

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Problem

One of the necessary skills for success in the modern era is the ability to read. In the United States, however, over past decades, there has been an apparent crisis in reading skills and the efficacy of reading instruction in schools (Anderson et al., 1985; American Federation of Teachers, 1999; Alvermann & Moje, 2013). Educators advance various theories tying reading skill to physical, biological, and environmental factors (Fischer & Immordino-Yang, 2007; Infed, 2015; Rosenblatt, 1988). Indeed, much of the scholarly writing in the field of literacy education today deals with the proposal and implementation of various strategies, such as metacognition (Lan, Lo, & Hsu, 2014), immersion (Elgin Children's Foundation, 2013), multisensory (Magpuri-Lavell et al., 2014), and contextualization (Cervetti & Hiebert, 2015), that are derived from established theoretical bases associated with prominent educators and analysts. These theoretical frameworks include cognitive (Piaget, in Gash, 2015), sociocognitive (Vygotsky, in Instructional Design, 2015), and transactional (Frank, 1983). This crisis is even more pronounced in the case of special needs students. Many of these students have attention problems or disabilities related to language that impair their abilities to learn to read, and to read at grade level. There is a need for systemic programs that can address this issue and assist special needs students in learning to read, in order to help them succeed in educational, social, and employment contexts.

Background, Context, and Theoretical Framework

Within the past fifty or more years, educators have become aware of a crisis in reading instruction in the United States (Flesch, 1955; Chall, 1968). One of the first pivotal studies to

bring this issue to the forefront was the First-Grade Studies (1967), an intensive collection of coordinated studies funded to a great extent by the United States Department of Education. The First-Grade Studies were not the first reading studies, nor were they the last. They were, however, a series of studies pertaining to teaching reading and interventions that could be considered seminal in the field for several reasons. This was the first widespread, organized effort by educators to collect and analyze information concerning reading instruction, thus making it unique. This group of studies was seminal in that it informed trends in reading instruction that endure to this day, particularly in the area of emphasizing phonics learning. The above studies were seminal because they spawned further research in the area of reading. As might have been expected, however, they did not instigate more research in comparative methods/methodology of teaching. Instead, research turned to other factors such as the environment, characteristics of students, and similar information that would impact reading readiness and teaching effectiveness, regardless of the method used. In this sense, the study was dispositive with regard to comparisons and rankings of methods of research, in some ways resolving that issue satisfactorily enough to allow investigation into other identified areas of impact.

Early methods of teaching reading were varied. While many systems made some use of phonics (sounding out letters), in the United States historically that was not the case. The look-say approach, or sight reading, became popular, along with memorization reading, known as the alphabet method (Barry & Monaghan, 1999). Then reading instruction shifted slightly to a more relevant approach, including comprehension questions to challenge the reader (Barry & Monaghan, 1999). The method of teaching reading shifted from a whole-language to a whole-word approach that included stories with illustrations, as well as descriptions of concrete

experiences (Barry & Monaghan, 1999). In this back-and-forth area of instruction, however, the balance soon shifted back toward instruction with a phonics-centered and spelling approach, according to Barry & Monaghan (1999). But within years of the Civil War era, Horace Mann (1867), prominent educator from Massachusetts, directed national reading instruction away from this by advocating the whole-word method of teaching reading in public schools.

Alongside Mann's influence, reading and spelling instruction improved in the 20th century because teachers became aware of and started using supplementary phonics methods (Barry & Monaghan, 1999). There was an emergence of pre-primer series which employed whole-word or sight-word reading methods, repetition, and occasional phonetic analysis to teach reading (Brown, 2014). Reading comprehension became a focal point once again, which was good news for teachers of content other than reading, whose effectiveness is intertwined with the ability of students to understand what they have read (Brown, 2014).

In America, there was a solid push for more phonics-based reading instruction which arose quite markedly during the mid-1900s. Rudolf Flesch, an advocate of the phonics methodology in the 1950s, wrote the widely read and, to many, shockingly eye-opening *Why Johnny Can't Read—And What You Can Do About It*, pointing out clearly the superiority of direct instruction in phonics over the look-say approach (Flesch, 1955). It was a significant era marked by historical, political, social, racial and cultural challenge and change, according to Willis and Harris (1997), which would inevitably have an impact on the American education landscape.

Prior to the mid-1950s, public schools in America had been legally segregated. This changed, at least under the law, following the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (347 U.S. 483, 1954). Willis & Harris (1997) highlight this decision, as

well as similar advancements and progressive forces, including awareness of socioeconomic disparities, as not well-publicized or connected but instrumental in prompting a hard look at reading instruction. Mainstream Americans, however, typically point to distress over Flesch's findings, coupled with fear bordering on paranoia, due to the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik 1 as the wake-up call to America that something was not going well in the education system, particularly in terms of science and reading instruction (Graves & Dykstra, 1997, p. 343).

Regardless of the causes that can be isolated for initiating sufficient concern to prompt these studies, the overall effect was that they signaled a transformation in the manner and method of looking at reading in this country that was groundbreaking at the time and is significant to this day. Controversy still exists over how and what to do to get Johnny ready to read, including the various theories and reading models (psychological, cognitive, neurological, transactional, and sociocognitive) concerning what stimulates linguistic acquisition to be discussed herein, and the deficit of failure still exists.

The poor performance of students in reading and language arts in the United States is imposing many forms of costs on citizens, businesses, and taxpayers. In terms of dollars, businesses throughout the United States lose approximately \$225 billion annually because of lost workforce productivity caused by illiteracy (Small Business, 2014). Students read below grade level or enter kindergarten without basic literacy skills and have a higher dropout rate (Get Caught Reading, 2014). According to the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress report, 66% of students start the 4th grade performing below their grade level in reading (Nations Report Card, 2013). In addition, the Nation's Report Card (2011) states that the percentage of

students in grade 4 performing at or above Basic, at or above Proficient, or at Advanced did not change from 2009 to 2011.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 specifically addressed the need to improve literacy and to ensure that every child could read by the third grade. Statistics abound that indicate the detriments of illiteracy—85% of delinquent children and more than 60% of adult prison inmates are illiterate (Begin to Read, 2013). Low academic achievement scores in reading throughout the country indicate that a reform of the nation’s literacy programs, including the development of specific interventions to raise grade-level reading and comprehension, is needed.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 called for improved guidelines in order to assess the education of special needs learners, in areas including literacy. The call for literacy reform was also echoed by Barack Obama, the then President of the United States, during his address to the Joint Session of Congress on February 24, 2009 when he announced that there was a need for “a complete and competitive education” (2009, para. 63) and that schools had to enact instructional reform in order to close the achievement gap between American students and their foreign counterparts. Obama further stated that “[c]ountries that out-teach us today will out-compete us tomorrow” (2009).

Statement of the Problem

Many students, especially those with special needs, are not able to read on their current grade level after being taught absent specially designed reading interventions. These students are not only struggling in language classes, but in all other classes because of their reading deficiency, including science and social studies. Because students are not capable of reading the

material, they are frustrated; therefore their grades are very low resulting in many students giving up on education altogether, with far-reaching consequences.

Purpose of the Study

This study was designed to call attention to and create a program that can address the nationwide problem concerning effective reading instruction for special needs students. The study also tested an intervention that was utilized with special needs students in a self-contained classroom environment. Many studies discussed in this research explain variables that can improve student reading, such as phonics drills, contextual-based reading, and immersion tactics, that require students to devote significant time daily to reading (Fielding et al., 1998; Elgin Children's Foundation, 2014). This research drew from the successful aspects of these programs to formulate an intervention that would enable special needs students in the Washington, D.C. school district enhance their reading skills efficiently, through this intervention and with the support of their teachers, parents and peers.

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following central research question:

What is the best design for an intervention to increase reading levels of special needs students?

The researcher used the following subquestions to examine any direct or indirect factors related to the central question that could explain the varied perspectives of participants as advocated by researchers (Creswell, 2014):

RQ1. How can teachers collaborate to implement researched-based teaching strategies to improve reading scores for special needs students with learning disabilities?

RQ2. What accommodations or modifications can help students successfully access grade-level reading material?

Rationale of the Study

This research was based on the concept and rationale that many students, particularly those with special needs, are having difficulty in learning to read. Various theories relating to factors enabling the learning of reading and methods of assisting in such learning were considered and incorporated. Examples are the Kennewick and Elgin programs, both of which have proven very successful but require significant time allocations, and are discussed at length in the literature review section (Fielding et al., 1998; Elgin Children's Foundation, 2014). For this study, a reading intervention was developed and put in place by teachers of special needs students in the District of Columbia school system, with the results and recommendations reported herein.

Relevance of the Study

The study is relevant to today's student needs, demonstrating herein as lacking in reading skills. It is also relevant to the teaching world, adding an alternative intervention design that may have practical impact on its utilization in other schools. Finally, it is relevant on a theoretical basis as it incorporates theories of reading to design an optimal intervention for special needs students.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it not only addresses an existing need through intervention development, but also continues to call attention to this issue and may prompt further research that could have salutary impacts on reading instruction in general, and for special needs students in particular.

Nature of the Study

This study used qualitative research methodology. The design of the study was content instruction in a self-contained classroom, with pullout teacher-directed intervention supplemented by computer reading. In general, in such types of studies the research topic alone does not direct the nature of the research method. Factors related to the topic, however, may lead to one research method or another. The choice between different research methods should depend upon what the researcher is trying to find out (Silverman, 2004). According to Marshall (1996), the specific research questions should determine the choice between quantitative and qualitative research method, regardless of the preference of the researcher. The purpose of this study, developing an intervention for special needs readers, and its related research questions, were behind the choice of the qualitative research methodology. This study relied mainly on the responses of participants, 10-12 special needs children drawn from a self-contained classroom in a District of Columbia school of 425 students, that were guided by testing and observations conducted throughout the study. Participants responded to survey questions designed to elicit the specific information sought; the above questions were then framed to determine how well special needs students read before and after intervention. Archival documents, such as grade histories and classroom observations, were also considered. In addition, results for tests administered before and after the intervention were examined and compared to help the researcher determine the success of the intervention. The study, therefore, in essence explored the reading ability of special needs students before and after the intervention designed and tested through this research.

The researcher recognized that participants in this study work with or observe special needs students from a self-contained classroom. Therefore, the researcher submitted surveys to

educators and parents using open-ended questions that address the research questions in order to ensure accurate, valid, and reliable results. Leedy and Ormrod (2010) explained that researchers conducting interviews and surveys in qualitative studies usually employ open-ended questions that focus on one or multiple central issues but could elicit responses in indeterminate directions, in this case due in part to various literary learning models. These theoretical literary model perspectives are explanations for what drives students to learn to read, and include psychological, cognitive, neurological, sociocognitive, and transactional-based theories, developed over the years by many well-known educators and theorists.

The researcher then analyzed the viewpoints of stakeholders—the teachers, parents and students who participated in this study. Qualitative research allows researchers to employ their critical thinking skills in order to make sense of the information that they gather and simplify them for readers. One of the advantages of using a qualitative research is that it can point out the limitations of the existing theories and beliefs. Well-done qualitative research is limited in its scope, but very rich in its level of understanding and depth. It assists the researcher in understanding the variety and number of causes and actions that lead to specific outcomes (Hopper, 2011).

Definition of Terms

Cognitive. A learning theory that derives from use of intelligence, conscious thought and experience, often associated with chronological mental development or stages.

First-Grade Studies. This was a series of reading research programs coordinated under a national umbrella, and testing interventions on students nationwide, in response to many alarms and signals that the teaching of reading in U.S. schools was not effective.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This legislation, passed in 2004, guarantees that special needs students (students with disabilities) receive a Free, Appropriate, Public Education (FAPE) tailored to respond to their specific needs through accommodations and modifications during an Individual Education Program (IEP) meeting involving stakeholders, and prescribed by the IEP document.

Individual Education Plan (IEP). A plan developed to comply with IDEA, designed to fit educational requirements of special needs students, including accommodations and modifications to mainstream classroom instruction. IEPs may mandate more restrictive environments, such as self-contained classrooms, pullout classes, more time for work, assistance including reading of instructions or content, and many other methods to help the students succeed.

Innovative Reading Programs and Interventions. Any example of many programs in existence designed to assist students in learning to read more effectively, beyond normal classroom instruction, including the following: (Programs) - Reading Recovery, Literacy Collaborative, The Kennewick Reading Program, the Elgin Reading Initiative; (Interventions) - Reading Mastery, Fountus and Pinnell Level Literacy Intervention System, Wilson Reading System, Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies. The type of program that was developed, implemented and analyzed in this study (for special needs students).

Intervention. An action or program taken or implemented to improve a condition or situation, which can be applied in many contexts, including emergency or long-term remedies.

No Child Left Behind. Passed in 2001, this legislation reiterates the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) to support federal spending for elementary and

secondary schooling. It imposed reading requirements and testing deadlines as a result of concern over literacy in the United States.

Pillars of Reading Instruction. Five essential components of reading instruction. They include phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary.

Qualitative Research. This is a research methodology based on objective criteria that are often quantifiable numerically or statistically. Although considered less biased in general than quantitative research, there is expectation of results when a hypothesis is presented and data is collected to prove or disprove it. Qualitative research utilizes certain techniques and tools, such as questionnaires, interviews, and surveys (one of the major methods used in this study).

Self-Contained Classroom. A classroom in which children are taught all subjects by Special Education teachers and paraeducators. It is considered a highly restrictive environment, as opposed to a mainstream classroom where students of all needs and skill groups learn together.

Sociocognitive. A learning theory based on use of intellectual ordering through observation and modeling the actions and processes of others. This theory is considered less proactive on the part of the instructor and involves almost passive absorption or educational osmosis on the part of the student, but requires cognitive engagement.

Special Needs. The requirements necessary to educate students who exhibit any of a large variety of challenges, including physical disabilities such as deafness, blindness, loss of limbs or use thereof, medical issues, intellectual or emotional difficulties, dyslexia, delayed learning or other developmental issues, diagnosed conditions such as schizophrenia,

bipolar disorder, borderline personality, mood swings, autism spectrum disorders including Asperger's syndrome, RETT syndrome, Pervasive Developmental Disorder, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder and/or behavior problems, including Attention Deficit Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and Oppositional Defiance Disorder. Special needs students may often be referred to as at-risk or struggling readers.

Stakeholders. The term 'stakeholder' refers to persons with a direct interest in or who may be impacted by the study. For this study, the most obvious stakeholders are special needs students. In addition, educators who serve such populations, as well as their therapists, support groups, friends and families, also qualify as stakeholders.

Transactional. A learning theory that involves an interaction or exchange between the instructor and the student.

Assumptions

Several assumptions contributed to the foundation of this descriptive qualitative study.

The first assumption was that participants would be willing to respond to the survey questions honestly. Participants were aware that they had the option to decline or participate voluntarily in this study, and consented to take part.

The second assumption was that the study sample of 10-12 special needs children, drawn from a self-contained classroom in a District of Columbia school of 425 students, would be representative of the general population of special needs students, so that this intervention may be successfully replicated or used in order to develop intervention tools elsewhere.

The third assumption was that participants in the study engaged in sufficient or adequate contact with the

students such that they had the ability to recall information and describe their experience in adequate detail.

Delimitations

The delimitations, or the inherently built-in components of the study that affect and have an impact on its application, include the following:

First, the participants included persons associated with only 10-12 special needs students, which means that the viewpoints of the participants were the only information used to represent those of any teachers, parents or students, as well as others who deal with such children in similar circumstances;

Second, to facilitate the best representation possible, the researcher was able to ask participants follow-up questions to the surveys, to allow participants to clarify their answers and provide complete information from that available.

Limitations

What are the limitations of the study? First, the implementation of the study's findings and its transferability were limited to special needs students that have similar characteristics to the ones examined in this study. Second, the participants did not know the researcher prior to this study, which can lead to incomplete information-gathering due to lack of familiarity. The researcher was careful to have principals arrange individual meetings with each participant in order to discuss the purpose and nature of the study before conducting the surveys. Also, the researcher was able to ask follow-up questions so as to give participants an opportunity to elaborate on and engage in further discussions. Participants were urged to provide as much information as possible in their responses. Since the choice of samples in qualitative studies is usually purposeful (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006), knowing the

participants might have made the study's findings more reliable than those from a qualitative study that uses random sampling. Third, the researcher had access to previous grades and to test results for pre- and postintervention comparisons.

Organization of the Remainder of the Study

The remainder of the study followed typical dissertation format. Chapter 2 contains the literature review: introduction, theoretical framework, review of research literature and methodological literature, research regarding interventions for special needs children in reading, a review of methodological issues, synthesis of research findings, critique of previous research, and summary. Chapter 3 is methodology, including the purpose of the study, research questions and hypothesis, research design (target population, sampling method and size, setting, and recruitment), instrumentation, data collection, field test, pilot test, operation of variables, data analysis, limitations of research design, internal and external validity, expected findings, ethical issues and summary. Included in Chapter 4 are the data analysis and results: introduction, description of the sample, summary of the results, detailed analysis, and summary. Finally, Chapter 5 reveals conclusions and discussion: introduction, summary of results, discussion of results, discussion of results in relation to the literature, limitations, implications of the results for practice, recommendations for further research and conclusions.