READING, ARGUMENTATION, AND WRITING: COLLABORATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF A READING COMPREHENSION INTERVENTION FOR STRUGGLING ADOLESCENTS

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The purpose of this study was to develop and implement a new reading intervention with 5th grade struggling readers. The intervention included reading across multiple texts, constructing arguments from the texts, engaging in oral argumentation, and writing argumentative essays. An additional focus was the impact of teacher collaboration on the implementation of the new intervention and its subsequent effect on students’ reading and writing outcomes.

It was a 10-week intervention unit based on the American Revolutionary War. Three student groups were involved: 1) an experimental group in a whole-class setting with teacher collaboration with the researcher; 2) an experimental group in a small group setting with a Reading Specialist without collaboration; and 3) a control, whole-class group studying the same topic. All groups took a pre- and post-test reading comprehension assessment and the experimental groups took pre- and post-test essay writing.

The intervention model included a combination of four evidence-based components: (1) reading across multiple texts on the same topic; (2) construction of an argument from the texts; (3) learning and participating in the oral discourse of argumentation; and (4) producing written argumentative essays. The study of students’ oral and written responses and their interactions with the teachers and each other generated some needed insight into how students develop critical literacy and its influence on reading comprehension. Simultaneously, an analysis of the
collaboration between the teacher and researcher and subsequent actions provided insight into the implementation of the intervention.

A Convergent Mixed Methods design incorporated both quantitative and qualitative methods. The analysis indicated no improvement in comprehension in any group, but there was significant improvement in essay writing in the two experimental groups (p = .000). However, there were no significant differences between the two experimental groups (p = .66). The qualitative results indicated student outcomes may have been affected by five implementation factors; (1) implementation fidelity; (2) short duration; (3) size of group; (4) task complexity, and (5) aligned assessments.

We know teacher reflection and collaboration play critical roles in the successful implementation of any new instructional strategy. Reflective practice and collaboration are effective professional development processes that enable the improvement of teaching and learning (David, 2009; Gearheart & Osmondson, 2008; Marsh, Pane, & Hamilton, 2006; Borko, 2004). Whatever we do to improve reading comprehension must involve these two components. The lessons learned from this study, as far as this particular intervention and how it was implemented, are the topics of this paper.

The intervention model developed differently than planned, over time, because of student needs and collaboration between the teacher and the researcher. Even though, there were no improvements in reading comprehension noted, the finding that low-performing students improved their argumentative essay writing in a whole class setting, just as much as similarly low-performing students in a small group with a teacher, may be a testament to the collaboration between the whole-class teacher and researcher. The following page outlines the development of the intervention model over time.
INTERVENTION DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION:

CHANGES OVER TIME

TEACHER:
Modeled the Process:
Read some articles aloud
Provided *think aloud* with modeling
Modeled annotation
Modeled choosing position
Modeled thinking of reasons
Modeled finding evidence
Modeled writing an argument map
Modeled thinking of a rebuttal
Modeled thinking of an answer – evidence-based
Repeated modeling, as needed
Explained and facilitated oral argumentation
Modeled writing an essay, using an argument map to support the writing

STUDENTS:
Introduction and Early Attempts
Observed teacher modeling,
Participated in guided practice
Listened to articles
Chose position,
Tried annotating articles
Lacked understanding of reasons and evidence,
Attempted constructing an argument,
Attempted reading maps to others,
(No eye contact, soft voices, no interaction without coaching)

At 4 weeks
Read articles individually,
Struggled to construct argument
(*Reasons* and *evidence* problems)
Read aloud arguments more fluently
Wanted to switch sides after hearing opposite side
Wrote a final essay, eventually
Read essays to a partner.
Attempted connecting review questions to arguments

Last cycle
Read articles individually
Wrote arguments more quickly,
Struggled with *counter-position* and *rebuttal*
Shared arguments more fluently
Engaged in discussion more assertively, Questioned peers,
Responded to counter-arguments
Wrote longer and more complete essays

INTERVENTION DEVELOPMENT:
Slowed cycles down to meet needs
Provided much more modeling and scaffolding than planned:
*position, reasons, and evidence rebuttal* and *counter-position*
Provided more background knowledge about the topic than anticipated
Provided more individual and small group coaching for oral argumentation than expected
Provided more scaffolding for written essays, even with their maps for support
Students had better discussions when mixed with regular students in the class, than with each other.
Resources


Borko, 2004).