PLCs IN ACTION

Innovative Teaching for Struggling Grade 3–5 Readers

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Reading teachers from across a school district formed a professional learning community to create lessons for their struggling readers. The PLC was as valuable to them as professionals as it was to student growth.

Many students in third through fifth grade struggle at the lowest levels of reading proficiency. In fact, fewer than 40% of fourth graders in the United States read at or above the "proficient" level on state standardized tests in 2009 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). As reading teachers working in elementary schools across our school district, we were faced with meeting the needs of the students in our schools with the lowest levels of proficiency in third through fifth grades. With the support of our district and administrators, we formed a professional learning community (PLC) and used it as a mechanism to address the needs of these students.

We turned to research to inform our inquiry. In a recent meta-analysis of 24 reading intervention studies targeting struggling fourth- and fifth-grade readers, Wanzek, Wexler, Vaughn, and Ciullo (2010) found that positive outcomes are most likely when educators provide explicit instruction in: "(a) word study strategies to decode words, (b) word meanings and strategies for deriving the meanings of unknown words, and (c) comprehension strategy instruction" (p. 890). We found this to be true in our own teaching. Yet we were also driven by experiences in which students failed to make substantial or lasting growth in reading when we focused on these instructional goals using only the commercial products available to us.

For example, some of our students craved additional experiences with books highlighting characters that represented their home cultures. Other students were particularly motivated and engaged when we used nonfiction books, but our current resources included limited supplies of these books and corresponding lessons. Still other students demonstrated text comprehension when working with us, yet struggled with the texts

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and comprehension questions they encountered in the classroom and on standardized tests.

We all recognized these issues, but as the only reading teachers in each of our schools, we lacked the professional supports we needed to address them adequately. Creating lessons individually proved time-consuming and alienating. Forming a cross-county PLC allowed us to draw on our collective years of expertise as well as current research to develop districtwide instructional materials that catered to the needs of our struggling readers in third through fifth grades.

Specifically, we set out to collaboratively gather and create reading lessons that addressed (a) decoding, (b) vocabulary development, (c) comprehension strategies, and (d) responding to standardized test question stems. This article describes the process we engaged in as we grew our PLC, provides explicit lesson examples and advice to other reading teachers involved in PLCs, and offers data that supports the effectiveness of our approach, which was the basis of our students' growth as well as our own growth as reading teachers.

Pause and Ponder

- What interventions do you use to systematically address the needs of struggling readers in grades 3–5?

- Are the students you are teaching making accelerated progress that will enable them to catch up with their peers?

- Does your reading intervention focus on word decoding, word meanings, and comprehension strategy instruction?

> *"We immediately found that we each had been craving this level of collaboration with other reading teachers."*

Getting Started Through the PLC

PLCs are defined as "a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). The use of PLCs as cultural change agents in public schools has been gaining popularity for years as a result of the ability of PLCs to build individual and collective capacity to influence student learning (Eaker, DuFour, & Burnette, 2002; Stoll et al., 2006). In our school system, PLCs traditionally existed within individual schools, and reading teachers joined communities of classroom teachers in their schools.

We formed our reading teacher PLC with the support of administration within our school district. Our new arrangement provided a regular, designated time for us to collaborate with each other. We immediately found that we each had been craving this level of collaboration with other reading teachers. As we began to talk to one another, we realized that our students shared common needs, and this recognition began to drive what we wanted to accomplish.

Our Process

Having a regularly scheduled meeting time once or twice each month allowed us to develop norms for the group, plan, set goals, monitor progress, give feedback, and eventually create, review, and revise lessons. With support and

guidance from our district's literacy coordinator, we designated time in each meeting toward discussing the particular needs of our nonproficient readers in grades 3–5. Our leadership lent further support by agreeing to provide the funding we needed to purchase multiple copies of texts for the lessons we would create. With these supports in place, we set out first to select texts and then to create lessons that emphasized our instructional goals.

Selecting Texts

Text selection was a central component of our process because we held the common belief that all readers need appropriate-level, high-quality, engaging texts that foster enthusiasm and critical thinking (Dreher, 2003; Primeaux, 2001). Furthermore, we agreed that students need opportunities to read and reread developmentally appropriate books—ones that address curriculum content, students' interests, and cultural diversity while providing ample instructional opportunities (Compton-Lilly, 2008; Liang, 2002).

We worked collaboratively to select books at each guided reading level, O–R) using two especially valuable resources: *The Fountas and Pinnell Leveled Book List, K–8* (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009) and *The Continuum of Literacy Learning: Grades 3–8* (Fountas & Pinnell, 2007). Starting with these lists, we first worked independently to identify our own favorite texts using specific criteria. In addition to wanting books that would allow us to focus on

decoding, vocabulary, comprehension, and responding to standardized test question stems, we sought books that:

- Aligned with the curriculum for targeted grades
- Generated high interest among third- through fifth-grade learners
- Appealed to both genders
- Represented multiple races and ethnicities
- Provided exposure to both fiction and nonfiction

We found the book selection process to be both rigorous and rewarding. When we came together, armed with our personal selections, we each advocated for the inclusion of our favorite books. An important part of this process involved describing how our favorite books could be used to enact meaningful teaching strategies to improve student learning. Across the board, we found that the most effective books were those that we had previously used successfully in our own teaching. The result yielded a selection of books (see Table for a complete list) that met our criteria.

Creating Lessons

After selecting texts, we worked as a group to create a unified lesson format and then in pairs to create lessons for each book. The lesson structure we created through this iterative process had four parts emphasizing decoding, vocabulary development, comprehension strategies, and responding to standardized test question stems. For each story, we established instructional priorities within each of the four domains that built on the qualities of the text.

We developed multiple lessons in each of the four areas based on the text characteristics. This allowed us to use the lessons flexibly depending on the

Table   Selected Texts

Level	Texts
O	*Amelia's Road* by Linda Jacobs Altman & Enrique O. Sanchez
	Annie and The Old One by Miska Miles
	Caves and Caverns by Gail Gibbons
	Fossils: Tell of Long Ago by Aliki
	Giant Pandas by Gail Gibbons
	The Hundred Dresses by Eleanor Estes
	Ten True Animal Rescues by Jeanne Betancourt
	Whales by Lesley A. Du Temple
P	*Dinosaur Bones* by Aliki
	Fly Away Home by Eve Bunting
	Grace's Letter to Lincoln by Roop, Peter & Connie
	The Lotus Seed by Sherry Garland
	The Magic School Bus: Inside the Earth by Joanna Cole
	Someday a Tree by Eve Bunting
	Tut's Mummy by Judy Donnelly
	The Wall by Eve Bunting
Q	*All About Sharks* by Jim Armosky
	A Golden Age by Martha Wickham
	A Medieval Feast by Aliki
	The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs! By Jon Scieszka
	Wilma Unlimited by Kathleen Krull
	Zora Hurston and the Chinaberry Tree by William Miller
Q/R	*Bonesy and Isabel* by Michael J. Rosen
	Every Thing Living by Cynthia Rylant
	Mummies Made in Egypt by Aliki

needs of our students. Thus a lesson set for a given story might extend for as few as four to as many as seven or eight days, depending on how we chose to adapt the lesson set to our students' needs. The Figure provides an example of a four-part lesson format.

The lesson plans included specific dialogue a teacher might use as well as suggestions for how the text might be divided into instructional sections. For instance, in Part 3 of the *Amelia's Road* (Altman & Sanchez, 1995) example, specific suggestions and questions were provided to focus on particular pages for discussion. Scaffolding was provided in the lessons through discussion, read- and think-aloud, and modeling to support students in their independent practice. In most lessons, students were guided to use

various graphic organizers, which helped facilitate discussing and writing about the text while charting specific understandings.

As an introduction to the process of creating lessons, we composed one lesson set as a group and debriefed regarding each of the components. With the structure of the lesson framed by the group as a whole, we worked with partners to create another lesson, which we again shared and refined with the whole group. We then generated lessons on our own. We agreed on completion dates for drafts, and on the designated due dates, we worked in our PLC to give feedback on each other's lessons and set follow-up meetings and deadlines for final drafts.

As lessons were completed, we used them. This allowed us to provide specific

feedback based on experiences with children. Individually, it allowed us to interrogate and reflect on our practice as we were learning to do in our PLC. Collectively, it created an important cycle of lesson creation, discussion, practice, further discussion, and innovation.

Our collaboration helped to ensure a consistent quality of work in an agreed-on lesson plan format. It also helped to make explicit what we were designating as high-quality reading lessons and provided a forum to interrogate that designation. These factors—ample time, collaborative, iterative work, and a clear articulation of lesson plan components—helped ensure the lessons would be appropriate to move third through fifth grade students to a higher level as readers.

The following sections describe the four parts of each lesson in greater detail.

Decoding. We started each lesson set with a short segment focused on decoding. A number of possible decoding lessons were created for each text, and we selected the specific lesson to teach based on the student needs identified through ongoing, formative assessment. Some examples of concepts addressed in Part 1 of the Figure using *Amelia's Road* (Altman & Sanchez, 1995) include the following:

- Sorting words that have common letter patterns but different sounds
- Changing the endings of certain words to make them plural
- Making small words using a longer word found in the text

Decoding practice proved to be important in helping the students' notice details in word making and learn how sets of words work in an organized way.

Vocabulary Development. Vocabulary work focused on helping students

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Figure   Four-Part Lesson Example Using *Amelia's Road*

Part 1: *Amelia's Road*—Decoding

1. *ch* = /k/ and /ch/ - Guide students in a word sort that focuses on words in which the *ch* letter pattern makes the /k/ sound or the /ch/ sound. Words: stomach, choral, chorus, character, Michael, ache, church, cheer, chomp, chair, ranch, lunch, such.

2. Adding *–s* and *–es*: Using the words from the initial word sort, guide students in making the words plural by adding *–s* or *–es*. Sort and read words.

3. Make words using the mystery word *sturdiest*. Letters: *e i u d r s s t t*

   a. Take two letters and make *is*.

   b. Rearrange the letters and add one more letter to make *sir*.

   c. Rearrange the letters and add one to make *rise*. We watched the sun *rise*.

   d. Rearrange the letters and add one to make *dries*. The laundry *dries* on the clothesline.

   e. Add one letter to make *driest*. The *driest* clothes are my socks.

   f. Rearrange the letters and add one to make *dustier*. It's *dustier* under the bed.

   g. Rearrange the letters and change one to make *studies*.

   h. Rearrange the letters and add one to make *dustiest*. This is the *dustiest* house I've ever seen.

   i. Now use all your letters to make a word that is in the book, *sturdies*.

   j. Sort: words that rhyme, words with the *–est* ending.

Part 2: *Amelia's Road*—Vocabulary Development

Amelia's Road
(Altman & Sanchez, 1995)

<u>Vocabulary Bank</u>

| migrant | cheerless | wondrous | labor camp | los caminos (the roads) |
| ached | shanties | permanent | accidental | grim |

Directions: Choose any four words from the list above and write them in the diagram.

Write about your understanding of *Amelia's Road* by showing the connections between and among the words. What is the significance of each word and how do the words fit together? Use the back of this page if you need more space to write.
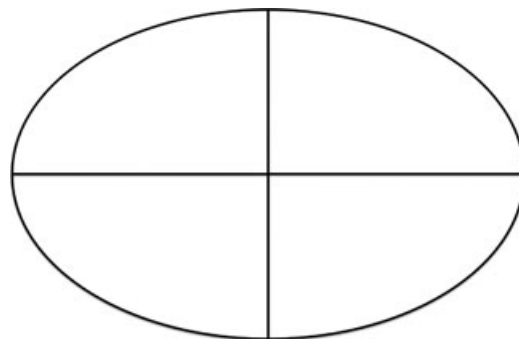
Amelia's Road

Figure   Four-Part Lesson Example Using *Amelia's Road* (*continued*)

Part 3: *Amelia's Road*—Comprehension

Purpose for reading: Citing evidence from the text, students will identify and describe how Amelia's changing feelings depict how a complex character evolves over time.

Activity:

- Tell students the purpose for reading, emphasizing that they should be looking for cues in the story that depict Amelia's feelings.

- Read to the bottom of page 5 out loud, "I wonder why Amelia hates traveling so much? Why do you think she says that the roads 'never went where you wanted them to go?' Let's look at the graphic organizer to organize our ideas."

- Place a sticky note on the prepared chart paper (below) that indicates Amelia's feelings so far in the story, including the page number and a short description of textual evidence of her feeling. Emphasize to students that evidence can be included explicitly in the text, through figurative language, and through the tone of the text and/or illustrations, among other ways. Discuss the thoughts and conclusions that Amelia's feelings can help the reader draw about the story as a whole, and add students' thoughts on a sticky note to that section of the chart.

- Give students sticky notes to mark pages where they notice a description of Amelia's feelings.

- Depending on students' decoding levels, have students read through page 11 independently, reminding them of the purpose for reading.

- After reading page 11, "How do you think Amelia feels about moving? What about the rest of her family? Where in the book does the author help you know this?" Depending on students' readiness, pause to record ideas on a sticky note as a group or to allow students to independently record their ideas on sticky notes and share out.

- Have students read through page 17. "Why do you think the author ends the page with the phrase 'The accidental road?'" Record students' thoughts on the chart paper.

- The same process can be followed to record Amelia's feelings and draw conclusions for the 2nd half of the book.

Amelia's Road	
Feelings—1st Half of the Book	Feelings—2nd Half of the Book
Conclusion/What We're Thinking	Conclusions/What We're Thinking
Mood:	

Part 4: *Amelia's Road*—Test Question Stems

1. Which word best describes the word *wondrous* in *Amelia's Road?*

     a. confusing
     b. amazing
     c. ordinary
     d. huge

2. Which event occurs after Amelia finds an accidental road and before Amelia's father gets out the map to get directions to the next town?
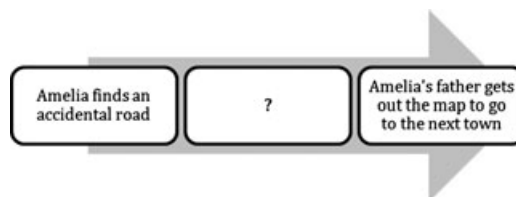
     a. Amelia helps her family pack their things.
     b. Amelia imagines a tidy white house with blue shutters.
     c. Amelia's teacher learns her name.
     d. Amelia buries a box of treasures.

3. What does the author most likely want readers to feel after reading *Amelia's Road*?

     a. It is better to have an afterschool job than to come home and watch TV.
     b. Amelia can have "roots" even though she doesn't have a permanent home.
     c. You should always do what your parents tell you to do.
     d. A tree can be as good a friend as a person.

"Vocabulary work focused on helping students determine how new words connected to known words."

determine how new words connected to known words. Most of this work was accomplished through concept maps and other graphic organizers. Part 2 of the Figure provides an example of one of the concept maps that was used for the vocabulary segment of a lesson.

In this lesson, students used the concept map to diagram and discuss relationships between key vocabulary words from the text. In another lesson, vocabulary development focused on a few root words (e.g., *hero, screech*) and how they were used in different words in the text (e.g., *heroic, heroine, screechy, screeching*).

Comprehension Strategies. For each text, we identified the specific comprehension strategies we would address, including topics such as cause and effect relationships, problem–solution, and symbolism. We also focused on drawing students' attention to a variety of text structures. Teachers taught the lessons directly by introducing the story, modeling the thinking strategy using think-aloud, and gradually releasing responsibility.

For example, Part 3 of the Figure example begins with an introduction of the purpose for reading. We then think out loud, "I wonder why Amelia hate's traveling so much?" to model the targeted critical thinking strategies. Finally, we turn the students' attention to a graphic organizer used to arrange sticky notes that record Amelia's

feelings, textual evidence, and our thoughts and conclusions.

Teaching students these comprehension skills required lessons that explicitly and gradually released responsibility to the students. We knew that this gradual release of responsibility was a critical component of any successful reading intervention and decided to support the process by providing a scripted dialogue in the lessons. Our intent was not to mandate what teachers would say, but we knew we'd all be more successful if we worked together to determine exactly how we'd like to engage in this think-aloud process.

Question Stems. As a final lesson for each text, we created a series of questions for students to complete independently or for the teacher to use as part of shared reading or think-aloud lessons. The questions drew on the question stems that have been used on the end-of-grade reading assessment in North Carolina. These question stems were derived from practice tests and other resources made available by the state and local education agencies. In creating the questions for our lessons, the goal was to help students map the new ways of thinking about a text that they acquired throughout the lessons to the specific types of questions they are most likely to encounter on end-of-grade assessments and in their classrooms.

We carefully selected just a few questions to go with each of the texts we used to minimize any perceived emphasis on this form of assessment in our intervention. Furthermore, we paid attention to the way that students interacted with the questions because it informed our teaching, but we did not use their performance on these questions as an indicator of their progress in reading. Instead, we depended on their

comprehension of benchmark texts for that purpose. Part 4 of the Figure provides an example of three questions we wrote to go with *Amelia's Road* (Altman & Sanchez, 1995).

Impact on Student Outcomes

At each of our schools, we identified the struggling readers in grades 3–5 to participate in the intervention in the way we always have, using a combination of classroom teacher referral and follow-up assessment. Once students were selected, we met with small groups of 3–5 for 30–45 minutes daily. Each group comprised students having similar guided reading levels as assessed using the *Benchmark Assessment System 1 or 2* (Fountas & Pinnell, 2010a, 2010b) or the *Developmental Reading Assessment* (Beaver, 2001).

Additionally, anecdotal notes citing specific reading concerns as observed during the individual reading assessment, end-of-grade scores from previous years, and classroom teacher observations informed our grouping decisions. At the end of a student's intervention period, we used the Benchmark Assessment to determine the reading gains each student made and to determine the course of future instruction. We were also able to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention using student performance on the state-mandated end-of-grade test in reading that is administered to all students in grades 3, 4, and 5. Please see the appendix at the end of this article for further details.

Impact on Reading Teachers as Professionals

The influence this experience had on us as professionals was arguably as valuable as the student gains. DuFour (2004) wrote that successful PLCs are characterized by three big ideas.

Effective PLCs focus on (1) ensuring that students learn, (2) a culture of collaboration, and (3) results, as indicated in formative and summative assessments. Our group of reading teachers came together to address the needs of our struggling readers. Notably, our district respected our goals to help our students grow academically and supported these goals by allocating time, funding for texts, and freedom to make instructional decisions.

This respect and support were vital for us as we fostered a culture of collaboration. Establishing our PLC was facilitated by our district's administration but was fueled by our own collective desire to learn from our varied expertise. As DuFour (2004) wrote, "A group of staff members who are determined to work together [toward a common goal] will find a way" (p. 6).

Working together to develop materials that met our students' needs stimulated and challenged us as thinking professionals and also delivered us from the more isolating experiences to which we had previously become accustomed. With our PLC we could share the load by working smarter instead of harder. Through this process, we continue to build a professional bond, a level of trust and mutual respect that positively influences our professional selves as greatly as it does our teaching.

Our focus on results also served to benefit us as much as our students. Using common assessments as formative and summative data informed our process as we created lessons and put them into practice. Determining how we could measure our students' reading growth and respond with adaptive teaching was always at the forefront of our minds.

Furthermore, our cycle of interrogation and reflection within our

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PLC meetings provided informal but equally valuable feedback for our work. As we created lessons, we provided collaborative critique, put the lessons into practice, brought our personal reflections back to the group to make further improvements to the lessons, and so on. We made the ongoing results of our efforts a constant focus of the collective conversation, and in this way, our lessons to this day continue to be living, breathing instructional tools for us to use with our students. We have found that this level of critical reflection and instructional adaptation has provided a nourishing and challenging form of professional development for all of us.

Discussion

As we reflect on our experience of gathering and developing resources for struggling readers in third through fifth grades, we want to highlight a couple of salient points. First, our process illustrates an overall emphasis on meaningful, text-based formative assessments rather than summative assessments. In an age of constant standardized testing in public schools in which end-of-year scores are privileged and formative assessments often focus on isolated skills, we were able to gain administrative support to implement an intervention in which accelerating student growth in reading meaningful text with fluency and comprehension was emphasized above all else.

Through close attention to student progress, we were able to adapt and cater our work with students to their

changing needs. Furthermore, our collaboration allowed us to check our own progress and improve our efforts by capitalizing on the expertise of the group. This continuous communication and collaboration also helped us develop a consistency in our teaching across the district in which we work. Thus we were empowered, with the help of district-level and administrative support, to embody a PLC in its truest form (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008).

We further wish to situate our work within the larger context of Response to Intervention in public schools (Vellutino, Scanlon, Small, & Fanuele, 2006). Ours was one piece of a larger framework that allowed our struggling readers to become successful readers in school. We embrace the concept that multiple responsive interventions are needed if we are to close the gap between our struggling students and their more successful peers. We further recognize the power of teacher-developed interventions, not only because they are adaptive to students' changing needs, but also because the collaboration inherent in creating such interventions provides a space in which teachers can grow and learn from one another.

Specific Suggestions for Teachers

Our experience has led us to want to share some specific suggestions for other reading teachers who might be considering engaging in similar work with struggling readers or within a PLC.

■ Investigate your district's receptivity and available structures for your PLC—our group benefitted greatly from the support and structure provided by our district. Take the time to explore these possibilities within your district to maximize your ability to carve out a space for your professional work with other professionals who share your goals—but don't let an initially limited structure stop you!

■ Establish norms for the group—collaborative practices are as important as instructional practices.

■ Explore research and available materials—work smarter rather than harder by substantiating your practice with current research and collecting effective research-based materials and strategies to use within your teaching.

TAKE ACTION!

1. Consider the books you use. Look beyond the level to make sure they align with the curriculum for targeted grades, generate high interest among the students you teach, appeal to both genders, represent multiple ethnicities, address fiction and nonfiction equally, and exhibit a variety of informational text features.

2. Determine which words in each book are good to target because they offer an opportunity to focus on variations and patterns in word use as well as connections and include spelling patterns that are important given the skills and needs of the students you teach.

3. Select a limited number of thinking skills that you can apply across several books in your collection. Determine which thinking skills can be applied to each text.

4. Identify graphic organizers you can use to support students in activities focused on vocabulary and thinking skills.

■ Start small—our project was doable because we began with a small range of text levels that addressed the needs of a particular group of students.

These are just some suggestions to get you started. Above all, we have learned that a successful PLC depends on a commitment to student learning and on the unique expertise of the particular professionals involved.

Areas for Future Growth

In keeping with the spirit of critical reflection that characterizes an effective PLC, we can see areas for future growth, both for our intervention and for our work together. For example, we found it invaluable to provide our students with opportunities to engage with both fiction and nonfiction texts. This balance paid off for our students—the books we used built real-world background knowledge and allowed us to make connections to various disciplines in students' classrooms.

In the future, we hope to grow our resources by including even more nonfiction texts. Perhaps exploring technological resources, such as tablets, for example, would provide a way for students to have access to a wider variety of texts. Professionally, we plan to grow as a community of learners who work together to create solutions for the challenges we face as reading teachers.

Conclusion

In this age of high-stakes standardized testing and national anxiety about the literacy "achievement" of our students, scripted, out-of-the-box interventions are ubiquitous. This article illustrates how we used the structure of a PLC to develop a literacy intervention that changed the growth trajectories of struggling readers in our schools. Capitalizing on the expertise provided by years of collective experience, and

emphasizing thoughtful collaboration, we not only created a literacy intervention that met the needs of our students but engaged in a process that challenged and nourished us as teachers. Thanks in part to district-level and administrative support, we were empowered to gather and develop resources that focused on meaningful, text-based formative assessment and the specific needs of our students. In doing so, we created a space in which we grew as professionals while our students were nurtured as literacy learners.

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Appendix

In Year 1, 150 children in grades 3–5 participated in small-group reading instruction with reading teachers in seven elementary schools. After an average of 12 weeks of intervention, the group made an average of 3.2 levels of growth on the Benchmark Assessment. In Year 2, 112 children in grades 3–5 participated in small-group reading instruction with reading teachers in seven elementary schools. After an average of 15 weeks of intervention, the group made an average of 3.04 levels of growth on the Benchmark Assessment.

Student performance on the North Carolina end-of-grade reading test provides another indicator of the positive outcomes associated with participation in our reading intervention. Across all seven elementary schools, there were 100 children who participated in our reading intervention and 760 children who did not that took the end-of-grade test in reading in Year 1 and the year preceding it. An independent samples, one-tailed *t*-test comparing mean gains in development scale score points revealed significant differences in the gain scores for the

students who did participate ($M = 8.41$, $SD = 6.04$) and those who did not ($M = 5.89$, $SD = 5.68$); $t(858) = 4.145$, $p < .001$.

In Year 2, children completing the end-of-grade test in reading for two consecutive years included 44 children who participated in the intervention and 921 children who did not. An independent samples, one-tailed *t*-test comparing mean gains in development scale score points revealed significant differences in the gain scores for the students who did participate ($M = 9.18$, $SD = 6.26$) and those who did not ($M = 5.63$, $SD = 6.04$); $t(963) = 3.808$, $p < .001$.

In Year 1, the 23 students who received 16+ weeks of intervention averaged 4 text levels of growth over their intervention periods, whereas in Year 2 the 36 students in this group averaged 3.47 levels of growth. Those students closer to grade-level proficiency required only six to nine weeks of the intervention to reach grade-level expectations.

In Year 1, the 66 students who received 6–9 weeks of intervention averaged 2.9 text levels of growth, whereas in Year 2, the 11 students in this group averaged 2.4 levels of growth. Being flexible with the number of weeks of service based on the rate of student growth enabled us to reach more students throughout the year. This information is valuable because it suggests that the approach has promise regardless of the various intervention structures that exist in our schools today.

The authors recognize issues of validity and reliability in our data collection and reporting. Although Benchmark Assessments are standardized, they include space for variation in administration and scoring. We did not measure reliability across teachers. Importantly, Benchmark

Assessments were chosen as measurement tools because they were the most meaningful and practical measures within the context of our schools.

Finally, although we acknowledge a possible practice effect at work with regard to the improvement in state standardized test scores as a result of explicitly including question stems in our intervention, we hope that the differences between average growth across the district and the growth among the students in our intervention group speak to the effectiveness of the intervention as a whole, not just the stems.

The results suggest that we were able to create a program that led to the type of accelerated progress that is required if students with the lowest proficiency rates in reading have a chance of closing the gap between themselves and their more proficient peers. Thus it appears that a relatively small investment of intervention time (30–40 minutes a day) for as few as 6 weeks has the potential to greatly increase the rate of growth in reading for our third-through fifth-grade students who need it the most.

MORE TO EXPLORE

Online Resource

- "Questioning: A Comprehension Strategy for Small-Group Guided Reading in Grades 3–5": www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/questioning-comprehension-strategy-small-408.html

Book

- *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work* by Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Thomas Many