Reading Fluency and the Implications it has on Student Achievement

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Abstract
The development of literacy skills is a primary goal of the elementary curriculum. Reading, writing, speaking and listening are codependent skills that are necessary in every academic area and aspect of life. Reading fluency plays an integral role in the reading process. Without accuracy, appropriate rate and expression, the heart of fluency, is lost and comprehension is negatively impacted. Since reading fluency is a critical skill for elementary aged students to master, it is important that teachers are informed of strategies and techniques that can be implemented in order to promote this important life skill. This research will attempt to share the importance of fluency within the classroom with an emphasis on its connection to comprehension. It will also uncover several ways to effectively integrate reading fluency techniques into daily instruction without interrupting the curriculum. Finally it will provide different forms of assessment that will aid in the development of reading fluency.

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Abstract

The development of literacy skills is a primary goal of the elementary curriculum. Reading, writing, speaking and listening are codependent skills that are necessary in every academic area and aspect of life. Reading fluency plays an integral role in the reading process. Without accuracy, appropriate rate and expression, the heart of fluency, is lost and comprehension is negatively impacted. Since reading fluency is a critical skill for elementary aged students to master, it is important that teachers are informed of strategies and techniques that can be implemented in order to promote this important life skill. This research will attempt to share the importance of fluency within the classroom with an emphasis on its connection to comprehension. It will also uncover several ways to effectively integrate reading fluency techniques into daily instruction without interrupting the curriculum. Finally it will provide different forms of assessment that will aid in the development of reading fluency.
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Reading Fluency and the Implications it has on Student Achievement

Literacy plays a critical role in today's society. In the elementary grades students need a balanced literacy framework that includes instruction in reading, writing, listening and speaking, in order for students to learn all the necessary skills for them to become literate adults. Within reading instruction, students need guidance with how to decode and comprehend a text. Reading fluency is the bridge that connects decoding words with the ability to make meaning of a text. Reading fluently can be described as accurate, evenly paced and expressive reading. In the past, fluency instruction was known as one of the most neglected aspects of reading. Without this type of processing, many students struggle to make meaning of the text because their cognitive functions are focused too much on the decoding process than on comprehension. Reading fluency affects all academic areas because each content area depends on developed reading skills. The purpose of researching reading fluency is to identify possible strategies that could lead to overall reading improvement in the elementary classrooms. This research is designed to identify the connections and relationship fluency has on other academic areas. The goal is to identify strategies and tools that can be employed in the elementary classroom in order to improve reading fluency. The research will also focus on ways to incorporate and manage the strategies, including effective forms of assessment. The quality of reading instruction in the elementary grades has long term effects. Therefore, early intervention in reading fluency, will certainly impact later success as students move further in their academic career. It could make a difference in their motivation, reading abilities and other content areas.
Literature Review

Literacy skills are a necessity in every aspect of life. Fountas and Pinnell (2001) stated that “Typically, children enter kindergarten with rather vague notions of what reading and writing are all about. During the next seven years, they progress from a rudimentary understanding to essentially an adult level of literacy,” (p. 6). In the elementary grades it is critical that students engage in meaningful experiences that move them along the reading, writing, listening and speaking continuum. National Science and Math Education Standards have recognized the importance of integrating literacy skills within these disciplines. A fundamental component of literacy is being able to read and comprehend a variety of texts. Reading fluency forms the building block for developing lifelong literacy skills. The literature will explore the foundational literacy skills necessary in the elementary classroom. It will discuss the role that reading fluency plays in the development of emergent readers. This review of literature will uncover the connection between fluency and comprehension. It will provide practical strategies that can be employed in the classroom and a variety of ways to assess the ongoing development of reading fluency.

**Literacy**

Literacy can be described as the ability to read and write in an effective manner and as a result allows an individual to interact meaningfully with the world around them. The goal for all students is to become literate adults and therefore at the elementary level, students need effective literacy instruction. Hapgood and Palinscar's 2007 study found the following:
To build literacy, young children need more than instruction in such fundamental skills as recognizing letters, decoding words, learning vocabulary words, and reading and discussing stories. They also need opportunities to use oral and written language to learn about the world and to communicate their ideas and observations. (p.56)

In other words, literacy really encompasses all language arts skills. Reading, writing, listening and speaking are both independent and interdependent in nature and thus need to be explicitly taught in the classroom in a purposeful manner. Making connections between reading and writing will actually promote progress in both since they are complementary processes (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).

To foster reading, writing, speaking and listening skills in an elementary classroom it is recommended that teachers employ a balanced literacy framework. Balanced literacy includes daily instruction in the areas of language development, reading and writing. At the elementary grades, it is recommended that teachers plan instruction that allows for an hour a day of reading, an hour of writing and between 30-60 minutes of language acquisition. A teacher can be flexible in their schedule to allow for either a continuous block of language arts or one hour sessions at various parts of the day (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Three hours of instructional time devoted to language arts can interfere with time necessary to promote other content areas such as science and social studies. That is why National Science and Math Education Standards have encouraged integrated instruction during the literacy block.
Reading

Reading instruction represents the cornerstone of all literacy skills. Reading plays a monumental role in building literate students and that is why so much time and energy is devoted to reading instruction at in the early grades. The difficulty that teachers face is that reading is a complex process that involves two important facets; decoding and comprehension (Welsch, 2007). These two skills must work together in order for a reader to truly make meaning of any text. Mokhari and Thompson (2006) went so far as to say that, "The ability to read fluently and with adequate comprehension is considered the hallmark of skilled reading," (p. 73) which really illustrates their synergetic relationship. Within the hour long block of reading instruction a teacher must address both decoding and comprehension through such practices as independent reading, guided reading and literature study (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).

The purpose of reading is quite simple, understanding. However, reading the words on a page does not qualify as constructing meaning. Reading comprehension means that readers think about what they are reading and what they are learning. In other words, they are building their knowledge base and developing deeper connections with the story. In order for true comprehension readers must go beyond just the literal meaning of a story to evaluating it critically as well (Goudvis & Harvey, 2007). This of course is not a simple task. Many researchers are in agreement that "Text comprehension is a complex task that involves a number of cognitive, linguistic, and sociocultural dimensions," (Mokhari & Thompson, 2006, p. 75). Knowing that reading involves making meaning of a text, readers must use their cognitive resources to comprehend a
text. The problem that many struggling readers find is that they are utilizing all their cognitive processing skills to decode a text and therefore struggle with comprehension. In other words, comprehension can only be achieved when students have mastered the foundations of the reading process (Corcoran, Good & Roberts, 2005).

Comprehension of a text can either be hindered or helped by a reader's prior knowledge on a topic they are reading about. Research suggests that reading is inherently linked to background knowledge. That means that a lack of content knowledge on a particular topic that is relevant to a text, can impact the overall understanding of an article or story. This notion has even been measured through national assessments (Manning & Tsuguhiko, 2007). Connecting background knowledge has been known to be especially true for nonfiction text where students needed to know the meanings of technical vocabulary or been given opportunities for prior hands-on experience with a concept in order to glean any understanding out of a nonfiction text. Basically, “When students read science material, comprehension is the main purpose of reading the text; therefore, the establishment of meaning should be included in the definition of fluent reading of science materials,” (Kinniburgh & Shaw, 2007, p. 17). In other words, comprehension and background knowledge are skills that need to be taught together in order to promote reading achievement.

The truth is that teaching reading is not easy. “Teachers have never been under more pressure. Pressure to perform. Pressure to cover the curriculum. Pressure to meet standards. Pressure to ensure high scores on standardized tests. The political climate surrounding education is more demanding than ever before,” (Goudvis & Harvey, 2007, p. 13). Since the passing of No Child Left Behind legislation, teachers have been forced
to change their teaching practices. The strong emphasis on drilling reading skills has increased, whereas the time devoted to content subjects has been jeopardized (Manning & Tsuguhiko, 2007). Reading instruction has changed and so has the assessments. According to this type of legislation high-stakes testing has literally become the sole way to determine if students can read (DeBenedictis & Fisher, 2007).

To combat the decline of other content areas being repressed in the elementary curriculum, some researchers suggest that social studies and science content can easily be integrated into reading instruction. Through shared and guided reading, teachers can select non-fiction text where students can build their general knowledge while developing crucial reading skills at the same time. Through this type of learning, students expand their vocabulary and learn about the world at the same time. This type of instruction builds the background knowledge that students need in order to comprehend a text and become successful readers (Manning & Tsuguhiko, 2007).

Since reading is a complex process, it is not uncommon for students to run into some type of difficulty at a certain point as they are developing their repertoire of reading skills. Students that are considered struggling readers are reading at least one year below grade level and require additional support in reading comprehension (Hall, 2007). Struggling learners often exhibit early warning signs as they work to develop reading skills. They may display an array of cognitive difficulties when they attempt to read. According to Brand (2006), "Children who are at risk for reading failure manifest many common early characteristics or warning signs. Phonemic awareness and letter knowledge are highly correlated with later reading accuracy and fluency," (p. 133). Recognizing these early warning signs is important so that the student is provided with
the appropriate support. Other researchers agree acknowledging that struggling readers find it difficult to master the skills necessary to truly understand a text. According to Goudvis and Harvey, “Less proficient readers may be so focused on decoding that they can’t give adequate attention to making meaning when they run into trouble,” (Goudvis & Harvey, 2007, p. 27), which truly illustrates the complex nature of reading.

Of course struggling readers come in all different forms but it is compelling to find out that boys, in elementary school all the way through high school, score significantly below girls on standardized reading tests. The truth is that there is a long history of underachievement in boys and the perception is actually becoming an expectation (Brozo, 2006). This presents another issue that needs to be resolved through appropriate reading instruction to combat this inequality. Interestingly enough it is also documented that the most frequent cause for a referral to special education is for a deficit in reading and a large percentage of students that actually receive special education services experience difficulty with reading (Burns, Lagrou, Mizerek & Mosack, 2006). This type of data is informative because it truly illustrates the demand for improved reading instruction that targets the skills necessary to develop proficient readers.

Reading Fluency

The goal of reading is to make meaning, that has been established but before meaning is achievable there are other reading skills that need to be taught first. Concepts about books and print as well as fundamental decoding strategies form the foundation for reading skills (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Some might assume that once decoding is well established, that meaning can be constructed but that would not be true. A reader must
also be able to read words accurately and smoothly at an even pace, which is exactly what reading fluency is all about. Unfortunately, in many cases reading fluency has been reported as one of the most neglected components of reading (Manzo, 2005 & Dudley & Manner, 2005). The reality is that reading fluency is critical to being a successful reader and is even considered by some to be the bridge that readers must cross in order to get from word recognition to comprehension (Welsch, 2007).

Researchers have continued to grapple with exactly how to define reading fluency. There is not a single definition that has been unanimously accepted thus far. It can be described as the ability to process a text using appropriate pacing and without errors while still preserving meaning (Witte-Townsend & Whiting, 2005). It has also been said to be, the process by which reading is done fast and effortlessly (Welsch, 2007). Fluency has also been described as reading with embedded expression, appropriate phrasing and reading quickly at some spots and slowly at others while adding a dramatic pauses where necessary (Rasinski, 2005). Some definitions even include comprehension as another element in reading fluency (Dudley & Mather, 2005). It is clear that the definition of fluency is certainly evolving.

Reading fluency is starting to generate more attention and as more research is being conducted, definitions are changing. The definition of fluency is broadening in some cases to include rate and accuracy at every level of reading such as whole-word identification and comprehension (Katzir, Kim, O’Brien & Wolf, 2006). In general reading fluency encompasses the ability to read a passage accurately and effortlessly however the ongoing debate over the role of comprehension in reading fluency certainly needs to still be explored.
Comprehension may or may not be included in the definition of reading fluency but the facts supporting their inextricable link are widely supported by many leading professionals. “The prevailing theory is that decoding and comprehension both require cognitive resources, and the more processing capacity devoted to decoding, the less capacity available for understanding what has been decoded,” (Corcoran, Good, Roberts, 2005, p. 306). Reading fluently frees the reader to concentrate on making meaning of a text. Some reports even show that reading fluency is a prerequisite for comprehension (Mokhtari & Thompson, 2006). One study of fourth grade students illustrated that “Students who can read text passages aloud accurately and fluently at an appropriate pace are more likely to understand what they are reading, both silently and orally,” (Mainzo, 2005, p. 11).

While there is an undeniable relationship between fluency and comprehension, just being able to read fluently does not necessarily mean the story was comprehended. On the other hand, if a reader is spending the majority of their cognitive ability trying to process the text, they will have limited resources available to work on comprehension (Oakley, 2005). This would imply that fluency is necessary but not the only process needed to comprehend a text. Taking a considerable time to decode words slows down the pace of a reader which creates choppiness and interferes with the reader’s memory to put the words together and make meaning of the text (Witte-Townsend & Whiting, 2005). Poor reading fluency is known to be a major cause of overall weak comprehension (Dudley & Mather, 2005 & Rasinski, 2006). Basically without students being able to successful read fluently, comprehension will be negatively impacted.
Motivation is something that needs to be on the forefront of educators' minds. That is especially true when it comes to reading instruction. Struggling readers often feel discouraged and lack a desire to engage in any reading instruction because of their own perception of themselves as readers. Keeping in mind that boys are likely to be a large percentage of the struggling readers in a given classroom, it is critical that the teacher examines each child's interests, personal needs and experiences to help provide the right instructional resources (Brozo, 2006). It is true that the more children are engaged with reading, the better chances they have of becoming fluent readers (Witte-Townsend & Whiting, 2005). This fact is important to take into account as teachers because they need to be aware of reading materials that will promote student engagement and a positive attitude towards reading. Students who lack motivation to read will read as few as 10,000 words per year compared to other students that are reading up to 500 times more words (Dudley & Mather, 2005). This statistic shows the significance of a teacher selecting highly engaging materials that reach a range of interests. If a student can gain an appreciation of books early on, they will be more willing to work through any difficulties that they encounter as they read (Witte-Townsend & Whiting, 2005). This appreciation makes a big difference in a student's overall effort and later in their achievement.

Fluency plays a huge role in a students desire to work on reading because without it, students experience frustration and a decreasing motivation to participate in reading activities. This really creates a downward spiral because without accurate decoding skills by grade three, students fall behind in academic achievement. As these students get older, their fluency problems become magnified because they struggle to complete assignments that their peers are capable of comprehending (Dudley & Mather, 2005). This frustration
does not just affect language arts. Reading is an integral part of every content area. This lack of motivation can lead to problems in other content areas and leave a child feeling unsuccessful. Therefore, reading fluency deserves a priority when developing literacy skills. One study showed that, “The deficit in reading fluency is not only a serious impairment but also highly persistent. The majority of children with a reading fluency deficit in Grade 2 still presented seriously delayed reading speed in Grade 8,” (Iozzino, Tessoldi & Vio, 2007, p. 204). This has a strong implication for direct instruction in fluency skills at an early age because without focused emphasis on this particular aspect of reading it will lead to later academic problems in most students. It has been suggested that elementary age students require regular instruction in reading fluency in order to be successful (Rasinski, 2005). That means that a teacher’s job is to help students become fluent early on so that they do not face frustration and become discouraged in school.

*Fluency Instruction*

Knowing that fluency plays a critical role in reading development, it is no surprise that experts suggest being proactive in the classroom through two different ways; teaching strategies and instructional planning. Teaching strategies can be described as the methods used to teach fluency, which includes a wide array of approaches. Instructional planning deals with what will be taught and when it is taught (Welsch, 2007). Both have a direct impact on a student’s ability to gain fluency skills.

Part of instructional planning is finding appropriate text that will target fluency instruction. Children need to have access to texts at an appropriate readability level for fluency instruction to be successful (Oakley, 2005). These books should be interesting
and enjoyable for the child and at a level where the student can read at a 95-98% accuracy rate (Witte-Townsend & Whiting, 2005). Books that fall within this range are considered an easy readability level and allow for students to practice self-monitoring skills. Any text where a reader has less than 97% accuracy would be too challenging for fluency practice (Dudley & Mather, 2005). If a text is at a student’s instructional level, between a 90-94% accuracy rate, pre-teaching of vocabulary is necessary in order for the student to be successful (Oakley, 2005). Books at an instructional rate can provide an opportunity for vocabulary acquisition and comprehension practice but would not be appropriate for fluency instruction (Dudley & Mather, 2005).

Another factor to consider for instructional planning is the amount of time devoted to fluency instruction. Time is a critical component to reading fluency. The amount of time devoted to reading ranges depending on the child. Overall literacy can only be achieved by sustained involvement with text. Therefore it makes sense that the most successful readers are typically students who are internally motivated and spend quality time reading (Witte-Townsend & Whiting, 2005). Equally important is the ability for kids to be able to choose their own books. It is easy for teachers or parents to get particular about the types of texts that they deem quality material for a child to read but in order to promote genuine engagement and a desire to read, the child needs to be allowed to select whatever book they choose (Witte-Townsend & Whiting, 2005).

There are many instructional activities that can be employed to target reading fluency. Since a typical classroom is ripe with students at a wide range of reading levels, fluency instruction can and should be modified to fit each student. Fluency activities such as readers theater, echo reading and choral reading that is done in the classroom allows
both “...beginning and experienced readers practice rereading texts to learn to coordinate decoding skills and to have the opportunity to be successful and confident as they read a text smoothly, effortlessly and automatically,” (Dugan & Marr, 2007, p. 52). Many of the instructional activities can be done together as a whole class where both advanced and emergent readers can hone their fluency skills. Literature that is meant for performing can be done through choral reading to initiate fluency practice. Choral reading allows students to read together as a group and build confidence with the text (Oakley, 2005). Teachers could easily establish classroom rituals where all students have access to a passage that can be shared and read as a group through choral reading.

One popular form of fluency instruction is repeated readings, which helps promote reading success (Rasinski, 2005). In a repeated reading, a student rereads a text three or four times until oral reading sounds fluid and is automatic. It focuses on increasing rate and comprehension with each reading of the text. Repeated readings is a wonderful tool to target reading fluency however many experts caution that the types of selections used need to be taken into account. This goes back to the instructional planning that is a crucial part of fluency. Some types of text lend themselves well towards this type of fluency practice. Since the expressive oral interpretation should be the main focus of repeated readings, texts such as poetry, lyrics, chants, dialogues and plays provide rhythmical oral readings (Rasinski, 2006).

It is essential that all fluency instruction be engaging. Students need to feel that the skill they are working on has a purpose and this should be explicit whether it is the first time the student is reading a text or the eighth time. In order to get students to buy into participating in repeated readings it helps to include a performance aspect which
provides an incentive for rehearsing (Rasinski, 2006). Research has acknowledged that the challenge in getting a student to read a text again is to find a particular method that will be motivating to them (Hodges, Mandlebaum & Messenheimer, 2007). Fluency takes practice and time. A great way to excite students is to provide rich materials that are meant to be performed such as poems, songs or scripts (Rasinski, 2005). Having a wide range of resources is essential so that both fiction and nonfiction materials are present with various reading levels represented.

Readers theatre provides repeated readings that can be fun and motivational. “Readers theatre is a rehearsed group presentation of a script that is read aloud rather than memorized. The emphasis is on spoken words and gestures, not on staged action,” (Flynn, 2004, p. 360). Readers theatre can even be used to target key social studies and science content that is often overlooked in light of high-stakes reading tests. The only materials necessary to implement readers theatre into the elementary science classroom are a science textbook or trade book, pencil and paper. Teachers can select parts of a science text that would be better understood if it were presented in a script like presentation. Teachers can then write the script themselves or work with students to write a collaborative script (Kinniburgh & Shaw, 2007). This form of curriculum-based readers theatre is a wonderful way to combine fluency instruction with content knowledge. When a class works together to read a script they are targeting the important speaking skills such as correct pronunciation, intonation and expression and reading it together multiple times before performing is an authentic repeated reading strategy. However if a teacher would rather have a script that is already written, there is a wealth of scripts that are
readily available for readers theatre that are based on stories or pieces of literature (Flynn, 2004).

Another instructional strategy that provides a purposeful and meaningful way for students to be involved with repeated reading is a cross-age book buddy program. This type of program involves older elementary students being paired with younger students and meeting on a regular basis to read to each other. The older students are instructed how to model fluent reading and how to discuss literature with younger readers. Since the expectation is for all the students to practice reading their books before buddy reading sessions, it provides a meaningful repeated reading (Friedland & Trusdell, 2006). Buddy reading provides a unique fluency practice for both the younger and older reader. The younger reader engages in repeated readings and is given feedback from the older reader, while the older reader is engaged with repeated readings and the opportunity to be the more proficient reader which is a confidence booster.

Variety is key when it comes to keeping students engaged and interested in any instructional activity. In keeping with that notion, a whisper phone can provide a unique way to practice fluency. A whisper phone is a homemade device that students can use that looks similar to a phone and allows students to easily hear themselves read as they whisper into it (Hodges, Mandlebaum & Messenheimer, 2007). The whisper phone is a great tool to use that encourages repeated reading. Students may find it motivational to use this tool because it allows them an opportunity to read orally without having an audience. Students that might feel discouraged to participate because of their perceived image as a failing reader can then practice without feeling intimidated by an audience. A whole class full of students can be reading orally at the exact same time without
interfering with each other's reading because each student is only whispering. Students benefit from hearing themselves read and a whisper phone is one way to achieve that goal. Another way for students to listen to themselves and monitor their own fluency is to tape record or video tape a student reading. Afterwards the student can listen to hear if they are reading accurately and effortlessly. The students can then practice fluent reading and be taped again in order for them to monitor their progress.

In addition to careful selection of texts and providing motivational activities, it is important that when students engage in repeated readings that they receive feedback about the errors right after they read so that they can practice accuracy. Prompt feedback after a repeated reading will deliver the most successful results (Dudley & Mather, 2005). Without this form of fluency coaching, a student may continue practicing their errors and won't be able to make the anticipated goals of the fluency instruction (Rasinski, 2005). Since one-on-one time with a teacher is a difficult commodity to provide on a regular basis, a peer reading partner can help resolve the problem. Having students practice with another peer can also help them identify errors and gain an understanding of what they can do to improve. Some research suggests that pairing struggling readers with a more competent peer partner can be a successful form of intervention. The peer coaches model fluent reading and also provide feedback to the developing reader. Dugan and Marr (2007) believe that when employing peer coaches that it works well to create individualized fluency folders that contain short passages that are leveled in difficulty so that the student practices a selection at an independent readability level. After reading, the peer coaches provide feedback to the developing reader in ways they can improve.
Students that are directly involved with ongoing evaluation see the purpose of this type of instruction and in turn will come to recognize their own growth.

Another method that promotes fluency and overall comprehension is sustained silent reading. This practice involves a student selecting a text that can be read at an independent level. Not only does this practice promote lifelong readers but it aids in reading achievement when done on a regular basis. In fact, research suggests that “as little as five minutes a day of silent reading over 20 weeks resulted in an additional one-month growth in reading achievement,” (DeBenedictis & Fisher, 2007, p. 31). While silent reading certainly has a strong impact on reading improvement it has been found that when students have a chance to interact with peers and discuss what they read during silent reading, it produces the best results (DeBenedictis & Fisher, 2007).

Paired reading is another popular form of fluency instruction. This strategy involves a student reading along with a more competent reader. When the student feels confident they take over the responsibility for reading (Oakley, 2005). This can also be done by the student following along with a text as they listen to a story on tape. Paired reading can even be done in a small group setting where students each have a copy of the text and the teacher models fluent reading. After multiple readings, the teacher gives more responsibility of the reading to the students (Rasinski, 2005). Another variation to paired reading could take the form of a student reading with a gender-matched role model. This has been shown to have a positive impact on the academic outcomes in the lives of many boys that could use a male mentor in this capacity (Brozo, 2006). This type of instruction could easily be done on a regular basis in any content area.
Fluency is a skill that requires a lot of modeling so that students have a clear picture of what it is that good readers do when they are reading. Having a text read aloud to students is a way to model fluent reading. Interestingly enough, “The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement compared the reading skills of 210,000 students from 32 different countries. They found the highest scores in children who were read to by their teachers daily and read the most pages for pleasure daily,” (DeBenedictis & Fisher, 2007, p. 32). During the literacy block it is important then to include time in the day where students listen to their teacher read aloud a book orally. The teacher should take the time to pause and share the strategies that they are employing to help them be a fluent reader. The students also have an opportunity to practice their listening skills at the same time. It is also beneficial to model fluent reading when the students also have access to the same copy of the text that is being read aloud. Big books are one way to accomplish that goal or provide an individual copy of a text for them to follow along with. Students could then share and discuss the strategies they listened to as their teacher modeled fluent reading.

Assessment

It is imperative that teachers closely monitor the progress that all students are making in regards to fluency in order to effectively inform their future instruction. Student achievement in fluency can be measured in a variety of ways. Fluency can be assessed through contextual reading or by whole word reading without a context (Burns, Lagrou, Mizerek & Mosack, 2006). One study was done that reflected that a better generalization is reached when words are presented in context versus a list. In other
words when fluency is practiced within a context as compared to in isolation, it leads to faster reading of those words when they were later placed in new contexts (Iozzino, Tressoldi & Vio, 2007).

It is important for a teacher to monitor students’ ongoing fluency progress. This can be done quickly and in a way that will show small changes in achievement (Rasinski, 2005). One way to accomplish this goal is for the teacher to select an unfamiliar text with an easy readability that is about a half a page in length so that the teacher can monitor fluency (Oakley, 2005). Researchers caution that fluency should not just be assessed based on being able to read words on a page fast enough. This can result in students saying words quickly just to do well and not attempting to gain any meaning from the text (Hedrick, 2007). To alleviate this problem, a short passage can be selected and used to assess fluency and also be used to monitor comprehension if it is followed by a brief retelling of what happened in the story. This process allows a teacher to identify progress made as well as areas that need further explicit teaching (Rasinski, 2005). Retell fluency is a better measure of comprehension than a question-response or cloze format because retelling can be taught, modeled and practiced much easier than the other two formats. Retelling what was read also represents a more critical path to sophisticated text comprehension and provides information to the teacher when students oral reading fluency does not represent comprehension (Corcoran, Good & Roberts, 2005).

Additionally, self-assessment and peer-assessment can also be powerful monitoring tools. This can be done by other students using a checklist, tape/video recording and class discussions (Oakley, 2005). One way to do a self-assessment or peer-assessment is for the teacher to select a short reading passage that if read fluently would
be able to be read in a minute. The students are then timed by either the teacher or a partner and then the students can individually record how many words they were able to read accurately within that minute. That information can even be recorded in a graphic representation so that students can monitor their growth using a visual aid. Research suggests that if this type of assessment is done that the teacher needs to emphasize that being able to read words rapidly is not the only component of fluent reading.

Summary

Literacy skills are necessary in everyday life. In order for students to be successful academically in any content area, they must be able to read, write, listen and speak effectively. Reading scientific texts, performing an experiment or solving a word problem, are all examples of situations that require good comprehension skills. Without fluency, reading can become a serious challenge because the reader is unable to make meaning of the text. In fact, "The escalating demands for rapid, accurate reading skills in a computer-literate society make it increasingly important to understand the factors that affect fluent reading," (Katzir, Kim, O’Brien & Wolf, 2006, p. 52). In other words, fluency needs to be incorporated into instruction often in order for students to gain the strategies they need to be successful readers. This is especially true at the elementary grade levels. The great part about fluency is that the strategies that target this skill can be used in any content area. Readers theatre, poems and short texts, can all be done using content specific readings. Paired reading, modeling of fluency and repeated readings can easily be incorporated into instruction as well. Assessments are also quick and easy to do and will inform future fluency instruction. Targeted fluency instruction will ultimately
effect overall motivation and academic achievement. The foundational skill of reading fluently is essential because it ultimately serves to promote lifelong readers.
Methodology

Reading fluency directly impacts the academic achievement of all students. The research will attempt to uncover the different strategies that can be employed within the elementary classroom that will promote reading fluency. A variety of strategies and tools will be explored throughout the research and the outcomes will be recorded and analyzed.

Participants

All of the students in a single third grade classroom were selected as the participants for the study of reading fluency. The entire study took place within the confines of one classroom and within the regular hours of instructional time. The classroom was located in the third and fourth grade wing of a Kindergarten through fifth grade elementary school. The school was situated in a suburban neighborhood with a diverse population.

The students were academically heterogeneously mixed. There were sixteen third grade students that participated in the research. They ranged in age from 7-9 years old. Nine of the students were male and seven were female. The students were grouped based on their reading level. The formalized testing that was done when the participants were in second grade had previously identified the reading level for each student. The participants were each given a Rigby Reading Test in June 2007. The reading test involved reading a short passage, orally retelling the story, reading the passage again out loud to the teacher and then answering four short comprehension questions orally.

The same test was administered again in September 2007 but this time the participant's current third grade teacher gave it. The results of both tests were analyzed
and compared to come up with an accurate reading level. The level indicated a specific letter that showed where on the reading continuum each student was according to the guidelines stated in Fountas and Pinnell. The participants in this study fell within a range of a guided reading level of K-R. Level K represented a reading level at the end of first grade. Reading level O was the target level for beginning of third grade. Level R represents an advanced level indicating the participant was reading at a beginning fourth grade level. The results of the initial assessment illustrated that six participants were reading below grade level, five participants were reading on grade level and five students were reading above grade level at the time of the testing.

Materials

There were several materials used to complete the research. The teacher used last year’s reading levels for each of the participants for grouping purposes. The Rigby Reading Tests were used to mark incremental reading progress every semester. Teacher created, reading fluency folders were also used which contained four copies of the same text on the various levels for each of the participants. The fluency folders were used as an on going form of assessment that the students used to practice their reading strategies. The reading passages were obtained from www.readinga-z.com. The passages had text that could be read within a minute based on the specific reading level. The folders were individualized for each student and color-coded based on the reading level. One minute sand timers were used to track the amount of time that passed as students read their fluency passages. Fluency rubrics were also used to chart weekly progress of each
individual student. Finally students used whisper phones to read their fluency passages on their own before working with their peer partner or book buddy.

Procedure

The teacher collected and analyzed the Rigby Reading Test that was administered to each of the participants in June 2007. Based on the reading levels determined in June of the individual students, the third grade teacher gave another Rigby Reading Test in September 2007. The testing took approximately twenty-five minutes per student. The participant was given a short text that matched the reading level of how they had performed in June. The student read the text and then gave an oral retelling of the events that took place in the story. The teacher recorded in their notes the key ideas that the student was able to recall. The student read the text a second time orally while the teacher did a running record of their errors. Finally the student answered four short response comprehension questions about the text. After meeting with the student, the teacher recorded the fluency, comprehension and reading of the text to gain an overall picture of each student. Both the strengths and needs were compiled for the entire class. The teacher noticed that fluency was an area in need of improvement in all students.

The teacher reviewed an extensive amount of literature on the topic of reading fluency and decided on some best practices that could be employed within the regular classroom setting and timeframe. The teacher consulted with the reading teacher to come up with a way to introduce the concept, several forms of assessment and discussed the possible strategies that would be used to target fluency. Through lesson study the team of teachers taught a lesson that illustrated how to use the peer fluency folders.
The first lesson was the student’s introduction to reading fluency. In the beginning of the lesson the students discussed what it meant to be a good reader. The students suggested many different ideas. The teacher led them towards a discussion about the different aspects of fluency. The students were given a handout with the definitions of accuracy, rate and expression on it. They went over each word and gave examples of each vocabulary term. The students were each given their own copy of an easy level (reading level J) picture book. The teacher modeled what it sounded like to orally read each page accurately, at a smooth pace and with appropriate expression. The students practiced by shadowing the modeling done by the teacher. The lesson was followed by center time devoted to the students reading with a peer buddy the same text out loud. They had an opportunity the next day to read the same book to a first grade book buddy.

The next lesson consisted of applying the definitions of fluency that they had learned from the previous lesson to learn how to practice their fluency skills. The reading teacher and the classroom teacher team-taught the lesson. They modeled how one peer would read a short text in a minute while the other buddy recorded the errors. The results were transferred onto a rubric, which included how many words were read, words that needed to be practiced, the rate and expression. The students then met with their fluency peer buddy. They were given their own folder, which contained a reading passage that was two levels below where they tested on the Rigby Reading Test and their own rubric. The students were provided guidance while they read aloud their passage while their buddy, recorded the errors and transferred the results on the rubric. Then the peer fluency buddies reversed roles and completed the same activity again.
The fluency passages were practiced four times during the week. Each time the progress made by each individual was recorded onto his or her rubric. The students were given time during the week to practice reading the passage on their own using a whisper phone. The students took the passage home to practice reading to an adult. At the end of the week the student took home the copies of the reading passages with the rubric and shared their progress with their parents. Approximately every other week the students were given a new passage to practice using the same strategies.

During the week opposite of when the students met with their peer fluency partner, the students went to the library and selected an easy level text that would be appropriate to read to a first grader. Over the course of the week they practiced repeated reading the picture book that was selected for fluency practice. The students met for a half hour every other week with their first grade book buddy. The fluency practice culminated in an oral reading of the selected fluency book to a first grader.

In addition to book buddies and peer fluency partners, the students also engaged in daily guided reading instruction. Guided reading instruction targeted a small group of students that are homogeneously grouped based on their reading levels. During their reading in this small group setting, they were given opportunities to hone both their comprehension and fluency strategies. The teacher monitored progress through anecdotal notes and gave appropriate practice and modeling that targeted each reading group.

Twice during the year the students also participated in readers theatre. The groups were heterogeneously mixed because the scripts offered roles that had a range in reading levels. The students had a chance to work as a group practicing their roles. Each time the students worked on a specific aspect of fluency. They used center time to meet with a
partner or use a whisper phone to practice their lines out loud. At the end of the week, the students performed their readers theatre for the rest of the class.

In order to determine ongoing progress in a formalized manner, the Reading Rigby Test was administered each semester. Every time the test was given the teacher noted progress in the areas of fluency and comprehension to determine overall growth as a reader.
Results

Reading fluency was an integral part of the language arts program for the third grade participants throughout the entire year. Beginning in September the students were introduced to the definition of reading fluency (the definition used can be found in the appendices) and were modeled fluent reading at least one time a day. The modeling included frequent read alouds, shared reading experiences, where the students had their own copy of the book that was being read out loud and guided reading where small reading groups that were homogenously clustered by ability, focused on fluency. The modeling and discussions about fluent reading allowed for an opportunity for the participants to gain a personal definition of fluent reading.

Through dialogue and discussion it was clear that all sixteen students had a firm understanding of what fluent reading involved and could describe how it sounded. In modeled lessons, students were asked to share what fluent reading entailed and spoke in an informed manner on the three components that were highlighted in the classroom, rate, expression and accuracy. Compared to past third grade students, their knowledge on fluent reading was more developed. They had access to the type of vocabulary used to describe fluency and could communicate why fluency was an important facet of reading. The common knowledge of reading fluency made lessons more meaningful. Even when lessons were not focused on fluency, the students would continue to comment and reflect on fluency. This showed that the foundation and direct instruction on fluent reading became an evaluation tool for the students to use on their own to monitor their reading and reading of others. It was noted that students often praised their peers when they heard each other read fluently.
The fluency peer buddy became a regular routine in the classroom. In the beginning it was difficult to run. The students even after watching it modeled a few times were unsure of the process. They were very enthusiastic in participating but were having difficulty understanding how to listen and record errors at the same time. The teacher made modifications to the process by having the students simply circle any errors instead of recording what words were inserted or read inaccurately. The students were also taught to keep their pencil on the paper following along with each word as it was read as a way to stay focused. This alleviated the problem the partners had of keeping up with the reader.

The teacher began each fluency peer partnering in the same manner to help establish routines. The students had a specific location in the room where they would work with their partner. The materials were color coded and labeled clearly to allow for easy access. The teacher led the students step by step for the first few weeks. The teacher kept track of the time that was given for each partner to read. Then after each person read, the teacher coached the students as to how to fill out the rubric. These same steps were repeated so that all students had the same instructions when they switched roles. After a few short weeks the students became very familiar with the expectations and with each successive practice, the teacher was coaching less and less on how to do the readings together as a pair. The students became more skilled at filling out the evaluation rubrics and developed their own individual strategies to help them stay focused listeners as they recorded any errors that their partner made.

The dialogue as the students filled out the rubrics was initially detrimental. The students were focused on pointing out each other’s downfalls as they read. A few pairs
argued over errors that their partner had recorded. They were upset at themselves when they made any mistakes. This became an important teaching point. After the first week, the teacher pointed out an exemplary pair of students who cooperated appropriately. The teacher shared specific examples about this pair of students that made their group successful. The teacher commented on how the two spoke positively to each other, encouraged their partner and took feedback as a way to improve and not a source of contention or criticism. The students even spoke on their own behalf and shared how it felt to work with their partner. This provided other students with a model for how to behave as a pair. Its impact was noticed immediately. The students that had been arguing previously took the advice of the exemplary pair and incorporated their means for communicating with each other to heart. The disputes about errors ended and the students instead began to focus on improvements. After each session with their partner the teacher allowed for time for the students to share good news about improvements that the pairs had noticed in each other.

As time went on it became clear that practicing the passage four times a week with their partner in a formalized manner was difficult. Since the class was practicing this every other week, it was hard to find the time four times in one week to do fluency partners. In addition to meeting with their peer partners, the students were also expected to take the passage home and practice with an adult and with a whisper phone during center time. Therefore it was clear that four times a week with their partner was more than what they needed. In between the first and the last reading there were many changes in terms of the amount of errors that each student made. They were able to see their growth easily by the end of the week. Changing the routine to meeting with their partner
three times a week instead of four made it more manageable for many reasons. The students and teacher benefited from the change. The routine became that the students would meet together on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. On Tuesday and Thursday the students would practice independently during center time and also at home with an adult.

The folders were an easy tool for organization because all of the materials could be found easily and replenished without too much trouble. The folders were color coded by the specific reading level of each student. For each reading level, the teacher placed five different readings in their folder. Each reading was copied four times so that they had one to take home and three to use during the week for their partner practice. As the students used up their passages, they moved on to the next reading level. Each successive level became more challenging such as in the amount of words that needed to be read in a minute, the readability of the vocabulary, the text features including the introduction to quotation marks or different types of punctuation besides just periods. Since the students were participating in this form of fluency instruction every other week, their supplies would last for approximately ten weeks. This seemed to be a good time frame with a particular reading level because by the end of ten weeks their reading level had typically gone up and they were then ready for more challenging fluency passages. Even if their reading level had not changed the fluency passages were selected at two levels below their instructional level so they still would be practicing passages that were at their easy level.

Book buddies was another regular part of their fluency instruction. The third grade participants would go to library each week and one of the three books that they checked out had to be a picture book that would be appropriate for a first grader to listen
to. The students were taught how to select an appropriate book by reading a few pages of a book that they thought would be interesting for themselves and a first grader. They would then determine if they could read all of the words on the page without difficulty. If there were more than five words on a page that were too challenging, than it was not an easy book for them to read and they would have to find another book. The students were allowed to choose fiction or nonfiction books and encouraged to take the first graders interest into account as they made their selections.

After library, the students would have center time to practice reading their book in a variety of ways. They would read it silently, read it into a whisper phone, read it out loud to another third grader and practice reading it to an adult at home. Each successive repeated reading of a easy text allowed for fluency practice. At the end of the week the students would meet with their first grade buddy and read it out loud to them. This gave a purpose to their repeated readings and as they read to their partners the teacher would circulate around the room listening to the text as they read out loud and praised the students when they were reading fluently. It was noted that the third grade students even commented to their first grade book buddies when they sounded fluent and encouraged the first graders similarly to how they talked to their peer fluency partners.

The students had the same book buddy partner the entire year. They established a meaningful relationship with each other and both classes looked forward to their half hour together. In addition to reading out loud to the first graders they also had an opportunity to be the more competent reader which boosted their self confidence. They would help the first graders sound out words and reinforced good reading strategies to help them develop their reading skills. The book buddy sessions were mutually beneficial
to both the first and third grade readers for different reasons. The fluency framework helped the third graders communicate effectively with the first graders. It also allowed for an opportunity for them to teach the techniques they have learned to the younger students, which the highest level of learning.

The whisper phones that the students used as part of their ongoing fluency instruction were teacher made. It consisted of approximately 3 ½ inches of pvc piping with pvc pipe elbows on either end. These were introduced at the beginning of the year. Most of the students had never had any experience with a whisper phone but some of them had used a variation of it in previous years. The students learned how to use the whisper phone and the purpose of using it. They had their own phone that had its own labeled bag so that they could continue to use them without the worry of spreading germs. The students regularly used the whisper phones to practice reading their book buddy books or fluency passages. Even when the students were not prompted to use their whisper phones, several students chose to use them when they did independent reading. The novelty of using the whisper phone wore off for some students but it was interesting to note that the struggling readers tended to choose to use the whisper phone more often than the grade level or above grade level readers. The whisper phone did promote self-monitoring of reading and was one tool that gave variety to their fluency practice.

Guided reading was a very important part of the language arts instruction. The students met with their teacher every day for approximately twenty-five minutes a day. The students were grouped into three reading levels according to their Rigby levels. The groups were flexible and would change based on individual needs and the specific goals of each reading group. The students read books at their instructional level with a focus
on different strategies that built comprehension. The students worked specifically on fluency according to what their needs were. The lower group was working on stopping at punctuation and decoding words appropriately. That group of students read shorter stories so that we could practice reading the book more than once. Often the books they read together they also read to their first grade book buddy. The grade level group focused more on some different forms of punctuation and how to read different genres including nonfiction text. The above grade level readers focused on reading text with quotation marks and giving appropriate expression depending on the mood of the characters.

In each reading group the teacher kept track of their fluency by having the students take turns reading in a whisper while the other students read silently. During this time the teacher would monitor how effectively they were utilizing the strategies that the group had discussed and practiced. The teacher kept records (see appendix D) and it informed the instruction that the group and individuals received. This ongoing informal assessment was quick and effective in terms of gathering an overall picture of each student.

During discussion of the text the teacher also noted their comprehension. This helped to determine the impact of fluency on comprehension. The struggling readers clearly benefited in fluency and comprehension when they read a passage more than once. They became more efficient at locating information from the text when they had multiple opportunities to read the same passage. The other two groups also were more skilled when they read a text more than once but the higher the level of the student the more reluctant they became to re-read a passage. They were more curious to find out what was going to happen next and rereading sometimes interfered with the flow and
fluency of the story. It was important for the teacher to adapt and change techniques based on the skill level of each reading group. That is why guided reading provided an important part of fluency instruction because it was individualized and feedback was given immediately.

Readers theatre was an activity that all of the students enjoyed. Each time the students had an opportunity to read in this manner they immediately wanted to know when they could do another one. The students had an opportunity to really act as a particular character and with each successive reading got even more expressive and accurate in their readings. The students had to cooperate by listening to each other and keeping track of where they were in the script so that they were on track when it was their turn. Having the opportunity to read with a range of reading levels helped the struggling readers because it gave them a model to work towards and in turn they improved their rate, expression and accuracy. The students enjoyed it so much they asked if they could take the scripts home to practice at night before performing.

When the students performed they really applied all the strategies that they had practiced and were very proud afterwards. The students that were the audience would then praise them for the different things they had noticed as the other kids had read. This provided a unique fluency opportunity that served as a good variation and change from routine. Unfortunately the time constraint in the classroom didn’t allow for many opportunities for the students to participate in readers theatre. The resources available were also very limited. Ideally in the future there will be more scripts available that directly correlate with the social studies or science curriculum.
The formalized Rigby tests were given three times a year, in September, January and June. It was after their Rigby test was administered in September that the students started all of their targeted fluency instruction. By the time January came around the students were more aware of what the teacher was testing them on. They knew that the first reading was a time for them to gather information about the text features and the overall main idea in order to read the text a second time in a fluent manner. Since the students had practiced evaluating each other’s fluency with their peer partner, they understood what the teacher was recording while they were reading. After the assessment the students even commented on their own reading in regards to fluency and comprehension. They felt more confident about themselves as readers from the struggling reader to the above grade level reader each noted that they had improved.

In general, the students’ attitude towards reading improved. They certainly each made progress in many ways. The growth varied from student to student but not one child didn’t experience some sort of growth. It is difficult to separate the different strategies and make an informed determination what actually inspired the most growth in terms of fluency. It is also very plausible to say that different methods worked better for some students than others. A wide spread approach to fluency allowed the students multiple representations and strategies that targeted the same goal. Perhaps the combination of many strategies had the most potential to promote change. All of the strategies and techniques were successful in terms of being able to be implemented and inspiring positive reading results.
Discussion

The literature that was reviewed supports reading fluency as an important aspect of a balanced literacy framework within the elementary classroom. During the research, reading fluency took place during the language arts block of time. Each day the participants had approximately two hours worth of language arts instruction, beginning first thing in the morning at 9:00 a.m. and lasting until lunch at 11:00 a.m. Within that time the students had instruction in reading, writing and word study, while also having meaningful opportunities to work on their listening and speaking skills. The literature suggested that approximately an hour be devoted to reading instruction, an hour for writing and anywhere from thirty to sixty minutes on language acquisition which was achieved in the research (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).

The literature supported both a solid block of language arts instructional time or separated times within the day (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). The reading, writing, and language development took place within a two hour time frame that was designed through the use of centers. The students participated in various forms of language arts instruction during that block of time that including guided reading, writers’ workshop and word study development. In the afternoon the students had approximately an hour of math instruction, forty-five minutes of either science or social studies and thirty-five minutes for academic intervention services. Within the science and social studies time frame, the students often participated in shared reading, read alouds, writing activities and other language arts related skills. The time allocated for academic intervention services was used for small group skill development in either language arts or math for struggling learners.
According to the literature, it is important that students move along the reading continuum (Fountas & Pinnell). In Kindergarten they come to school with little knowledge about reading and writing and it is the goal for all elementary students to continue to build on their existing reading skills to become literate and capable adults. According to both the literature and research, by third grade, typical grade level students have had opportunities to build their phonemic awareness, construct a repertoire of sight vocabulary, develop decoding skills and are working towards establishing themselves as more developed readers. Part of this development process includes reading fluency which serves as a bridge from decoding to comprehension. At this point in their schooling, the students fall into three different categories. They are either at, above or below their appropriate reading level for their grade. Depending on their reading level, their needs and development are quite different. These differences were shown as part of the continuum in the literature but not explicitly explored how this range of reading skills affects fluency specifically or how to best address a variety of needs within a classroom structure.

At the beginning of the year the students were assessed using a reading test known as the Rigby Reading Assessment. This testing gave base line information on individual strengths and needs in reading. From this testing, it was clear what students fell into which categories as seen in Appendix C. The comments in the appendix show specific insights on the students’ ability to read fluently. While there were certainly differences between each reader, by placing them into three leveled groups, it was evident that each group had their own specific needs in the area of decoding, fluency and comprehension. The above grade level readers needed coaching and guidance in the area
of reading expressively, slower more evenly paced and an emphasis on reading according to the proper punctuation. The grade level readers needed coaching in reading at a faster pace and with more expression. The below grade level readers needed assistance with decoding words accurately, reading in longer phrases and reading faster. The literature shared the same sentiment that reading fluency has many components including pacing, expression and accurate reading (Witte-Townsend & Whiting, 2005). The range of differences that existed by third grade was astonishing. The separate needs of each group of students supported the use of homogeneously grouped guided reading instruction.

**Struggling readers come in all ages and ethnicities.** The literature explored struggling readers as a gender related issue. Boys over the course of many studies throughout the years have continued to be a prominent portion of the number of struggling students (Brozo, 2006). In a classroom of only sixteen students it is hard to draw a conclusion on a gender related issue for struggling readers. Half of the students that receive AIS services in language arts were male and the other half female. Therefore gender comparisons did not play an important role in this particular research.

Reading is a complex task that involves many different processes working in a synergetic manner. Decoding is a very important part of reading (Welsch, 2007). The larger the sight vocabulary that a student possess, the more fluent the reading will be. Students that have difficulty determining how to sound words out properly, often require more assistance with a particular vowel pattern. The students that were reading below grade level, tested into the same word study grouping. By the end of second grade, the students should have a strong understanding of both long and short vowel sounds. According to their word study assessment these students did not possess a sufficient
understanding of short and long vowels which was evident in their spelling and decoding errors.

The literature focused entirely on the relationship between comprehension and reading fluency, however, there certainly appears that a relationship exists between phonemic awareness and reading fluency (Goudvis & Harvey, 2007 & Mokhari & Thompson, 2006). The grade level readers actually split in terms of their word study testing. A few of the students fell into the short and long vowel pattern group while the majority of that group tested into other vowel patterns and syllable junctures. All of the students that were reading above grade level tested into the other vowel patterns and syllable junctures group. It should also be noted that the grade level and above grade level readers had a larger sight vocabulary and a much stronger sense for decoding unfamiliar vocabulary. The below grade level readers not only struggle to spell but have a hard time recognizing homonyms. The literature did note that an early warning sign for difficulty with comprehension are readers who have trouble decoding which is why it is not surprising that the below grade level readers have difficulty in more than just one area of reading (Goudvis & Harvey, 2007).

It is clearly evident that reading fluency is directly linked to comprehension. This notion was confirmed by both the literature and the research. All of the struggling readers in the research had difficulty with decoding, reading fluently and comprehension. The undeniable connection between these processes is rooted in the struggling readers’ behavior. The students that were the furthest below grade level had the most difficult time decoding vocabulary. The words they struggled with were common sight vocabulary words. Comparatively, the decoding that the above grade level readers struggled with was
sophisticated and often content specific. The overall comprehension is negatively impacted by frequent breaking for decoding. Too much of the cognitive processing is spent on determining the vocabulary and not on putting the ideas together and drawing meaning. During shared reading, as part of the language arts block, the same grade level text is read by all students. The above grade level reader reads the text effortlessly with not just literal comprehension but also inferential comprehension too. The struggling reader on the other hands takes a considerable amount of time to read the same text and is unable to decode the necessary vocabulary that contributes to overall comprehension. Their cognitive efforts are consumed by the decoding process and they struggle with comprehension questions. The lowest readers have trouble even locating information in the text when asked literal comprehension questions.

The literature suggested that comprehension is also related to background knowledge (Manning & Tsuguhiko, 2007). This was also apparent in the research. The content of both social studies and science is very time demanding in the elementary schedule. It is critical that the content be weaved into the language arts instruction in order for the students to have an ample opportunity to interact with the particular academic content necessary at each grade level. Therefore, very often the students are required to read nonfiction text on an unfamiliar topic. Depending on the amount of hands-on prior knowledge that a student has on a particular topic will ultimately determine the amount of comprehension that can be obtained. In the research it was determined that activating background knowledge was especially important for struggling readers but it also showed benefits for all students in their ability to grasp the new content and retain the information in a meaningful and connected way. If a new scientific topic
was first addressed through a hands-on inquiry lesson and then explained in depth through a guided reading nonfiction text, students were able to not only comprehend better but the scientific vocabulary embedded within the text was not as challenging to decode due to their prior exposure to it.

Reading fluency has been a neglected component of many language arts programs (Manzo, 2005 & Dudley & Manner, 2005). It is gaining more attention as an important and necessary teaching topic. Decoding is a critical and obvious necessity for reading but being able to decode effectively does not mean that comprehension is achieved. Fluency bridges the two facets of reading and allows for a more meaningful interaction and understanding. Explicit instruction of fluency promotes overall comprehension for all students. Students need to be aware of what fluency entails and the importance of it so that they can consciously work on establishing an appropriate rate, accurate and expressive reading. As students develop these skills their comprehension will also improve. The literature debated the definition of fluency especially in regards to comprehension (Dudley & Mather, 2005 & Rasinski, 2005 & Witte-Townsend & Whiting, 2005). According to the research the two are inherently linked. The literature did not however share the continuum for fluency development specifically. Perhaps a more focused study on the connection between fluency and comprehension as a shared continuum of development might illuminate more evidence that supports reading for understanding.

A major factor in reading development has to do with each individual’s personal desire and motivation to be engaged with a text. A lack of motivation can be due to previous difficulty reading. This notion supports the need for fluency instruction because
the more challenging it is to read accurately, the more turned off a student can become to reading (Dudley & Mather, 2005). Motivation was an important idea in the literature and became an equally significant aspect of the instructional planning in the classroom. At the beginning of the year it was important for the teacher to determine each student’s attitude towards reading. Very few students indicated that they did not enjoy reading however the grade level or above grade level readers had a long list of favorite book titles while the lower readers struggled to come up with a single title that they enjoyed. One low level reader even indicated that the book they enjoyed most was one that had been read out loud to them by an adult.

According to the literature the amount of time a student is actually engaged in reading is directly proportional to their reading ability (Dudley & Mather, 2005 & Witte-Townsend & Whiting, 2005). The initial inventory helped in the research development. All of the books were carefully selected so that the topic would be interesting and engaging to the students. It was also important that the students had say in selecting some of the books that they read as well. The students overall were most intrigued by nonfiction texts so that became an area where more instructional resources had to be located for some of the reading levels. It also became important for students to be engaged in a variety of texts as frequently as possible in many different ways. Therefore reading was important of course during school hours but also outside of school. An ongoing part of the student’s homework was to select any text that they enjoyed and to read for twenty minutes a day. They were required to record the title, amount of pages read and have a parent initial their reading log daily.
Another part of the instructional planning was determining what would be taught and when. In order for students to have an opportunity to practice their fluency skills they needed to have a text that was an easy readability. According to the literature in order for a text to be considered easy it must be read at a 97% accuracy rate (Witte-Townsend & Whiting, 2005). To ensure that a text was easy the teacher selected texts that were two levels below their guided reading instructional level. The passages ranged in length and genre. The teacher also found resources that had a potential for a performance aspect to it. Reader’s theatres texts and poems that could be enjoyed as repeated readings were important. Each student was matched with another student with similar reading abilities. The teacher created color coded folders that contained four copies of each reading passage that could be read in under a minute. The folders were individualized so that each pair had a text level that was easy for them to read. As the reading difficulty got harder so did the text features such as the introduction of quotation marks. An example of the reading passages is included in Appendix B.

The literature provided a wide array of strategies and methods that support reading fluency. The difficulty became which ideas to use and which ones there just wasn’t enough time to try or wouldn’t fit well with the instruction. Repeated readings were something that was mentioned in all of the literature so that was an area that was explored in the research (Rasinski, 2006). While the literature stated many different ways of getting students to reread a text it did not explore how often a particular text should be reread and it certainly did not get into the amount of time per week that should be devoted to repeated readings or fluency instruction in general. In the research the teacher set aside specific time allotments within the week for fluency instruction. Every other
week for four times the students would meet with their fluency peer and practice reading the minute long passage. The students would listen to each other read and record their progress throughout the week on a rubric illustrated on Appendix A. On the opposite week the students practiced reading an easy level text that they choose which would culminate by meeting for a half hour with their first grade book buddy (Friedland & Trusdell, 2006). That way it was automatically designed that the students were having a meaningful routine built in each week.

Guided reading occurred every morning during center time. The below grade level readers had shorter books that they read at least twice. In their small group time, the teacher would preview difficult vocabulary, spend time practicing how to decode words, model how punctuation marks guides when to stop and pause, allowed for time for the students to listen to each other read and discuss fluent reading. The students would participate in echo readings, reading as a chorus, and reading it silently to achieve multiple readings. The teacher also focused on literal comprehension questions and how to locate the information in the text. The students worked on pieces of fiction and nonfiction, short one page texts, picture books and chapter books so that they had plenty of variety. This small group work allowed for leveled practice of specific fluency skills. The teacher assessed in an informal way how each individual was progressing on an ongoing basis using the form from Appendix C.

Similarly, the grade level and above grade level readers also met with the teacher for small group instruction daily in the form of guided reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Their texts were in general longer pieces with more sophisticated vocabulary embedded within it. The focus for each of the groups was again guided by the informal and ongoing
assessments that the teacher took once weekly. Each new text was selected with a fluency purpose. For example, the above grade level readers were given text with italics so that they could learn the reasoning for changing the look of text and how that would impact the expressive nature in which they read those words. The groupings were flexible and if a student’s needs were better served in a different group then they would be switched when a new book was introduced. The changes made to each group didn’t happen often. The overall picture of a child’s reading progress was taken into account before a change would occur.

Most of the fluency instruction was catered to the individual needs of each student but at times whole class modeling was very important. Daily read aloud instruction provided an opportunity for the students to listen and watch as a proficient reader would demonstrate reading fluency. The use of big books served as a way for the students to watch what words were read and listen to how they were read simultaneously. The teacher would also use books where each student had a copy of the text so they could follow along as the teacher read. At times the students would not have a text in front of them but simply concentrate on hearing the expression. Afterwards, the teacher would allow for discussions about fluency and comprehension as it related to what they had just listened to. In the literature it also suggested that read aloud time was an important activity to include at the elementary grades (DeBenedictis & Fisher, 2007). Even students who did not view themselves as strong readers would enjoy listening to stories read aloud so it would also build a motivation to be engaged in a text.

During the year it was difficult to find time for reader’s theatre but when the class was able to participate in this activity the students found great joy in it. The reader's
theatre scripts that are available, as noted in the literature, are quite extensive (Flynn, 2004). The class did not take the time to write their own script as was suggested but they did use one that had various reading levels within a single script. The literature supported reader’s theatre because it allowed for struggling readers to learn from proficient readers as they listened and practiced their reading skills. The students enjoyed this activity because of the performance aspect and found it very motivating (Hodges, Mandlebaum & Messenheimer, 2007). When the students had a chance to share their reading with the other group they read with great expression and listened to each other appropriately.

Sustained silent reading was also suggested as an important aspect of reading fluency (DeBenedictis & Fisher, 2007). The students were given plenty of opportunities to read silently during center work. To provide a tool that might motivate and certainly stimulate fluency skills, the students were each given a whisper phone. This device which was discussed in the literature allowed for the students to hear their own reading and monitor themselves as readers (Hodges, Mandlebaum & Messenheimer, 2007). Some students found this tool more exciting than others. There was not a correlation to the type of reader that enjoyed this tool the most it was really just a matter of preference. The teacher also allowed readers to decide if reading silently by themselves or reading quietly with a partner would allow them to best monitor themselves as a reader. The students who chose to read by themselves or with a partner also appeared to be just a preference of each individual and not linked to their ability.

The students were assessed in many different ways as was supported by the literature. Reading with their peers they monitored each other’s ongoing progress through a rubric. During guided reading the teacher monitored ongoing informal progress.
Anytime the students read on their own they were monitoring themselves as readers but any corresponding activities done were submitted to the teacher and some evaluation was done on their comprehension. The formalized assessment was done once each semester to determine the overall picture of the reader. The results of the Rigby Assessment are in Appendix C. Each individual showed progress in reading fluency. Some students progressed faster than other students. There didn’t appear any particular reason for why the differences in progress among the students took place, other than perhaps individual effort, since all students were given the same amount of time to hone their skills. Each reader when asked how they viewed their own progress noted that they felt they had improved.
Conclusion

The literature provided a loose framework for what the research could entail. It certainly was not an organized plan off which to follow (Rasinski, 2006). The research allowed for exploration of many of the different suggestions but did not by any means exhaust the list of possibilities that were suggested. In some cases, it was clear that the literature and research came to the same conclusions. In other situations, the literature opened up areas for more questions to be pondered. The most significant question that came up as a result of the research was how much time should be devoted to fluency instruction? This was not clear from the literature and certainly was not resolved in the research. Within the research time was a critical element. It was the decisive factor as to what strategies could be employed and which ones were not used. The choices on what activities were given priority became the ultimate instructional planning component of the research. There are many areas that still need to be explored in the area of fluency. If the literature and the research both noticed that fluency is connected to other parts of reading than more should be done to support this study within the elementary program (Mokhari & Thompson, 2006 & Welsch, 2007). Perhaps as there are standards for other subjects and topics, there should exist one on reading fluency so that particular practices are established each year to allow for meaningful fluency instruction. An in-depth look at how fluency and phonemic awareness are connected would also serve as an interesting study. Through the literature and the research, there is no doubt that reading fluency is a critical component of literacy that needs to be an ongoing part of the elementary curriculum in order to move students along the reading continuum (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).
References


Friedland, E. & Truesdell, K. (2006). “I can read to whoever wants to hear me read,”
Buddy readers speak out with confidence. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 38, 36-41.


Hedrick, W. There is more to fluency than speed and accuracy. *Voices From the Middle*, 14, 55-56.


Appendix A
Peer Fluency Rubric

*Fluency* is reading *accurately, expressively* and at a proper *rate*.

*Accurately* means you read only the words on the page. You do not add, leave out or change words.

*Expressively* means you use the punctuation marks and describing words to put feeling and rhythm into your reading.

Your voice changes to show emotions, to emphasize important ideas and to command attention.

*Rate* means you read smoothly, with an average speed of 90-100 words per minute. Remember reading too fast or too slow will take away from reading expressively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day 1</th>
<th>Accuracy ⭐⭐⭐</th>
<th>Expression ⭐⭐⭐</th>
<th>Rate ⭐⭐⭐</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Words Read:</td>
<td>Words to practice:</td>
<td>Areas to improve:</td>
<td>too fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>□ volume</td>
<td>too fast &amp; too slow (in parts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>□ articulation (speaking clearly)</td>
<td>too slow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>□ inflection (emphasis)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>□ dialogue</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>□ attention to punctuation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day 2</th>
<th>Accuracy ⭐⭐⭐</th>
<th>Expression ⭐⭐⭐</th>
<th>Rate ⭐⭐⭐</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Words Read:</td>
<td>Words to practice:</td>
<td>Areas to improve:</td>
<td>too fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>□ volume</td>
<td>too fast &amp; too slow (in parts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>□ articulation (speaking clearly)</td>
<td>too slow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>□ inflection (emphasis)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>□ dialogue</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>□ attention to punctuation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day 3</th>
<th>Accuracy ⭐⭐⭐</th>
<th>Expression ⭐⭐⭐</th>
<th>Rate ⭐⭐⭐</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Words Read:</td>
<td>Words to practice:</td>
<td>Areas to improve:</td>
<td>too fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>□ volume</td>
<td>too fast &amp; too slow (in parts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>□ articulation (speaking clearly)</td>
<td>too slow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>□ inflection (emphasis)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>□ dialogue</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>□ attention to punctuation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In 1978, a big winter storm hit Boston, Massachusetts. The winds blew over 35 miles an hour. Over two feet of snow fell in one day. The plows could not keep up.

The snow fell so fast that cars were left in the middle of the roads. People had to walk away from them. Many people had to stay at work. They could not get home because the roads had too much snow.

The heavy snows knocked down power lines. Many people had no heat. It took over two weeks to get the roads plowed and the power lines back up. It was one big storm!
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>June</th>
<th>September</th>
<th>January</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>avoided punctuation often, little expression</td>
<td>great expression, speed increased but can be too fast at times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>reading in short phrases, no expression, slow pace</td>
<td>reading in longer phrases, slow pace, little expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>K</td>
<td>K</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>working on decoding, slow pace, no expression</td>
<td>improved word recognition, faster pace, good expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>Q</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>pace was too fast, little expression</td>
<td>even pace, great expression, inserted words when very expressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>Q</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>took many pauses, inserted words</td>
<td>occasionally pausing, faster pace, inserted few words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>slow pace, read in short phrases, avoids punctuation, working on decoding</td>
<td>appropriate pace, read in longer phrases, avoids punctuation occasionally, working on decoding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>slow pace, read in short phrases, no expression, working on decoding</td>
<td>appropriate pace, little expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>Q</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>avoids punctuation occasionally, little expression</td>
<td>great expression, pace increased but skips words when going too fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Q</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>slow pace, avoids punctuation occasionally, little expression</td>
<td>appropriate pace, little expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>repeated words frequently, working on decoding, avoids punctuation, slow pace, reads in short phrases, substitutes words</td>
<td>repeats words occasionally, working on decoding, avoids punctuation, slow pace, reads in short phrases</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>11</th>
<th>Q</th>
<th>Q</th>
<th>R</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>substitutes words, avoids punctuation, little expression</td>
<td>pauses before punctuation, great expression</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>12</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>Q</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>uneven pace with long breaths in between words, short phrases, no expression</td>
<td>appropriate pacing, when reads faster will skip words, reads in longer phrases, great expression</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>13</th>
<th>K</th>
<th>L</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>slow pace, inserted word endings, left out many words, read in short phrases, working on decoding</td>
<td>appropriate pacing, self-corrected mistakes, read in longer phrases, working on decoding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>14</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>J</th>
<th>L</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>reading word by word, very slow pace, working on decoding, avoids punctuation</td>
<td>reading in short to longer phrases, slow pace, working on decoding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>15</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>S</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>repeats words, little expression</td>
<td>great expression</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>16</th>
<th>Q</th>
<th>Q</th>
<th>R</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>avoids punctuation, inserted words, left out many words, little expression</td>
<td>inserted words occasionally, good expression</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Targeted Rigby level for grade three during the school year:
Beginning of year: N  Middle of year: O  End of year: P

Any students reading at a level less than the targets for each semester were considered below grade level in reading. Those students are highlighted in gray.
## Fluency Observation Chart

**Date:**

**Reading Selection:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name</th>
<th>Reading Rate</th>
<th>Accuracy</th>
<th>Expression</th>
<th>Overall Fluency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fast</td>
<td>No Errors</td>
<td>Volume</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Just Right</td>
<td>Few Errors</td>
<td>Articulation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Slow</td>
<td>Many Errors</td>
<td>Inflection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Punctuation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fast</td>
<td>No Errors</td>
<td>Volume</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Just Right</td>
<td>Few Errors</td>
<td>Articulation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Slow</td>
<td>Many Errors</td>
<td>Inflection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Punctuation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fast</td>
<td>No Errors</td>
<td>Volume</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Just Right</td>
<td>Few Errors</td>
<td>Articulation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Slow</td>
<td>Many Errors</td>
<td>Inflection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Punctuation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fast</td>
<td>No Errors</td>
<td>Volume</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Just Right</td>
<td>Few Errors</td>
<td>Articulation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Slow</td>
<td>Many Errors</td>
<td>Inflection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Punctuation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fast</td>
<td>No Errors</td>
<td>Volume</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Just Right</td>
<td>Few Errors</td>
<td>Articulation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Slow</td>
<td>Many Errors</td>
<td>Inflection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Punctuation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>