are in smaller groups, they will get individualized attention as much as possible. Smaller groups are more conducive to children achieving academically.

Reading Teacher B-2 added:

Class size impacts reading a great deal because the smaller the class, the more effective the instruction.

Reading Teacher B-3 added:

In our third grade classrooms we reduced sizes to fifteen students, and we've noticed that those kids have had a jump in their proficiency levels. The teachers have more time to focus on the student's individual needs and differentiate instructions and provide better and more sustained small group instruction. These teachers do not constantly have to adjust their instruction for twenty or more kids. It's a lot easier to work and differentiate instruction for a smaller number of kids. I don't think the class is effective if it has more than twenty students in K-3.

Reading Teacher B-4 expressed:

Class size is a very important factor in reading achievement. I think class size should be smaller because the students need that individualized instruction to help get them on grade level.

Conclusion

The reading teachers shared that it is imperative that children are exposed to the foundation of literacy early on. Several mentioned teacher effectiveness and cooperative learning as being crucial contributions to reading development and performance.

District leaders need to push cooperative learning more, as studies are showing that children learn from each other. Schools should develop more strategies and programs to involve families in the literacy process of their children. School districts should develop and sponsor more preschool programs, so that when students get to kindergarten, they will be more prepared for formal schooling. Last, administrators should encourage and entice their staff to create classrooms that are engaging and allow children to develop a love for reading.

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