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‘I Am in Grade One and I Can Read!’ The Readers’ Workshop

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed the effects of the implementation of the readers’ workshop on students’ reading levels and comprehension skills in a first-grade, mixed-ability classroom in Lebanon. The instruments used at the beginning were running records and reading continuums, and at the end of the academic year, teachers’ professional notebooks and notes from the guided reading sessions and teacher-student conferences. The results showed that the readers’ workshop, when used as a differentiated reading approach, improved students’ reading levels and comprehension skills.

INTRODUCTION

Most educators expect their students to become proficient and confident readers but are aware that, in the higher grades, students sometimes begin to view reading negatively. Teachers are challenged to meet students’ diverse needs in reading, and to motivate them with appropriate and innovative approaches (Pettig, 2000). Tomlinson (1999) suggests a differentiated reading approach to provide quality reading opportunities to fit different students’ needs.

Miller (2002), Nesheim and Taylor (2001), and Taberski (2000) proposed the implementation of the *readers’ workshop*, a student-centered approach to teaching reading in the classroom which allows learners to be actively involved in the process of learning how to read at their own levels. It uses various teaching methods to achieve the objective of preparing self-disciplined readers who use a variety of reading strategies to understand the texts. In the readers’ workshop, students learn techniques that the teacher has modeled, and they apply these techniques to achieve their reading goals. Consequently, students recognize that they are valued as readers in this nurturing environment, regardless of their reading levels.

This study examined how using the readers’ workshop could improve students’ reading levels in a First-Grade, mixed-ability classroom. It was conducted in a Beirut school that offers an American curriculum, implementing various differentiation strategies for reading and writing instruction for around 900 Lebanese and international students.

THE READING PROCESS

The process of reading is a dimensional action that includes several skills such as phonics and decoding, fluency, word recognition, comprehension and higher-order thinking, and “the sum of these pieces is a tapestry that good readers use on a day-to-day basis to process text in their world” (Tankersley, 2003, p. 2). Reading is an extremely complex problem-solving experience that engages students and enables them to use prior knowledge and background to construct meaning from the text (Baskwill & Whitman, 1997). Students who read well are active agents willing to learn and assume responsibility for their own growth (Taberski, 2000). Research shows that a child who does not master the basics of reading at an early age is unlikely to learn it later on, and will probably not succeed in other school subjects. One main cause of low-performance in schools is students’ low reading achievement (Pettig, 2000; Shevin, 2008). Herron (2008) noted that “Students who are not at least moderately fluent in reading by third grade are unlikely to graduate from high school” (p. 77), and Lause (2004) found that 65% of the subjects in that study do not see themselves as readers and have stopped reading for pleasure. Thus, an important role of primary grades is to teach students how to become proficient readers.

It is important for students to possess a repertoire of reading and comprehension strategies to figure out unfamiliar words, understand and construct meaning from the text (Baskwill & Whitman, 1997). Tankersley (2003) found that effective readers are able to use decoding skills to quickly identify difficult words they encounter while reading. They also use their background knowledge to make logical inferences from the text and also apply both comprehension monitoring strategies and their awareness of spelling patterns to pronounce words in their texts to increase comprehension. Effective readers analyze and think about what they read while decoding and pronouncing the words in the text.

Differentiation and Using the Reader’s Workshop

To address reading problems at school, educators consider *differentiated instruction* as the most practical strategy to meet the diverse needs of students in a heterogeneous classroom (Tomlinson, 1999), a “way of thinking about teaching and learning that advocates beginning where individuals are rather than with a prescribed plan of action, which ignores students’ readiness, interests and learning profiles” (p. 108). Differentiated reading instruction helps teachers adjust the curriculum and instruction to meet students’ diverse needs, abilities and interests (Tomlinson, 1999, 2000) rather than adopting the one-size-fits-all classrooms (Pettig, 2000) where advanced learners are bored and unchallenged, and struggling students are unmotivated to learn new things they think are too hard (Tomlinson, 2000).

One specific differentiation strategy that was proven to be extremely effective in literacy classrooms is the readers’ workshop (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997; Lause, 2004; Miller, 2002; Nesheim & Taylor, 2000, 2001; Taberski, 2000). It uses teaching techniques that prepares readers to be self-disciplined and motivated to read because of a real interest (Lause, 2004), and presents a structured literacy community where students are given choices and individual time to read, as well as opportunities to react to what they read (Nesheim & Taylor, 2001). The daily structure of the reader’s workshop includes four parts: an independent self-selected reading time, a short whole-group mini-lesson, a second independent reading time with reading conferences, and a *reading share* (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997; Miller, 2002; Nesheim & Taylor, 2000, 2001; Taberski, 2000).

The First Independent Reading Time

The readers' workshop begins with the first independent reading time, ten minutes in which students are given the freedom to self-select books from any reading level or genre (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997; Miller, 2002; Taberski, 2000). When children choose books beyond their reading levels, they simply enjoy the illustrations and read whatever they can. The reason behind this freedom is to allow readers to browse different types of books and enjoy them even if they are too difficult or too easy (Miller, 2002; Taberski, 2000).

The Mini-Lesson

The second part starts with students gathering around the teacher for a ten-minute, whole-group, short mini-lesson (Miller, 2002; Nesheim & Taylor, 2000, 2001; Taberski, 2000). The teacher presents the teaching point and then models it clearly. Mini-lessons are usually short, specific, and presented in a manner that is meaningful to readers' needs (Nesheim & Taylor, 2000). They give students an opportunity to observe how other readers take risks, tackle difficult words, and use strategies when needed. Mini-lessons can be divided into three areas (Atwell, 1987): procedures (e.g., doing a small-group *share* or learning how to read aloud for listeners), literary (e.g., learning about the characteristics of different book genres or analyzing both characters' traits and feelings in the text) and strategy and skill (e.g., making inferences, or predicting and tackling difficult words). At the end, the teacher connects the mini-lesson to others from previous days and to students' lives as developing readers. This way, he or she will ensure that some students will apply the mini-lesson in their independent reading time, and that it will stay in students' ongoing reading repertoire (Miller, 2002).

The Second Independent Reading Time with Reading Conferences

After the mini-lesson, students read *just-right* books (i.e., books that correspond to their reading levels) quietly for 30 minutes while the teacher moves around the classroom, conferring with individuals (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997; Miller, 2002; Taberski, 2000). Based on their reading-readiness levels (see Assessment Tools below), which matches their ability with 96% accuracy for fluency and comprehension, students are given leveled books that range from A to Z (levels correspond to an instrument created by Teachers' College Reading, TCRWP, 2008b; Fountas & Pinnell, 1999). Teachers must be diligent in matching students with just-right books that continually challenge them during their independent reading time (Taberski, 2000; Tankersley, 2003). When children are not given the right books to read, their reading time will be less effective. During the second independent reading time, readers are supposed to use all the reading and comprehension strategies that they have been exposed to in previous mini-lessons.

To monitor students' improvement in reading, and to learn more about them as readers, the teacher confers with readers individually, and records observations as part of the ongoing assessment (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997; Miller, 2002; Taberski, 2000). Conferences allow teachers to meet with individual students to assess the reading progress, offer guidance if needed, and match them with new books (Taberski, 2000). The teacher also evaluates the strategies that the student is using when facing difficult words, his or her comprehension strategies, and reading/decoding fluency to assess his or her comprehension level (Keene, 2008; Miller, 2002; Taberski, 2000). Teachers should focus on the student and the reading strategies that he or she is

using, rather than on the text, during a reading conference: The aim is to instruct the reader—not direct the reading—by directing students to use reading and comprehension strategies that can be applied in other texts (Taberski, 2000). The teacher also has the option to conduct a guided reading group during students' second independent reading time (Browning-Schulman & DaCruz-Payne, 2000; Fountas & Pinnell, 1999; Pinnell, 1999; Taberski, 2000).

The Reading Share

In the last five minutes of the workshop, students share what they learned from the mini-lessons and had used in their reading time, as well as their new discoveries or questions (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997; Miller, 2002; Taberski, 2000). The students usually reveal first what they learned about themselves as readers on that day, and secondly the reading and comprehension strategies that worked well for them (Taberski, 2000). The children answer these questions either as a whole group or in pairs. This daily reading share operates almost as a separate and shorter mini-lesson which enables students to hear what strategies worked well with their classmates, learning from each other (Taberski, 2000). The teacher might also highlight a specific conference in which he or she observed a certain student performing effective reading that deserves to be shared with the others (Nesheim & Taylor, 2000).

The sequence of the readers' workshop offers a meaningful daily structure that gives students time to practice reading, and provides opportunity for reflection and response.

Assessment Tools

Running Records

A running record is an effective tool for assessing a student's reading level, and is a fundamental instrument for recording what the child does while reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999; Taberski, 2000; TCRWP, 2008b). The teacher writes down everything the child says or does while reading a text in order to interpret the reading strategies that the child uses successfully, as well as those that he or she needs help with (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999; Taberski, 2000). According to Campbell Hill (2001), when running records are kept consistently, they track students' patterns of error and reveal approximate reading levels, becoming an instrument for teaching rather than just a tool to communicate a student's rank in class. Teachers can find appropriate books for students at their current levels of reading by counting errors in a student's running record (Taberski, 2000). By examining a student's errors and cues for self-correction, teachers can understand either the student's success or need for help. A running record makes it possible for teachers to determine specific and varied methods that might help turn students into strategic readers (Browning-Schulman & DaCruz-Payne, 2000; Campbell Hill, 2001; Taberski, 2000), and is considered an official assessment tool in the elementary department of the study school.

Observational Notes

Another effective assessment tool that teachers use to monitor students' behaviors and progress while reading is writing down observational notes (Browning-Schulman & DaCruz-Payne, 2000; Campbell Hill, 2001; Fountas & Pinnell, 1999; Taberski, 2000) either during

students' independent reading time or during reading conferences. Recording observational notes as a tool to assess readers' growth allows the teacher to see if students remain engaged while reading, and to check if they are able to independently select just-right books that correspond to their reading levels. It helps the teacher to keep track of students' meaning, structural and visual miscues during reading conferences, analyze their patterns, and check if the reader self-corrects (Taberski, 2000). It also enables the teacher to check if the student is effectively using the reading and comprehension strategies that were taught in previous mini-lessons. With time, these observational notes will present an informative profile of each student that will help the teacher plan the next instructional actions accordingly (Browning-Schulman & DaCruz-Payne, 2000). Thus, running records are when teachers record what students do while reading a text while observation notes are when teachers record their own observations during independent reading time.

Reading Continuums

Teachers also use a *reading continuum*, "a visual representation of literacy development using descriptors to depict the developmental stages of learning," (Campbell Hill, 2001, p. 3) and a practical method to connect standards, curriculum and daily instructional lessons based on a constructivist approach of teaching and learning. It also represents essential concepts: What students can do by reporting the descriptors positively, what students learn and not what is taught, and the reading stage each has reached. These are mainly estimations; although students' reading behaviors might fall mostly into one stage, they can still be strengthening one or two skills from the previous stage and demonstrating evidence of other skills at the following stage. The reason for using a continuum is to focus on progress and growth that will enhance further learning (Campbell Hill, 2001). Thus, the reading continuums are set rubrics that teachers use to check the work of a student progressing towards a standard.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study followed a qualitative research design, and was a practitioner research, gathering data on daily practices and reflecting on them in order to help improve teachers' expertise (Burns, 2000). The researchers implemented the reader's workshop, and kept running records, using observations and interviews to collect data about students' reading before, during, and after implementing the differentiated approach. By being open about the data and results, and keeping a diary of students' achievement and running records of their reading growth, the researcher's experience could be a reliable source for determining validity. Triangulating the results by using various sources also increased the reliability of the findings. Student names were kept anonymous, and the researchers sought and received the school's permission to collect and publish the data (Burns, 2000).

Participants

The participants were 18 students of different nationalities and backgrounds in a first-grade, mixed-ability classroom. Stratified and random samplings were used to select a representative sample to generalize results (Burns, 2000). In mid September 2008, each student's

reading level and comprehension skills were assessed using the running records of the TCRWP (2008b). Students received letters regarding their reading levels (based on fluency, accuracy, and understanding of the text) at that time (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999). The running records of the 18 students were divided into three different stratas based on the TCRWP (2008a) benchmarks for independent reading levels. As a result of the reading assessment, 12 students were in group one (needs support), five students were in group two (meets standards) and one student was in group three (exceeds standards). The names of each were placed in one of three containers (one for each of the three categories, labeled Participants A, B, and C), and a name was randomly drawn from each container. These three students would be highlighted in this paper.

IMPLEMENTING THE READERS' WORKSHOP IN THE CLASSROOM

The first phase of the study included administering a reading assessment during the month of September. One of the researchers met separately with each of the 18 students to give out the skill-leveled books ranging from A to Z, and recorded the current reading level on the running record. As they read, she also asked them various comprehension questions to measure comprehension, revealing the different reading-readiness levels of the students.

In the second phase, teachers read about the elements of the readers' workshop, how it supports the concept of differentiating reading instruction, and how the whole-group mini-lessons (as well as the individual teacher-student conferences) help meet and build on the different readiness levels.

On October 6, 2008, the researchers officially started implementing the readers' workshop in the classroom. They introduced students to its structure and components, and explained what was expected of them in the workshop setting. The readers' workshop was scheduled for a 60-minute block everyday.

Mini-lessons taught during the month of October focused on two major goals. The first goal was to allow students to become familiar with the routines, expectations, and the structured schedule, teaching students how to (1) listen quietly to the ten-minute mini-lesson; (2) independently choose books and read them quietly during the ten minutes of the first independent self-select reading time; (3) find a comfortable individual reading space; (4) use whispering voices during reading time; and (5) find help in reading while the teacher is conferring with other students or leading a guided reading session. Mini-lessons during the last week of October covered the second major goal, which was to teach students the system of reading leveled books. In addition, mini-lessons discussed the meaning of reading leveled and just-right books, how to know if this is a just-right book, and how to start reading higher-level books. These mini-lessons allowed students to ease into the readers' workshop routines. Moreover, instructing students about just-right books helped them become wiser when selecting their own books, and decreased instances of their comparisons to each other.

November witnessed the units on instruction of the reading and comprehension strategies. The main goal was to assist students in becoming effective participants in the process of reading by activating their imagination. It was important to find a child-friendly expression (at the six-year-old level) to describe how they could predict the story events before reading, cross check their predictions while reading, and make conclusions at the end. Thus, mini-lessons highlighted the fact that readers have strong "reading muscles" that allow them to start making "movies" in their heads after looking at the title and cover page of a book, predicting the stories before

reading and check if their predictions were right, and then keep those movies running in their heads as they read. Students also learned to stop and think about what they read, and to reread if they did not understand.

December's reading unit included mini-lessons that focused on training students to become active problem-solvers who use a variety of decoding strategies to allow them to figure out difficult words. Students were encouraged to compare themselves to characters in stories who face unexpected problems; instead of giving up, these characters try various ways to solve problems and reach solutions at the end. Readers were expected to, as these characters did, "spring into action" and use different reading strategies to tackle difficult words. Some of the reading mini-lessons included using picture cues, sounding out the words, looking through the word till the end, and chunking.

January's reading unit introduced students to various characters in books, as well as comprehension strategies that were extremely important in analyzing characters' traits and feelings. The mini-lessons trained students in retelling story events in sequence, noting how characters change, making text-to-text and text-to-self connections, thinking about the story elements, and how to make inferences at the end. Students also used different graphic organizers to enhance their comprehension skills. Students worked on story maps and character maps, and made comparisons of different characters using Venn Diagrams.

In February, the mini-lessons taught students how good readers use meaning, structural and visual cues to figure out words, especially since most students were starting to read books at higher levels. It was necessary to teach some strategies that helped the children balance their reading efforts between decoding words and understanding the stories; students were instructed in how to confirm whether what they read made sense, whether it sounded right in English and looked visually correct. They were also taught how to stop while reading to self-monitor for meaning, how to cross-check using different strategies, and self-correct if needed. As a result, students learned that making meaning while reading assists them in tackling difficult words.

In March, students were introduced to a new genre to broaden their general knowledge of books: nonfiction. Students were eager to read books that talked about their favorite topics. The list of subjects that students read about varied from animals and insects, to Earth and other planets, to countries and places. One mini-lesson focused specifically on how expert readers brainstorm all their ideas about a certain topic before starting to read the book. Another taught students how to use the KWL (what we know, what we want to know, what we learned) and the before/after charts on which they would write down all the new information they learned while reading the book. Other mini-lessons taught students how to research a nonfiction book by taking notes on post-its, and at the end using these post-its to synthesize the main ideas about that topic. This unit empowered all students with some sophisticated comprehension strategies that they could use throughout their lives when reading any nonfiction book.

In April, the focus of the reading instruction was on using various word-solving strategies to increase fluency while reading. The unit assisted students in breaking down big words into smaller words, finding similar spelling patterns, and making connections between word families. The mini-lessons focused on teaching students how to work with word parts, compound words and how to divide them into two words. Equally important, students learned how to reread to make sure that the unfamiliar word sounded right and made sense. Students learned that to become brave and resourceful readers, they should not ignore difficult words or give up. Rather, they should use their repertoire of strategies to attack the tricky words.

In May, the mini-lessons reviewed some of the basic decoding strategies, as well as more sophisticated comprehension strategies. Most of the students were successful in using many of these strategies when reading their leveled books independently.

During the first week of June, new running records were administered for all students in the classroom (including Participants A, B, and C) to evaluate whether they showed improved reading skills. Reading continuums were also used in June to assess students' growth in reading according to the students' new stages on the continuums. At the end of the academic year, both the running records and the reading continuums (rather than letter grades or scores) were used by the elementary school as the official tools to measure a student's achievement in reading.

Analysis of the Reader's Workshop

First Independent Reading Times

During the study, in the first self-select reading time, students were allowed to pick from any reading level and genre (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997; Taberski, 2000). They were given the freedom to choose books above their reading levels, which exposed students to higher levels of reading and challenged them to use more sophisticated reading and comprehension strategies in their attempt to decode difficult words and understand the text. Initially, several children chose books that were below their reading levels because they were easy rhyming or predictable books, poem books, or books with capturing illustrations; it is as if they took advantage of this first independent reading time to warm-up for the more challenging books during the second independent reading time (Taberski, 2000). By the end of the year, participants were able to independently select just-right books that corresponded to their reading levels without asking for help. They were also exposed to various genres of books such as fiction and non-fiction, and were able to identify the characteristics of each.

Mini-Lessons

Everyday, the students gathered in the meeting area of the classroom to learn a new skill that would enable them to tackle unfamiliar words and make meaning of the text. As indicated by Nesheim and Taylor (2000), the reading mini-lessons were short and specific, and delivered in a manner that was meaningful to the readers' needs. The collection of these reading and comprehension strategies taught during mini-lessons empowered students with an advanced reading repertoire that they could use while reading to reach higher reading levels. It was through the mini-lessons that the teacher demonstrated effective reading to students toward the goal that the students would use the techniques and strategies on their own.

Second Independent Reading Times

During the second independent reading time, students were matched to their just-right books that corresponded to their actual reading levels (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999), and they were encouraged to use all the reading strategies that they knew to independently tackle the difficult words. Within the supportive climate of the classroom, all students felt secure, and knew that no matter what levels they were reading, their improvement was always praised.

During this time, the teacher held reading conferences with students (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997; Miller, 2002; Taberski, 2000) to informally assess them by observing their reading behaviors and taking notes of their usage of different reading and comprehension strategies. During the teacher-student conferences, one of the researchers observed them reading, re-explained or modeled strategies and gave them direct feedback to strengthen their use of the strategy (such as decoding tricky words), setting it as a goal for the student to practice during the independent reading time. Thus, setting a clear objective during every conference gave the teacher and the student a base to monitor reading growth during the next conference, and increased the chances that the techniques shared during that conference would improve the student's reading ability. The conference was the time in which the teacher would decide to move a student to a higher reading level when she would feel that he or she read with accuracy, fluency, and comprehension (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999). Students did not feel threatened, and showed a positive attitude toward learning how to read. Most importantly, the teacher-student conferences helped in strengthening communication, allowing the teacher to learn about the thinking of the students as strategic readers, and to encourage them where they needed help. The students were not intimidated about sharing their reading experiences with the teacher because they knew that they would not be assigned letter grades or scores, which went a long way toward fostering the positive and enthusiastic attitude of students to this process.

Reading Shares

The reading share was useful in summing up the work of the day. All students had the chance, for the last five minutes, to share with their friends the reading and comprehension strategies that worked well for them. As Taberski (2000) indicated, the reading share operated as another short mini-lesson, in which students learned from each other's experiences in reading. Students became motivated not only to take risks in reading, but also in sharing information about themselves.

Assessments

Both the running records and the reading continuums provided evidence of students' reading abilities and reflected their reading growth throughout the year. The improvement of the reading levels, in addition to the progression to a new reading stage on the continuum, showed how students improved their reading skills, regardless of their academic readiness levels. In addition, the reading continuum by itself served as a detailed description of every student's achievement in reading with very specific reading behaviors. Using the continuum was a more favorable alternative to giving scores.

Analysis of Participants' Running Records and Reading Continuums

Participant A

Participant A was a boy who was below the First-Grade Level standards in reading. The results of his running record in September showed that he was only able to read level A (when compared to the TCRWP (2008a) benchmarks for independent reading levels, Participant A's low level in reading confirmed that he needed support); Participant A was considered to be in the

Emerging Stage of the reading continuum. He knew all the letter names and sounds, was capable of reading a text from top to bottom and left to right, and identified some words in the book. The analysis of his error patterns on the running record showed his inability to use meaning, graphophonic (the letter-sound relationship) and structural cues (to decode unfamiliar words), and he was unable to self-correct when the words did not make sense. In fact, Participant A lacked the simple reading strategies for emergent readers, such as using pictures cues and sounding out the words. He also answered the comprehension questions very briefly.

In June, Participant A's running records showed improvement in his reading and comprehension skills. He had progressed to Level K, and at that point was considered to be meeting the First-Grade Level standards of reading according to the TCRWP benchmarks. Participant A had also acquired more advanced reading strategies, such as noting patterns in the text, looking through the word to the end, chunking the word, skipping and coming back, and self-correcting. Additionally, Participant A started using some simple comprehension strategies to better understand the text such as making and confirming predictions, making text-to-text and text-to-self connections, and stopping to think. He reached the Beginning Stage of the reading continuum in June, as he was able to read early-reader books for a period of ten to fifteen minutes, recognize basic reading genres, identify high frequency words, and summarize story events in sequence. The child progressed beyond normal expectations because of his participation in the reader's workshop.

Participant B

Participant B was a girl who started the year having met the First-Grade Level standards in reading (as indicated by the TCRWP benchmarks for independent reading levels). The results of her running record in September showed that she was able to read Level D independently and answer the comprehension questions. She also applied different reading strategies, such as using picture cues, sounding out the word, and chunking to decode difficult words. However, Participant B's main weakness was her inability to read out loud with expression and fluency. In September, Participant B was considered to be in the Developing Stage of the reading continuum, capable of reading simple books for a short period, recognizing simple words, making predictions and answering simple comprehension questions.

By June, Participant B showed enormous improvement in her reading level. The results of her running records showed that she was able to read chapter books from Level N, which was considered to be a Grade-Three Level of reading. Moreover, both the teacher-student conference notes and the classroom observational notes showed that Participant B had become highly skilled in using advanced reading strategies, such as making connections between word families, using meaning, structure and graphophonic cues, monitoring, cross-checking, and self-correcting. Her comprehension skills had also greatly improved since the beginning of the year, and she was able to use different graphic organizers, make text-to-text and text-to-self connections, take notes to answer research questions, and summarize a text. She also demonstrated great improvement in overcoming her monotonous and slow way of reading a text. Participant B reached the Expanding Stage of the reading continuum in June, capable of reading easy chapter books for a period of 15 to 30 minutes, comparing characters and events in stories, "reading between the lines," and using the dictionary to figure out the meaning of difficult words.

Participant C

Participant C was a girl who highly exceeded the First-Grade Level standards in reading since she was already able to read Level Q in September. Her decoding skills were extremely advanced for her age, and she was proficient in reading out loud fluently. However, her answers to the questions of the running record showed that her comprehension skills were not as well developed compared to the level of the books she was reading. She was not able to retell the story events in details, and answered only two out of the four comprehension questions. In September 2008, Participant C was considered to be in the Expanding Stage of the reading continuum, capable of reading easy chapter books in 15 to 30 minutes, self-correcting, and using advanced reading strategies to decode tricky words.

By June, Participant C showed major growth in both her reading and comprehension skills. She was able to read challenging chapter books from Level U, which is considered a Seventh-Grade Level of reading. Moreover, her comprehension skills highly improved; her responses on the running record reflected her ability to summarize the story in sequence, and answer both the literal and inferential questions. Both teacher-student conference notes and classroom observational notes confirmed her ability to use sophisticated comprehension skills while reading, such as making and confirming predictions, making text-to-text and text-to-self connections, creating mental images, and making inferences. Participant C reached the Fluent Stage of the reading continuum in June, capable of selecting and reading different genres of books for 30 to 40 minutes, using the dictionary to figure out the meaning of new words, discussing the story elements including the characters, setting and plot, and “reading between the lines” to better understand the text.

Summary of Three Participants’ Reading Achievements

The results of the participants’ running records and reading continuums reflected a great deal of improvement in their reading levels and comprehension skills. Additionally, all three participants succeeded in learning a variety of reading and comprehension strategies. By possessing this repertoire of strategies, the participants were able, by the end of the academic year, to increase their reading levels and enhance their comprehension skills, allowing them to be more self-confident as readers. They learned that, regardless of the varying reading levels that they were reading, each one of them was progressing differently—but certainly—toward being a proficient reader.

CONCLUSION

The readers’ workshop approach offered first-grade students the opportunity to expand their reading experiences throughout the year, and empowered them with a sophisticated repertoire of reading and comprehension strategies that in return enhanced their reading levels and comprehension skills. Students were greatly motivated to read about their favorite topics and share with each other their successful experiences in applying reading and comprehension strategies while reading. The workshop also provided students with a safe and friendly environment in which they learned to take risks in reading. The workshop was an efficient, instructional reading approach because it provided (1) a differentiated reading environment, (2) a

secure reading setting that encouraged students to take risks while reading, (3) meaningful reading experiences, (4) individualized instruction that directed students' success in reading, and (5) direct teaching of strategies used by proficient readers. Students were always given encouragement when reading, even if they made some mistakes because they realized that, after all, the priority was to learn the reading and comprehension strategies needed to become engaged and proficient readers.

The findings reveal that implementing the readers' workshop improves students' reading levels and comprehension skills in mixed-ability classrooms. Through differentiating the reading instruction, students with different learning needs and reading-readiness levels improve in reading and comprehension skills at different paces. Students ended up loving to read because they knew that all their efforts were being recognized and reinforced. As Lause (2004) indicated, the readers' workshop approach assisted in turning first-grade students into self-disciplined and proficient readers who were motivated to read out of real interest.

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