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AN EVALUATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF SMALL GROUPS USING SPECIFIC READING STRATEGIES

Kenyatta Starks

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AN EVALUATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF SMALL GROUPS USING

SPECIFIC READING STRATEGIES

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Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of requirements of

Doctor of Education

In the Foster G. McGaw Graduate School

DISSERTATION ORGANIZATION STATEMENT

Despite my projects having different topics, teacher professional learning was a critical lever in all three as a means to improve academic achievement. Effective and sustained learning will not only improve teachers' practice but will also give them agency over their learning. As a result of my research I will continue to work with schools and leaders to develop cohesive learning structures for all teachers.

For the **Program Evaluation,** candidates are required to identify and evaluate a program or practice within their school or district. The "program" can be a current initiative; a grant project; a common practice; or a movement. Focused on utilization, the evaluation can be formative, summative, or developmental (Patton, 2008). The candidate must demonstrate how the evaluation directly relates to student learning. In this program evaluation, an overall theme that emerged was that while teachers received professional learning to implement strategies, they did not use what they learned to improve academic achievement. In the **Change Leadership Plan**, candidates develop a plan that considers organizational possibilities for renewal. The plan for organizational change may be at the building or district level. It must be related to an area in need of improvement and have a clear target in mind. The candidate must be able to identify noticeable and feasible differences that should exist as a result of the change plan (Wagner et al., 2006). An overall theme from this change plan was that teachers have to receive professional learning that enables them to be successful when implementing learned content in the classroom. In the **Policy Advocacy Document,** candidates develop and advocate for a policy at the local, state, or national level using reflective practice and research as a means for supporting and promoting reforms in education. Policy advocacy dissertations use critical theory to address moral and ethical issues of policy formation and administrative decision making (i.e., what ought to be). The purpose is to develop reflective, humane, and social critics, moral leaders, and competent professionals, guided by a critical practical rational model (Browder, 1995). In this Policy Advocacy document, one common theme was teacher preparation and development. Teachers that were hired during turnaround were sometimes novices. However, unlike many schools, turnaround ensures that a robust learning structure for teachers is a priority.

Works Cited

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Shulman, L.S., Golde, C.M., Bueschel, A.C., & Garabedian, K.J. (2006). Reclaiming education's doctorates: A critique and a proposal. *Educational Researcher*, 35(3), 25-32.
Wagner, T., et al. (2006). *Change leadership: A practical guide to transforming our schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
6.20.16

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this program evaluation was to inform best practice for reading instruction in small groups of 4th-grade students using specific reading strategies. There were six teachers involved, all of whom were 4th-grade teachers. The evaluation also examined the implementation of targeted professional learning to improve elementary student reading performance; this treatment was applied to all groups. The teachers were divided into two groups. Group one consisted of three teachers who were responsible for implementing three reading strategies: predicting, making connections, and inferring. Group two consisted of three teachers who were responsible for implementing three different reading strategies: questioning, visualizing, and summarizing. Using quantitative methods, I found that all the teachers used one or more of the strategies during small group instruction, though not all to the same extent. All the participants implemented at least one component of the assigned reading strategies; however, few implemented the strategy beyond the surface level. As result, I would recommend creating a structure of accountability to ensure the implementation of professional learning is effective and sustained.

PREFACE: LESSONS LEARNED

Poor literacy performance in elementary school is a concern for many districts. As an educator for over twenty years, I have observed the lack of teachers' knowledge to teach literacy. As a result, I wanted to examine how teachers would implement specific reading strategies in small groups to improve students' reading ability. It is important to note that teaching reading can be daunting task, even for seasoned educators. I found through this evaluation that the more comfortable a teacher felt with a specific strategy, the more comfortable they were implementing it. As I continue to work to improve teacher practice, I will place extra emphasis on ensuring that teachers are confident with what they learn. Additionally, this would mean ensuring the professional learning community is not only one that is structured, but one that allows teachers to be vulnerable with criticism.

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SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The goal of this program evaluation was to inform best practice for reading instruction in small groups using specific reading strategies. For the purpose of this investigation, small-group instruction typically refers to a teacher working with two to four students on a specific learning objective. The size of the groups provided the students with a reduced student-teacher ratio. Small-group instruction usually follows whole-group instruction. It allows teachers to work more closely with each student, reinforce skills learned in whole-group instruction, and evaluate student understanding. Small-group instruction grants students more of the teacher's attention and gives them a chance to ask specific questions about what they learned. Teachers can use small-group instruction to provide struggling students with intervention as well (Meador, 2015).

Patton (2008) identified six primary uses of evaluation findings: overall summative judgment, learning, accountability, monitoring, development, and knowledge generation (p.139). For the purpose of this evaluation, I focused on how to monitor teachers and hold them accountable. According to Patton (2008), "accountability focuses on well-management of the scarce resources" (p.139). Patton (2008) defined accountability as "a manager making the internal accountability process the most important" (p. 139). My goal for this evaluation was to help the school identify areas of improvement for the implementation of small groups in reading by measuring how, and to what extent, teachers were implementing specific reading strategies. I performed this measurement while incorporating the knowledge of Patton's six evaluation findings and using it to evaluate teachers' practices.

Utilizing action research, I examined teacher preparation and implementation of small-group instruction as a means of intervention and differentiation for improving elementary students' reading ability. This examination included teachers' implementation of small groups and targeted reading strategies, which has been proven to impact student reading performance (Serravallo, 2010). Also, when investigating teachers' implementation of small groups, this research allowed for more in-depth exploration and analysis of which aspects of the reading strategy implementation were most salient.

Providing all students with the same reading instruction can be detrimental to student achievement (Daniel, 2007). Moyer (2011) believed that students' strengths and weaknesses are different and that small groups have a positive effect on student achievement. Though some have suggested that many strategies used during small groups (e.g., predicting, making connections) promote substantial achievement in reading for elementary students (Serravallo, 2010), the wide variations in elementary student ability reflected in recent assessment data indicate that these strategies may not be universally applicable. For that reason, my research aimed to explore small-group instruction within a particular context.

My decision to evaluate this program was based on my observations of teachers after professional learning sessions. My observations revealed teachers were implementing small-group instruction at a very low level after attending professional learning sessions. While it is important to determine the effectiveness of reading strategies toward the goal of sustained student achievement, one must also provide a firm foundation for those charged with executing the strategies. Looking carefully at how staff

is prepared and supported throughout the small-group implementation process can provide valuable insights into the success or failure of small-group instruction.

Differentiated instruction is not a new concept in itself; however, the manner in which educators utilize this strategy has changed over time. Existing research-based strategies and models have proven effective in meeting students' varying needs and supporting their growth over time (Tomlinson, 2003). If we want to impact student achievement, the mere exposure to information is not enough. Educators must be expertly trained, supported, and evaluated in the application of these strategies and models if they are to be successful in helping students. Patton's (2008) research stated that monitoring manages the program, routine reporting, and helps with early identification of problems. As with the implementation of small-group instruction, it will be vital that Lady Academy, the site of the research, has a process for monitoring teacher implementation of professional learning. Patton (2008) stated the key factors for learning are creating a learning climate, openness to feedback and change, and trust (p.140).

Rationale

Before the 2013–2014 school year, Lady Academy had no evidence of implementation of specific reading strategies to improve students' reading abilities. As a result, the students showed growth but not attainment. Also, no systematic teacher development program had been put in place to help educators support students to achieve in reading.

The current data for 4th graders indicate that fifty-eight percent of students read at or above grade level. Fifty-four percent of the students are meeting grade-level standards. Based on the Northwest Evaluation Assessment (NWEA), student growth was observed

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in data from elementary grades, but on the whole, students are still having difficulty with reading and related tasks. For example, sixty percent of students currently struggle with essential reading, as reflected in NWEA reports. This is a matter of concern because student engagement in reading and related tasks will become more complex as they progress across grade levels. It is critical to address this issue at the elementary levels to ensure students the greatest possibility of sustained success (Serravallo, 2010).

Reading and related skills are fundamental to student success at all grade levels, but elementary school grade performance is particularly indicative of student performance in later years (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001). While early assessments may identify areas of needed improvement, many of the implemented interventions are only marginally effective in helping students achieve steady growth over time (Serravallo, 2010). However, small group instruction has been found to improve not only students' achievement but also their social interactions (Akrum & Bean, 2007). Small groups provide opportunities to target instruction to students' individual needs and provide immediate academic feedback.

This study aimed to examine the processes and activities involved in preparation, implementation, and continued evaluation of small group instruction meant to continuously improve students' reading performance using specific reading strategies. Our schools exist to educate. Regardless of variations in mission and vision, all schools agree on the importance of preparing students for competition in a global economy. Reading instruction is a fundamental component of this preparation, as these skills are utilized across curricula. If the reading instruction is ineffective, students may lose access to opportunities beyond secondary grades.

My professional experience in implementing small-group reading instruction with teachers has proven to be successful, which is why I advocate for more teachers learning how to employ this method. During my tenure with a large, urban school district in the Midwest as a turnaround specialist, I used small groups as an intervention to help students who were struggling in reading. Teachers were trained to implement small groups and reading strategies across all content areas. The program evaluated during this research aimed to improve reading abilities and in turn allows teachers to build expertise in preparing for and implementing small-group reading instruction. The data gathered through this study will help teachers and districts learn more about what is involved in preparing for and implementing small-group instruction as a reading intervention.

The program evaluation had a great impact on Lady Academy. Teachers received professional development, which allowed them to enhance their ability to implement small groups and improve their professional practice. These improved skills will impact student achievement.

Effective teacher preparation can translate into solid implementation. When done with fidelity, that implementation leads to continuous improvement through progress monitoring. Moreover, steady and consistent evaluation leads to sustainable student achievement.

Goals

Teachers in my district struggle to implement effective small reading groups due to a lack of effective professional development and support throughout the implementation phase. However, studies have shown that small-group instruction impacts student achievement (Gibson, 2011). The intended goals of this program evaluation are enumerated below:

1. To evaluate teacher implementation of differentiated small-group instruction as an intervention to improve elementary student reading ability.

2. To determine which methods are most effective when building teacher capacity in preparation for and during the implementation phase of differentiated small-group instruction for elementary grade reading students.

3. To develop effective methods of evaluation during the implementation phase that allow for timely adjustment of practice.

The above goals specifically relate to teacher implementation of small groups to improve students' reading ability.

Primary Research Questions

This case study sought to examine teacher implementation of an intervention aimed at improving student reading performance through specific strategies within small groups. The primary research question and related questions are enumerated below:

1. How do teachers implement reading strategies after receiving professional learning?

2. What professional learning is needed to effectively prepare teachers to implement small-group instruction as an elementary reading intervention?

3. What reading strategies were used by teachers most frequently during small-group instruction?

4. Is differentiated small-group instruction a viable intervention for improving reading performance for students beyond elementary grades?

SECTION TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction to Literature Review

Teachers face myriad challenges in their work. During my tenure as an educational and instructional leader, I have found that teachers are asked to complete many tasks, such as grading papers, conducting grade-level activities, and facilitating parental involvement and support, to name only a few. In addition to meeting the demands of administrators, parents, and colleagues, teachers are also charged with delivering quality instruction that meets the needs of all learners in their classrooms. However, most teachers are not trained to carry out this daunting task put before them.

Teachers are expected to meet students where they are. This requires knowing all students and their academic levels—especially reading levels—and planning appropriate lessons. This expectation presents a serious challenge for educators, because many don't know how to create learning tasks and scaffold to address students' individual needs. As a result, many students do not ever reach the reading ability that allows them to progress (Borrero & Bird, 2009).

Teachers encounter many forms of diversity in meeting students' needs, ranging from cultural to socioeconomic to academic (Serravallo, 2010). As such, varied students require varied support. Small-group instruction is one evidence-based strategy proven to have an impact on student reading abilities if implemented effectively (Ankrum & Bean, 2008). It is designed to support individual students' needs. Williams (2010) suggested that material presented to students in small groups should address their learning styles. Schultz (2011) agreed that teachers need to address the learning styles specific to the students in the groups. Wilson, Nabors, Berg, Simpson, and Timme (2012) noted that

small groups allow teachers to focus on individualized instruction. Teachers who are knowledgeable with working with diverse learners have been reported to provide appropriate instruction in small groups (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Vaughn, 2014). These teachers are trained to plan targeted instruction using students' individualized education plans.

In order to provide a full framework for this study, in this quantitative action research, I will discuss the following bodies of literature: reading achievement gap, small group, and assessment and identification. This body of literature sets the foundation for the impact of small-group instruction implementation using specific reading strategies

Reading Achievement Gap

The reading achievement gap refers to the disparity in academic performance between different groups (Teale, Paciga, & Hoffman, 2007). According to Fryer and Levitt (2004), "on average, black students typically score one standard deviation below white students on standardized tests" (p.1). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is an assessment program conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) to inform the public of what elementary and secondary students in the United States know and can do in various subjects. The NAEP (2007) reported that there is a twenty-seven-point gap between black and white students in fourth-grade reading. Fryer and Levitt (2004) researched the causes of this persistent gap and found, among other factors, that socioeconomic status, family structure, and neighborhood characteristics all played a role. A substantial gap remains even after these crucial influences are accounted for.

Discrepancies in reading skills have hindered progress in closing the achievement gap, as reading is embedded in every content area. Wagner (2008) recognized that

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reading served as a focus of 20th Century basic skills. Also, Wagner (2008) stated that most students learned by memorization and not skill specific. When students cannot read, it affects their overall academic performance. If there is not a clear link between what students learn and the requirements for job skills, students will not be prepared for the future. Reading plays into every skill area. If students are unable to read and understand content, they will struggle to function productively as citizens. As result, many could end up incarcerated, homeless, or working low-end jobs and unable to support their families. This is particularly true for African Americans, and is evidence of the systematic racism that exists in our country. Communities with low- and middle-class African-Americans often have lower-quality schools than white communities of similar socioeconomic status. Such schools also may be faced with equity issues, such as lack of funding, resources, and parental involvement.

Without foundational content area literacy skills, students struggle in fourth grade and beyond (Halvorsen et al., 2012). Wagner (2008) believed in increasing instruction that focuses on engaging students in higher-order thinking, as doing so encourages collaborative problem solving and can help reduce the achievement gap. Several researchers have suggested that the integration of literacy skills at an early age—print motivation and awareness, letter knowledge, vocabulary, phonological awareness, and narrative skills—helps to close the achievement gap (Halvorsen et al., 2012). Additionally, Snow, Porche, Tabors, and Harris (2007) argued for the necessity of ongoing reading support in middle school and high school, especially in the area of comprehension. Such support can include small groups, online intervention programs, and one-on-one tutoring.

In addition, Serravallo (2010) argued that reading exists at the core of discourse on instructional improvement. There is consensus within the literature on the importance of quality reading instruction very early in a student's academic career (Akrum & Bean, 2011; Wilson 2012; Serravallo, 2010). Tyner (2009) stated that small-group instruction is essential. The research conducted by Williams (2010) has shown a high correlation between the style in which material is presented and the learning styles of students considered "at risk" in the area of reading comprehension. The study proved that for students to be successful, they must be given the material in ways that suit their different learning styles (p. 20). McBride (2004) stated that "Differentiated instruction is vital to affecting positive change in student performance because the one-strategy-fits-all approach doesn't work in a real classroom" (p. 39).

Small Groups

Based on Wagner's position, implementing small groups should prove an effective strategy for closing the global reading achievement gap of African American students. Wagner (2008) believed that learning should not be a process of memorization. Rather, it should target specific skills. Wagner (2008) also stated that for most students during the 20th century, a rigorous curriculum meant having to memorize content.

Small groups do not require memorization, but they do require teachers to implement specific strategies to address the individual needs of students. In a recent study, AERA (2004) recognized three common factors between several programs that were successful in closing the achievement gap: rigorous instruction that consists of a challenging curriculum, exemplary teachers, and a social environment that pushes for academic success.

The School Psychology Forum Research (2013) found that small-group instruction was successful (e.g., it increased fluency and comprehension) when it involved teaching the students specific strategies, such as metacognition, generating questions, and summarizing. Further, one case study showed that the fourth- and fifth-grade students were successful for two reasons: first, because they used small groups to focus on reading comprehension, and second, all teachers employed a consistent model to teach reading comprehension (2013). Block and Pressely (2001) reported firm evidence that comprehension can be improved by using specific strategies (e.g., making connections and inferences, asking questions). Making connections refers to students connecting background knowledge with their current assigned text. Asking questions helps students understand the text at a deeper level because questions clarify the confusion. Inferring means that students use background knowledge and "read between the lines" of text to interpret the meaning and develop deeper understanding (Vaughn et al., 2010, p. 5). Also, small group instruction has been shown to produce better results with student outcomes (Vaughn et al., 2010). For example, students perform better on both classwork and state assessments.

Currently, at Lady Academy, the diverse learner population makes up forty percent of the entire fourth grade. Diverse learners—students with an Individualized Educational Plan—are more likely to require small-group instruction (Fuchs et al., 2014). The small-group strategy is often identified as an accommodation for diverse learners.

Studies have reported that smaller groups allow teachers to provide specialized instruction, such as Tier 1 and Tier 2 intensive instruction, that struggling students in primary grades respond to successfully (Elbaum, Vaughn, Tejero Hughes, & Watson

Moody, 2000; McMaster, Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2005). Tier 1 supports consist of interventions that students receive during regular school instruction, whereas Tier 2 supports are provided through targeted instruction in small groups. However, Wanzek and Vaughn (2008) have shown that even intensive intervention can have adverse outcomes. Students in fourth grade and above who received Tier 2 interventions have shown to experience less of an impact than those in primary grades (Vaughn et al., 2010).

According to Serravallo (2010), small groups increase student achievement because they allow teachers to focus and adjust the instructional pace based on students' individual needs. Serravallo (2010) believed that students regrouped after direct instruction could improve in reading and all other subjects. Providing all students with the same reading instruction can be detrimental to student achievement (Daniel, 2007). Students' abilities exist at various levels. Moyer (2011) argued that when students' strengths and weaknesses are different, it can have a negative effect on student achievement. Students should be placed in appropriate small groups with differentiated lessons to support their achievement. Research supports grouping students for instruction, using data to inform this practice, and providing explicit instruction in the small groups (Gibson, 2011).

Small groups allow for increased student-to-student interaction and for students to be able to process their thinking and ask questions (Gibson, 2011). Gibson stated that there are five steps to making changes that help teachers effectively and efficiently implement small groups. The first step involves establishing the environment. In this step, furniture is arranged to include four to six work areas, each referred to as the "teaching table." Teacher-led, explicit, student-focused instruction needs to occur at the

teaching table. The second of Gibson's steps is using data to inform practice. This step involves the teacher identifying specific instructional needs and related instructional purpose through data analysis. Groups created as a result of the data should be flexible, changing dynamically to align instruction and need, as well as to accommodate choices or available resources. Gibson's third step is managing resources. Efficient time management is essential. Teachers must develop daily schedules that identify when small-group instruction occurs. Further, creating routines and procedures is important during initial implementation. Teachers provide frequent practice and discussion opportunities.

Finally, data can help teachers inform their practice and achieve high-quality instruction. Using data allows teachers to create differentiated small-group instruction with purposeful practice. These practices consist of data-driven instruction, effective targeted instruction planning, collaboration, target assessments, and re-teaching strategies.

Several strategies can increase the impact of reading instruction (Ankrum & Bean, 2008). Serravallo (2010) argued that "differentiated reading instruction is best attained through flexible, purposeful groupings and with the attention to the repertoire of ways to meet students" (p. 14). Beecher and Sweeny (2008) supported this idea by stating that "reading instruction was differentiated by the use of flexible groups, texts on different reading levels, student-selected texts during independent reading, and guided reading groups according to the identified need for individual students" (p. 19).

Likewise, Tyner (2009) asserted that beginning readers benefit most from being taught explicit skills during intensive small-group instruction. The small group, the

differentiated reading model, enables teachers to focus on specific skills needed by varied groups of children. According to Wasik (2008), small groups allow children to receive individualized reading strategies that may not be possible in large-group instruction.

"Appropriately differentiated instruction involves even deeper teaching skills versus whole classroom instruction because it requires teachers to diagnose individuals' needs and make appropriate adjustments to their instructional focus and instructional routines" (Torgesen, Houston, Rissman, & Kosanovich, 2007, p.16). Likewise, Huber (2010) stated: "differentiated instruction is defined as an approach to teaching and learning where students with varying learning abilities work within the same class" (p. 79). Huber (2010) also stated that "the purpose of differentiated instruction is to maximize student growth and individual success by meeting students where they are" (p. 79). Huber's statement confirms my experience that students are not in a one-size-fits-all category. They come to school at various levels, and addressing their individualized needs will advance their academic achievement.

Contrary to the wealth of literature supporting small-group instruction as an effective model for improving student reading achievement, a body of literature exists suggesting that small groups are more detrimental than helpful to students. Many factors can impact how students perceive grouping, and all of these have the potential to hinder the learning process.

Although many studies supported small groups (Ankrum & Bean, 2008; Serravallo, 2010), there was opposition (Torgesen et al., 2006). For example, Poole (2008) stated that, according to his research, without effective implementation and structure of small groups, students can become disengaged and distracted. This happens

most frequently in small groups that are not teacher-led. According to Ward (1987), some factors must be adequately addressed for students to be successful: the permanence of group assignments, teacher perceptions and expectations, instruction in pull-out groups vs. regular classroom instruction, and changes in the role of the teacher. Crawford &Torgesen (2006) similarly suggested that small-group instruction is insufficient for improving academic achievement.

It is important to recognize that many of these studies found small-group instruction detrimental when it was not done properly. The studies' issues were with implementation and practice, not the broader concept. As such my program evaluation is aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of whether small groups are being implemented and utilized properly at Lady Academy

Assessment/Identification

According to Servello (2010), small-group instruction is more applicable for teaching reading because it meets the different needs of each student. Small-group instruction affords teachers more interaction with students, which allows them to proctor progress and more readily identify areas of weakness for students.

The primary consideration in reading instruction should be the needs and strengths of each child (Clay, 2002). According to Taylor (2000), assessments provide the only means for making teaching decisions, as assessments provide the data that informs good instruction.

Once this data is collected, the teacher must be empowered to analyze information. This analysis, coupled with the teacher's broad knowledge of the reading

process, will enable powerful instruction. Continuous informal assessments lead to responsive teaching.

Teachers should look at students' strengths and needs by using multiple data sources to help identify instructional starting points. Both district-wide assessments and teacher-made checklists can be valuable in gaining information about each child. As the school year progresses, keep in mind that small groups are meant to be flexible, and thus their participants will vary. Teachers should alter the composition of small groups based on an assessment of children's changing instructional needs (Wilson, Nabors, Berg, Simpson, & Timme, 2012). This will allow for continued differentiation and allow teachers to continue to plan and develop specific targeted-skilled instruction.

SECTION THREE: METHODOLOGY

Research Design Overview

Patton (2008) defined evaluation as determining something's merit, worth, value, or significance. Logically, it follows that a program evaluation typically involves making some judgement. Patton (2008) believed that "program evaluation, at its best, distinguishes what works from what does not, and it helps separate effective change makers from resource wasters, boastful charlatans, incompetent meddlers, and corrupt self-servers" (xviii).

A quantitative research approach was used to conduct this evaluation. Since this investigation examined the implementation of targeted professional learning to improve elementary student reading performance, this treatment was applied to all groups. A quantitative methodology was selected because it allows for the exploration of what strategies were and were not implemented.

In this case, the treatment referred to targeted professional learning in preparation for and during the implementation phase of small-group instruction during fourth-grade reading classes. All teachers participated in the professional learning offerings, and variation during the implementation phase was expected.

Teachers should feel confident about improving students' reading abilities. The implementation of small groups at Lady Academy helped develop 4th-grade students' reading skills and also allowed teachers to be experts on the implementation this type of intervention. Teachers were trained to effectively implement small group instruction using the following reading strategies: predicting, making connections, inferring,

questioning, visualizing, and summarizing. (See Appendix A for the observation protocol used).

Participants

The total sample population consisted of six classroom teachers implementing the small-group instruction intervention after participating in professional learning. The participating teachers, all of whom were female and African-American, ranged in age from 30 to 50 years old. Their levels of professional experience varied, from a second-year teacher to one with more than ten years' experience in education. During the implementation phase, three teachers focused on predicting, making connections, and inferring, while the other three concentrated on questioning, visualizing, and summarizing. The data collected allowed the researcher to understand better the implementation of specific reading strategies that influence students' reading abilities while allowing all students to benefit from small groups as an instructional intervention. Teachers were notified of the nature and purpose of the research and were given the opportunity to opt out, as the model of intervention would still be implemented across all fourth-grade classrooms to ensure consistency. Teachers who agreed to participate signed a consent form. The identities of all identifiable participants were kept confidential. Participants' personal information (e.g., name and age) was not revealed or disclosed. The participants in group one were referred to as numbers; those in group two were referred to as letters. These steps helped ensure that no one reading any written reports or publications based on this research would be able to identify the participants.

Data Gathering Techniques

All teachers were required to attend a three-hour monthly training about the implementation and execution of small instruction for 4th graders emphasizing specific reading strategies. The training consisted of the various components of implementing reading strategies and practicing small-group instruction. An outside agency delivered the initial professional learning through a trained small-group interventionist; ongoing learning was conducted through the curriculum resource teachers at Lady Academy. The formal training will have a direct impact on the validity of data obtained throughout the study.

Once the initial professional learning was provided to the teachers, weekly observations were completed by the researcher in all six fourth-grade classrooms to ensure the strategy was being implemented with fidelity, in line with the expectations of the study. Data was collected and evaluated for teacher implementation. The classroom observations gathered data on the implementation with small groups using specific reading strategies: one group concentrated on predicting, making connections, and inferring, while the second group focused on questioning, visualizing, and summarizing.

Data Analysis Techniques

The classroom observation data were analyzed by calculating the number of times each reading strategy was used during small-group interventions over the course of 10 weeks. Those only implemented only at the surface level saw growth that varied between ten and twenty points. The goal of the exercise was to gain a better understanding of the viability of small groups as an instructional intervention to improve students' reading ability.

SECTION FOUR: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Lady Academy currently utilizes small-group instruction to improve students'

reading ability. This strategy was implemented to improve both general and teachers'

capacity for small-group instruction using specific reading strategies. Teachers were

provided professional learning on how to use specific reading strategies while teaching

small groups, which addresses the second research question in this evaluation. The

professional learning not only showed teachers the research for each strategy, but more

importantly *modeled* the strategy using the gradual release of responsibility. This practice

requires the teachers to have students gradually assume responsibility for their learning

using the following instructional framework:

- "I do it" (focused instruction)

- "We do it" (guided instruction)

- "You do it together" (collaborative learning)

- "You do it alone" (independent learning)

Duke and Pearson (2002) defined gradual release as the teacher making a shift

from assuming all responsibility for the performance of a task "to a situation where the

students assume the responsibility" (p. 211). As a process for small group instruction,

teachers create pre-determined groups to organize students before releasing students for

independent responsibility. Teachers use small groups to help make this shift and ensure

students master the skills. Reading is taught for 1 hour and 30 minutes a day, except

Monday, which is a half day with a 45-minute reading period.

Six fourth-grade teachers, with a range of teaching experience, were observed for

ten weeks. During the observations, which were a minimum of 45 minutes, I used an

observation checklist with specific reading strategies to document if and when the teacher

employed one or more of the strategies during small groups. The six teachers were

divided into two groups. Group one would focus on predicting, making connections, and

inferring, while group two would focus on questioning, visualizing, and summarizing. All

of the teachers in each group implemented one or more of the reading strategies.

Group One

Group one consisted of three teachers who were responsible for implementing

three strategies: predicting, making connections, and inferring. As noted during the

observations, two of three teachers (67%) used all of the strategies during small-group

instruction over the 10-week period. One of the three teachers (33%) abandoned the

strategy making connections after week three.

Teacher one did not focus on one reading strategy but rather incorporated all three

reading strategies. For example, in one classroom observation, the teacher had one group

working independently on predicting while another worked with an instructional aide on

making connections and a third teacher-led group worked on inferring. Teacher two

abandoned making connections strategy after week three and continued to use

predications and inferences for the remainder of the ten-week period. Teacher three

structured the groups by ability and students worked on one reading strategy every three

weeks for the ten-week period.

However, implementation did not go far beyond the surface level. None of the

teachers (0%) explained, demonstrated, guided, practiced, or reflected on the strategies

within the small groups. Teachers monitored the small groups by walking around, but

they did not provide any feedback aligned to the implementation of the reading strategy.
Instead, all of the feedback was very general.

For the three weeks, teacher three used predications and teachers one and two used all three strategies. Beginning in the fourth week, teacher two abandoned "making connections" strategy. However, despite the non-usage of that particular strategy, usage of the other two was not observed more frequently. Teacher one used all three strategies and teacher two used two strategies. Upon week seven, teacher three went from predictions to inferences. Teacher one continued to use all three strategies, and teacher two continued to use the two strategies.

One particular limitation for this group was the teacher implementation. For example, although all three strategies were observed, not all strategies were necessarily implemented with fidelity. During my observations, on more than one occasion the three teachers failed to explain the skill; demonstrate how to complete the specific work; guide the student while they completed some of the assignment; support students during independent practice; or reflect with students to ensure mastery of understanding.

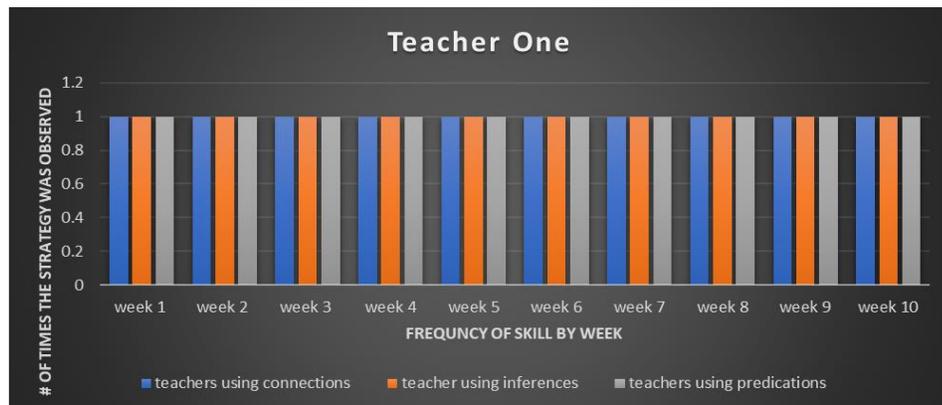*Figure 1.* Teacher one frequency of reading strategies (group one).

Figure 2. Teacher two frequency of reading strategies (group one).

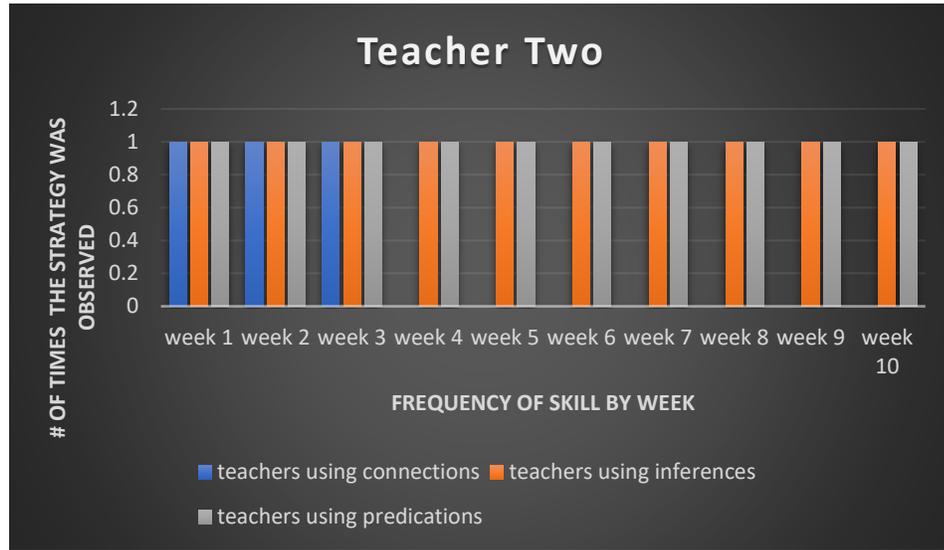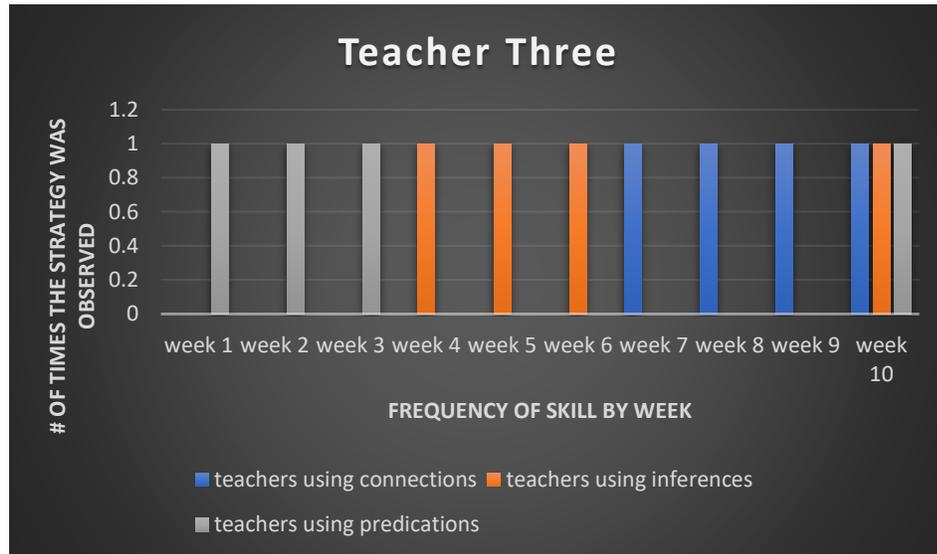*Figure 3.* Teacher three frequency of reading strategies (group one).

Group Two

Group two consisted of three teachers who were responsible for implementing three strategies: questioning, visualizing, and summarizing. Two of the three teachers (67%) used all of the strategies during small-group instruction throughout the ten-week period. Questioning was observed 50% of the time with both Teacher A and teacher B. Visualizing was observed with teacher A 20% of the time, while teacher B did not employ this strategy at all. Summarizing was observed somewhat similarly to questioning, at 40% and 60% for teachers A and B, respectively. However, in the group, this Teacher A and B much like group one didn't explain, demonstrate, guide, practice, or reflect on the strategies. Teachers monitored the small groups by walking around; however, they did not provide any feedback aligned to the reading strategy. Instead, all of the feedback was very general. While I observed all three strategies in use, they were not used consistently. Again, like in group one, the concern is effective implementation.

Teacher C implemented one strategy at a time. In groups, the entire class focused on one reading strategy every two weeks. The teacher explained, demonstrated, guided, practiced, and reflected based on the needs of the students in the groups. Teacher C provided specific feedback that aligned to the reading strategy.

Figure 4. Teacher A frequency (group two).

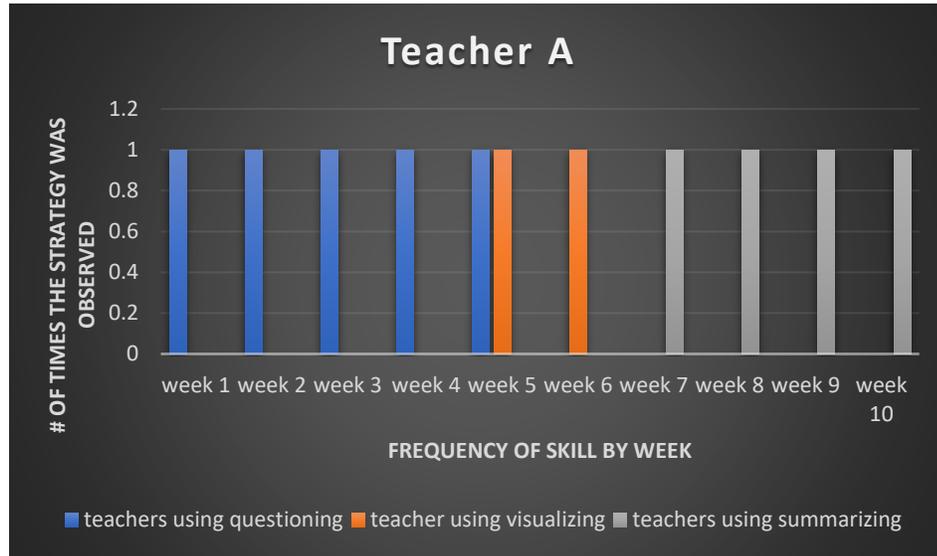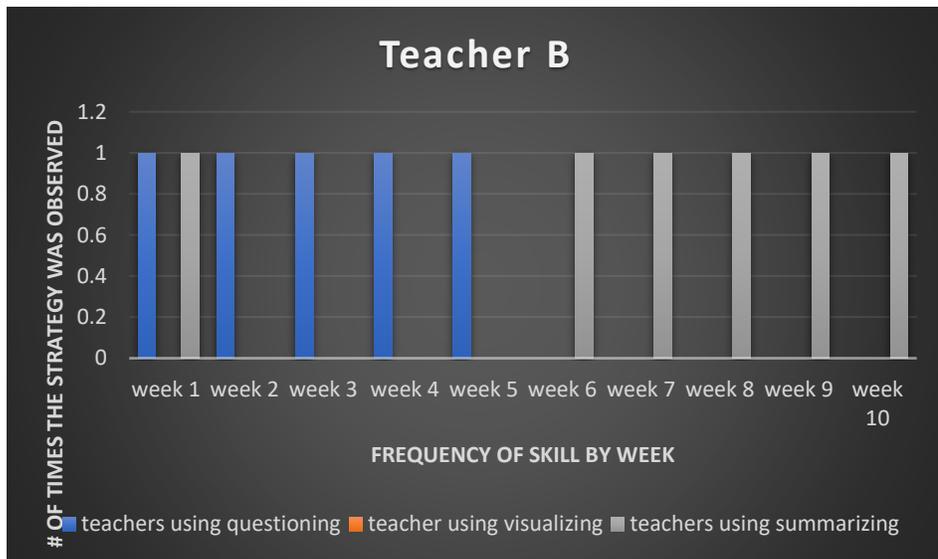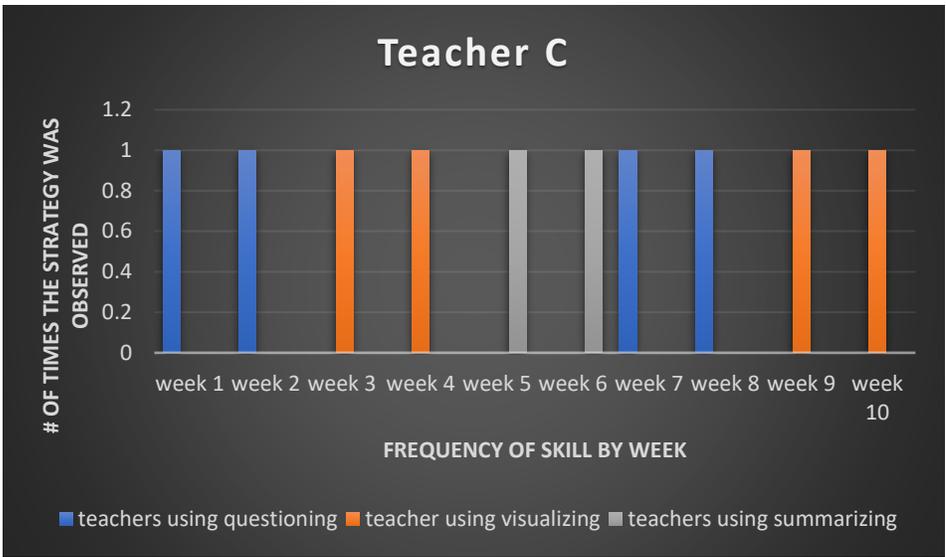*Figure 5*. Teacher B frequency (group two).

Figure 6. Teacher C frequency (group two).

Teacher C

OF TIMES THE STRATEGY WAS OBSERVED

FREQUENCY OF SKILL BY WEEK

■ teachers using questioning ■ teacher using visualizing ■ teachers using summarizing

SECTION FIVE: JUDGEMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The goal of this program evaluation was to gather data that would provide a deeper understanding of the implementation of small group instruction using specific reading strategies. Group one data shows; two teachers implemented all three strategies immediately following the professional development. This trend remained consistent for at least three weeks. I observed that after the first three weeks that one teacher used the strategy predications. Week four, five, and six inferences were used by one teacher. One teacher used inferences and making connections while one teacher continues to use all three reading strategies for the entire ten-week period. Week seven, eight, and nine one teacher used making connections, and week ten one teacher used all three reading strategies. I can also infer that one of the teachers was deliberate to use one strategy at a time to ensure mastery during the three-week intervals during the research period. Group one had one teacher that only used predictions and inferences after week three.

Group two observations revealed for the first three weeks immediately following professional development, the teachers in group two used two of the three reading strategies on a consistent basis. Overall, the visualizing reading strategy was used only by two teachers for two weeks, with the other teaching using it within a three-week period after professional development. The data also show that after the three- week period that only two of the teachers used visualizing. Summarizing was consistent overall, though, in the last three weeks, the usage dropped to only one teacher. Overall, all strategies were implemented, but it was at the surface level. Except for Teacher C none of the teachers explained, demonstrated, guided, practiced, and reflected on the strategy during small group instruction. Marzano (2012) recognized summarizing as a high-yield strategy for

impacting student achievement. Questioning was used by all three teachers throughout the research period. This strategy was part of teachers' regular practice and is implemented daily.

The overall judgments of the study involved teachers' learning styles, their experiences with working with small groups (as well as their broader teaching experiences), commitment to the study, the fidelity of implementation, and the lack of conversation with the researcher to provide insight regarding implementation.

All the participants used at least one component of the reading strategies implementation, and all of the reading strategies were used at some point over the 10-week period. The strategies that were implemented over the ten-weeks it was evident during my observations that teachers became more comfortable with the strategy. The program also increased teachers' knowledge of implementing small-group instruction using specific reading strategies. Teachers became more effective in identifying students for specific groups, creating discipline routines, and using specific skills based on their student's data. My observations allowed me to see the teacher using less time redirecting the students, which resulted in more time on task. Teachers were very knowledgeable of their data, which allowed them to make quick changes to groups as needed based on checks of understanding. Finally, as the data shows the strategies though implemented at the surface, they became fluent at identifying the strategy needed based on individual student data. As a result of the study, teachers are also familiar with Patton's (2008) six primary evaluation components.

Implementation of the program was not consistent among all participants. Although all six teachers received the same professional learning, the participants

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implemented the program components differently. After the fourth week, the level of teacher implementation decreased in group one and two. Marzano (2012) stated that sharing the learning objectives with students will positively affect student achievement. Over the 10-week period in the study, only two of the six teachers aligned with Marzano's research. The two teachers who implemented with fidelity saw increases in their 4th grade assessment data and reading ability. The level of engagement was observed and was very impressive as a result of effective implementation. Two of the teachers used one strategy at a time one changed strategies two weeks and the other three weeks at a time and after each cycle checked for mastery.

As a school administrator, it is vital to provide some autonomy to your teachers. However, it appears that for critical professional development strategies, clear expectations are necessary, even to the point of deciding which strategy to teach and when. It is also important to create a sustained, consistent, and collaborative professional learning community where teachers have individual learning plans that include targeted areas of professional growth. Administrators must constantly monitor the professional development implementation and provide ongoing feedback and celebrate successes when they occur.

I would recommend implementation of two tracks of professional learning for teachers, consisting of the individual and school level. The former would be aligned to the teacher's learning plan and focus on their areas of growth, while the latter would be based on data from school-wide observations and walkthroughs. I think the most important factor in determining teachers' success in these two professional learning tracks would be the individuals' intrinsic motivation and ability to track their growth. Based on

my observation the more ownership the teachers took for their own learning and implementation I observed more excitement to learn and execute. I also observed teachers during and after their professional learning session being reflective on their growth and what was needed to get better.

In my tenure as a leader, I have seen that many intrinsically motivated teachers—usually novice teachers—soar to new heights. They are self-motivated and seek opportunities to enhance their practice and skill. These educators tend to take professional development strategies and personalize them. However, in contrast to this experience, during my evaluation of the small groups, the teacher who implemented strategies most effectively was the one with more than ten years of experience. Based on my research, participants need to feel that professional learning improves their practice; it is equally as important, however, that professional learning gives participants the confidence to implement the learning effectively. Teachers are the most critical lever to improving academic achievement.

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APPENDIX A: WEEKLY TEACHER OBSERVATION CHECKLIST FOR

READING STRATEGIES

Date:

Teacher	Predicting	Making Connections	Inferring	Questioning	Visualizing	Summarizing

Other Strategies observed but not listed

_____

Observed Teacher Actions:	YES	No
Explained the Strategy		
Demonstrate the strategy		
Guide the student to apply the strategy		
Helped students practice the strategy		
Reflection of Strategy		