

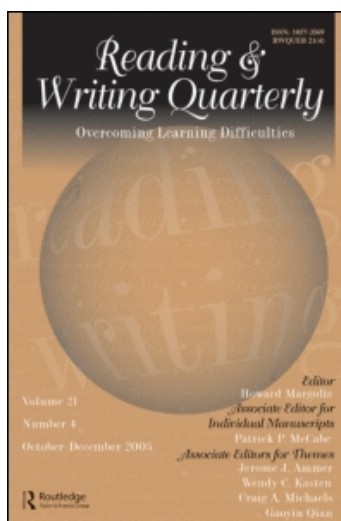
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A Study of Readers Theater in Eighth Grade: Issues of Fluency, Comprehension, and Vocabulary

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A STUDY OF READERS THEATER IN EIGHTH GRADE: ISSUES OF FLUENCY, COMPREHENSION, AND VOCABULARY

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This study investigated the impact of Readers Theater on eighth-grade students, the majority of whom were reading below grade level. Over six weeks of a short story unit, one class participated in Readers Theater. The comparison group of like-ability students received more traditional literary and vocabulary instruction. Quantitative measures showed that when compared with students in the comparison class, students in the Reader Theater class made statistically significant growth in reading level, as well as significant gains in fluidity and expressive measures of oral reading. Groups were not significantly different on comprehension measures. However, the Readers Theater class nearly doubled the vocabulary acquisition of the comparison group. Qualitative measures attested to the potential of Readers Theater to motivate struggling adolescent readers and to build their reading confidence.

In 1989, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development issued a wake-up call to the education community about the plight of adolescent learners in this country. The Council asserted that middle schools may be the “last best chance” for many students to acquire the necessary skills needed for success in the future (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). As a result of this call, subsequent studies and assessments have raised deep concerns about the disturbing number of middle school students who are still unable to read critically and perform other higher level thinking tasks

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(e.g., Donahue, Daane, & Jinn, 2005), the negative attitudes middle school students have developed toward reading (e.g., Worthy & McKool, 1996), and their fading interest in reading (e.g., Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988).

Ivey (1999) found that middle school readers' inclination toward reading and their reading performance to be a function of the instructional environment. Her study suggests that instructional approaches in a responsive classroom context may have the potential to counter the challenges of low performance and apathy toward reading. Given the imperative for more studies on instructional approaches to meet the needs of struggling adolescent readers, we examined the viability of the instructional tool of Readers Theater for addressing both reading achievement and motivation to practice reading. The research base for this investigation includes current understanding of the relationship between fluency and comprehension, vocabulary, and comprehension, as well as the role of Readers Theater in fostering fluency, overall reading achievement, and vocabulary acquisition.

REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH

Fluency

Fluency is a critical component of skilled reading. Children who do not develop reading fluency continue to struggle to read (Allington, 1983; National Reading Panel, 2000). Indeed, the National Research Council report concluded that "adequate progress in learning to read...depends on sufficient practice in reading to achieve fluency with different texts" (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998, p. 223). Fluent reading is dependent upon strong word recognition skills, but such skills do not inevitably lead to fluency (National Reading Panel, 2000). That is, skilled readers must move beyond simply identifying words to making meaning of connected text. Although much of this fluency has developed by third grade, research indicates that students can continue to develop aspects of fluent reading beyond this point (Stahl & Kuhn, 2002).

Historically, researchers who examined oral reading fluency did not always agree on their definition of fluency. Some focused on rate (e.g., Dahl & Samuels, 1974). Some included accuracy as well as rate in their investigations of fluency (e.g., LaBerge & Samuels, 1974). Still others focused on phrasing (e.g., Schreiber, 1980) or the use of prosodic features such as pitch, pauses, and stress (e.g., Dowhower, 1987). More recently, researchers have proposed that fluency is a multidimensional construct (Strecker, Roser, & Martinez, 1998; Zutell &

Rasinski, 1991). That is, fluent readers can read text at an appropriate rate, with a high degree of accuracy, using phrasing of meaningful word units and expressive intonation.

Fluency and Comprehension

Many fluency experts (e.g., Allington, 1983; Samuels, 1988) argue that the most compelling reason to focus instructional efforts on students becoming fluent readers is the strong correlation between fluency and comprehension. Indeed, a current understanding of fluency mandates that the definition of fluency encompass more than just oral reading to include comprehension (Pikulski & Chard, 2005; Samuels, 2002). Harris and Hodges' *The Literacy Dictionary* (1995) defines fluency as "freedom from word identification problems that might hinder comprehension" (p. 85).

The relationship between fluency and reading comprehension is well established (Anderson, Wilkinson & Mason, 1991; Bear, 1991; Clay & Imlach, 1971; Kleiman, Winograd, & Humphrey, 1979; Sindelar, Monda, & O'Shea, 1990; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). An analysis of scores on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) also underscores the close relationship between fluency and reading comprehension (Pinnell, Pikulski, Wixson, Campbell, Gough, & Beatty, 1995). Hudson, Lane, and Pullen (2005) explain fluency's role in comprehension thusly:

Each aspect of fluency has a clear connection to text comprehension. Without accurate word reading, the reader will have no access to the author's intended meaning, and inaccurate word reading can lead to misinterpretations of the text. Poor automaticity in word reading, or slow, laborious movement through the text taxes the reader's capacity to construct an ongoing interpretation of the text. Poor prosody can lead to confusion through inappropriate or meaningless groupings of words or through inappropriate applications of expression. (p. 703)

Typically, students who engage in laborious, choppy reading have difficulty understanding what they read. For the nonfluent reader, poor word recognition slows down the reading process and takes up valuable cognitive resources necessary for meaning-making. Reading becomes a tedious process of figuring out the words, which results in poor understanding of what has been read. Fluency seems to be a *contributor* to comprehension by freeing cognitive resources for interpretation (Samuels, 1979), but fluency also seems to be an

outcome of comprehension as effective oral reading involves preliminary interpretation and understanding (Briggs & Forbes, 2002; Schreiber, 1980).

Vocabulary and Comprehension

Research has long supported the importance of vocabulary in promoting reading comprehension. Multiple studies document the strong positive relationship between knowledge of word meanings and comprehension (Anderson & Freebody, 1981; Baumann, 2005; Baumann & Kame'enui, 1991; Davis, 1944; Nagy, 1988). That is, proficient readers bring a wealth of word knowledge that enables them to construct meaning across a variety of texts.

The developmental nature of vocabulary acquisition is evident in the rapid growth of children's reading vocabularies throughout their elementary school years. Some children, however, do not experience this growth. White, Graves, and Slater (1990) found disparities in the reading vocabularies across socioeconomic levels, with children from low socioeconomic backgrounds having reading vocabularies that increased by only one-half to two-thirds of the reading vocabulary increases of middle class children. Chall, Jacobs, and Baldwin (1990) had similar findings in their studies of the reading abilities of children from low socioeconomic environments. They reported a deceleration in vocabulary in grade four and beyond; they attributed this decline to an increase in more abstract and technical vocabulary of content area textbooks, as well as an increase in more sophisticated words in literary works.

To counter these tendencies, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds need effective, intentional vocabulary instruction. Beck and her associates (Beck, McKeown, & McCaslin, 1983; Beck, McKeown, & Omanson, 1987; Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982) document the positive effects of what they describe as "robust" vocabulary instruction on reading comprehension. These experts assert that robust instruction moves beyond learning mere word definitions to providing opportunities for deeper processing of word meanings. That is, students need to discuss words, understand the relationships among words, and encounter the new words repeatedly in meaningful contexts in order to internalize word meanings.

Readers Theater

Readers Theater is an instructional practice in which a story text is converted to a script. Working in "repertory groups," students

repeatedly read the script, assuming the role of characters and narrator, in preparation for a reading before an audience. Readers Theater is a form of “performance reading” (Worthy, Broaddus, & Ivey, 2001) in which the reader must attempt to take on the voice of the character, as well as the character’s attitude and personality.

Readers Theater and fluency. Readers Theater involves oral reading practice as students repeatedly read a text in preparation for a performance. Thus, Readers Theater incorporates rereading, a well-documented intervention shown to increase fluency (Dowhower, 1987; Herman, 1985; National Reading Panel, 2000; Samuels, 1979; Samuels, Schermer, & Reinking, 1992).

Because the teacher actively “coaches” and provides direction for expressiveness during rehearsals, Readers Theater also offers the modeling that is important to fluency development. While students practice reading in repertory groups, the teacher actively listens to the oral reading and coaches students in expressiveness and phrasing. This feedback is important to students’ fluency growth. Pany and McCoy (1998) found that repeated reading with feedback and guidance was superior to repeated reading alone.

Other researchers (e.g., Chard, Vaughn, & Tyler, 2002; Koskinen & Blum, 1986; Kuhn & Stahl, 2000; Rasinski, 1989) also assert that students who receive feedback to their oral reading are more likely to develop reading fluency. Such feedback assists poor readers in knowing how good reading sounds. The National Reading Panel (2000) concluded that studies show that multiple oral readings with immediate feedback are

effective in improving a variety of reading skills These procedures help improve students’ reading ability, at least through grade 5, and they help improve the reading of students with learning problems much later than this. (p. 3–20)

Studies (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1999; Millin & Rinehardt, 1999) affirm the potential of Readers Theater to promote students’ oral reading fluency. These researchers attribute the fluency growth via Readers Theater to the value of the repeated reading within a motivating context, as well as the “coaching” and modeling provided by the teacher during Readers Theater rehearsals.

Readers Theater and overall reading achievement. A growing body of research underscores the viability of Readers Theater as an instructional device for promoting overall reading growth. Martinez, Roser,

and Strecker (1999) conducted an experimental study of Readers Theater with second graders and found that students who participated in nine weeks of Readers Theater made significant gains in both oral reading fluency and reading level when compared with their peers. Keehn (2003) replicated those findings in a study of Readers Theater students in second grade. Millin and Rinehardt (1999) and Rinehardt (1999) conducted studies of Readers Theater with elementary Title I students and documented its benefits on students' oral reading ability, comprehension, and attitude toward reading. Roser and colleagues (2003) investigated Readers Theater among fourth-grade students learning English as a second language. They found that students made measurable gains in both rate and overall reading level.

Thus, research has shown Readers Theater to be a powerful intervention to promote fluency development in the grades one through four. Moreover, Readers Theater appears to promote overall growth in reading level, especially among struggling readers.

Readers Theater and vocabulary. While reading, students must be able to retrieve word meanings quickly and efficiently to keep comprehension intact. To develop this rapid cognitive process of accessing and retrieving word meanings, students need frequent experiences with new words. Hence, a necessary component of effective vocabulary instruction involves creating opportunities for multiple exposures to the words in meaningful contexts (Baumann & Kame'enui, 1991; Beck & McKeown, 1991; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). As discussed earlier, studies indicate that many encounters with the words are needed to refine and internalize word meanings and positively impact comprehension (McKeown, Beck, Omanson, & Pople, 1985; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). Readers Theater, as an instructional tool, has the potential to impact vocabulary growth because the repeated reading of the scripts affords multiple exposures to new words. Readers Theater may promote vocabulary acquisition by offering repeated exposures to words, repetition that is important to vocabulary acquisition (Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). This study investigates the effect of Readers Theater on vocabulary learning.

Thus, research studies demonstrate that

- fluency can be developed, especially through incorporation of rereading,
- feedback to students about how to improve their oral reading promotes fluency growth,

- fostering fluency has positive effect upon comprehension, and
- repeated exposure to new words in meaningful contexts promotes vocabulary learning.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

This study investigated the use of Readers Theater among middle school students, the majority of whom were struggling readers, as a means for sustaining oral reading practice, offering feedback to students regarding their oral reading, and providing motivation through an authentic communication event. The study addressed the following five research questions:

1. What effect did participation in Readers Theater have on the reading level of eighth graders, many of whom were struggling readers?
2. What effect did participation in Readers Theater have on the prosodic aspects of fluency (phrasing, fluidity, expression) in the oral reading of eighth graders?
3. What effect did participation in Readers Theater have on the reading comprehension of eighth graders?
4. What effect did Readers Theater have on vocabulary learning?
5. How did eighth graders respond to Readers Theater?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants in the six-week study included 36 eighth grade students enrolled in two reading class sections taught by the same teacher. The reading class is required of all students in eighth grade and meets daily for 50 minutes. Located in a low socioeconomic neighborhood in a large metropolitan area in South Texas, the middle school is a designated Title I school. Students in each of the two targeted classrooms were approximately 60% Hispanic and 33% African American. (Table 1 provides the ethnic make-up of the participants by classroom.) Sixteen students of varying reading ability, nine students of whom were identified as special education students, were enrolled in the class that received the intervention of Readers Theater. Twenty students were in the class that served as a comparison group. There

Table 1. Comparison of students in intervention and control classrooms

	Experimental classroom	Control classroom
Reading level		
Grades 3–5	10	7
Grades 6–7	4	9
Grades 8–9	2	4
Ethnicity		
Hispanic	10	12
African-American	5	7
White	1	0
Asian	0	1

were no students identified as special education students in the control classroom. However, the comparison group included a number of students reading below grade level. Table 1 also compares reading levels of students in the two classrooms at the start of the study. Student reading levels were determined by district reading assessments and by the leveled passages of the Ekwall/Shanker Reading Inventory (Shanker & Ekwall, 2000). Table 1 shows that the majority of students in both classrooms were reading below grade level. To ensure the statistical equivalence of the experimental and comparison groups, an analysis using Levene's (1960) test of equality was conducted. This analysis determined that the intervention and comparison groups were statistically equivalent in reading levels at the beginning of the study. Students in both comparison and intervention classrooms had no previous knowledge of or previous experience with Readers Theater.

Teacher

The same eighth-grade Language Arts teacher taught the Readers Theater class and the control class. She was in her eighth year as a classroom teacher. She had participated in her district's professional development sequence for middle school reading teachers, and she was pursuing a master's degree with an emphasis in literacy education.

Instructional Materials

The researchers, in collaboration with the classroom teacher, selected six short stories to use in the study. Selection of the short stories

was based upon student interest, suitability for Readers Theater format, and readability levels. The text levels represented a range from fifth-grade to seventh-grade reading levels, based upon the Fry (1977) readability formula. Because the majority of students were reading below grade level, texts were chosen at readability levels that would be manageable for most of the students. As the researchers created Readers Theater scripts for each short story, they maintained the integrity of the story by including narration sections for one to three “narrators” and verbatim dialogues for respective characters. Minimal changes to the text were made to fit the script format; these changes did not impact the readability levels of the stories. Vocabulary words targeted for instruction were italicized in the scripts. Table 2 presents an example of a story adaptation to script format.

Table 2. Story adaptation to RT script format

“Charles” by Shirley Jackson

Original text

The day my son Laurie started kindergarten he renounced corduroy overalls with bibs and began wearing blue jeans with a belt; I watched him go off the first morning with the older girl next door, seeing clearly that an era of my life was ended, my sweet-voiced nursery-school tot replaced by a long-trousered, swaggering character who forgot to stop at the corner and wave good-bye to me.

He came home the same way, the front door slamming open, his cap on the floor, and the voice suddenly become raucous shouting, “Isn’t anybody here?”

At lunch he spoke insolently to his father, spilled his baby sister’s milk, and remarked that his teacher said we were not to take the name of the Lord in vain.

“How was school today?” I asked, elaborately casual.

Readers Theater script

Narrator 1: The day Laurie started kindergarten he *renounced* corduroy overalls with bibs and began wearing blue jeans with a belt.

Laurie: That’s baby stuff! I’m going to school now, and I want jeans.

Narrator 2: His mother watched him go off the first morning with the older girl next door, seeing clearly that an era of her life was ended, her sweet-voiced nursery-school tot replaced by a long-trousered, swaggering character who forgot to stop at the corner and wave good-bye.

Narrator 3: Laurie came home the same way, the front door slamming open, his cap on the floor.

Laurie [raucous, shouting]: Is anybody here?

Narrator 1: At lunch he spoke *insolently* to his father, spilled his baby sister’s milk, and remarked that his teacher said we were not to take the name of the Lord in vain.

Mother: How was school today?

Role of the Researchers

The two researchers, experienced in Readers Theater implementation, discussed and initially demonstrated the modeling and coaching behaviors needed to support Readers Theater. The classroom teacher and the special education teacher, who came into the classroom daily because nine of the students were identified as deserving special education, rotated among different “repertory groups” each week to ensure that all students received similar feedback and coaching over the course of the intervention. At least one researcher was in the classroom every day to ensure fidelity of the treatment. In addition, the researchers observed regularly in the comparison classroom to document the instruction taking place.

Description of Instruction for Readers Theater Group

In the intervention classroom, the teacher followed the weekly Readers Theater plan as outlined in Table 3. A week was devoted to each of the six short stories. On Monday, the teacher first administered the vocabulary pretest. Then students responded to a journal prompt related to the theme of the short story to be read. The teacher then read the short story, using expression, as students followed along.

Table 3. Description of weekly Readers Theater intervention

Day 1	Teacher administers vocabulary pretest. Students respond to a theme-related prompt about the short story in writing journals. Teacher models expressive reading of story and discusses vocabulary words. Students read personal copy of script independently or in pairs. Teacher reviews meanings of targeted vocabulary words.
Day 2	Repertory group members practice script and exchange roles. Teacher models, coaches, and monitors time-on-task. Teacher elaborates on targeted word meanings.
Day 3	Repertory group members practice script and exchange roles. Teacher models, coaches, and monitors time-on-task. Final ten minutes: group members negotiate roles for final performance.
Day 4	Repertory groups practice. Students read only part assigned. Teacher models, coaches, and monitors time-on-task. Final ten minutes: students plan performance details.
Day 5	Teacher administers vocabulary post test. Repertory groups perform reading before an audience.

During this initial oral reading of the short story, the teacher paused at each targeted vocabulary word to explain and elaborate its meaning. Then students received a personal copy of the script based on the short story. Students read the script independently or in pairs. On Tuesday, the students gathered in repertory groups to practice. “Master scripts” were distributed, and each student read the part highlighted in his/her script. Each group had an adult facilitator (classroom teacher or special education teacher), who coached for expressive reading, modeled phrasing and intonation, and kept the students on task. To maintain student engagement, group leaders continually exhorted reluctant readers to read with expression, constantly modeling and coaching for expressive reading. Coaching comments included the following:

- “How would you feel if . . . ? Now read like this is happening to you.”
- “Try that again. You are the character, and you’re scared.”
- “Read that again and make your voice sound like you’re talking.”

After each reading, students assumed new roles, and the script was again read. This allowed students to consider different character perspectives and to interpret the text from a new stance. Wednesday’s format replicated that of Tuesday. During the final minutes of Wednesday’s practice, students negotiated for parts (roles) they were to read for Friday’s performance. During repertory group meetings on Thursdays, students practiced reading only the role they had been assigned for the next day’s performance. The final minutes of Thursday were devoted to details of the performance, such as how to introduce the story and the readers. On Friday, each group performed before an audience. Each week the audience varied—other classrooms, administrative staff, and librarians.

Description of Instruction for Comparison Group

In the comparison class section, the teacher employed instructional procedures that included prereading vocabulary support, journal writing, strategy instruction, shared reading, and discussion (see Table 4). The comparison group devoted two days to each of the six short stories. The students first completed the vocabulary pretest for the short story. The teacher followed the pretest with a discussion about the word meanings. She displayed the words on the board,

Table 4. Description of comparison group instruction for each short story

Day 1	Vocabulary pretest Discussion of targeted vocabulary words Journal writing Mini-lesson on a comprehension strategy Identification of purpose for reading Teacher reading orally Reading silently or in small groups Review of targeted vocabulary words
Day 2	Rereading of short story by students Teacher-led discussion of story Response activity related to story
Day 3	Vocabulary posttest

wrote the definitions, and then had the students copy them in their notebooks. She reminded students to listen for the words as they read the short stories and to pay attention to how the author used the words in context. For the next phase of the lesson, the students responded in their writing journals to a pre-reading prompt that addressed an issue related to the upcoming story. At this point, the teacher explained a comprehension strategy, such as making predictions or asking questions as they read. She then provided students with a purpose for reading the short story, such as “pay attention to the element of suspense in this story.”

The teacher began by reading the opening portion of the story orally to the students, modeling expressive reading. Then students continued reading the story. The students had a choice of different formats for the reading: shared reading, with the teacher reading and the students following along; small group oral reading; and silent individual reading. There was no teacher feedback concerning the oral reading done during the small group sessions. At the close of the first day, the teacher revisited the targeted word meanings in the context of the story. The second day, students had an additional opportunity to reread the story. They then participated in teacher-led discussions and, in some instances, engaged in a related response activity, such as illustrating key scenes in the story. The teacher administered the vocabulary post-test the following day before beginning the next short story. After the students completed all six short stories, they spent the remaining time of the six-week investigation participating in a novel class study, which included guided reading, shared reading, and different combinations of silent reading and group reading.

Table 5. Vocabulary words

Short stories	Vocabulary words
“The Dinner Party”	Spirited, rafters, commotion, sober, verandah
“Wrong Number”	Disgusted, random, routine, hysterically, eerie
“French Class”	Propelled, scowl, lingered, bluff, sheepishly
“Ice Maiden”	Sculptures, scurried, agony, emerged, nasal
“Charles”	Renounced, insolently, deprived, haggard, unsettling
“To Serve Man”	Delegates, translator, stifled, shortages, farce

Vocabulary Study

The researchers and classroom teacher identified five words in each selection to use for the vocabulary intervention. Vocabulary selection was based upon the level of student familiarity with the words, the importance of the word for story comprehension, and the usefulness of the words to the students’ language ability. A list of the words for each Readers Theater script is provided in Table 5. Before either class read the short story, the teacher administered a two-part vocabulary pretest that measured prior knowledge of the words. One section required students to write a definition of each word, and the other section asked students to select one sentence from three possible choices that contained the correct semantic and syntactic use of the word (see Table 6 for an example of this assessment). Students were required to write the definitions first so that the sentences from the second section would not influence their responses.

The teacher began each short story lesson by introducing the words, prompting students to share their existing knowledge of the

Table 6. Sample vocabulary assessment

“Charles” by Shirley Jackson
Read each group of sentences. Put a check by the one in which the underlined word is used correctly.
_____ He <u>renounced</u> all rights to the throne to marry the carpenter’s daughter.
_____ He <u>renounced</u> so many basketball games for the team that the league made him the most valuable player for the season.
_____ The girls did not want her to go to their Halloween party because of her <u>renounced</u> attitude.
_____ The boy was rewarded for his <u>insolent</u> behavior with a pizza and a movie.
_____ The teenage created an <u>insolent</u> in the front yard when he tried to turn the car around.
_____ Because the young girl yelled in an <u>insolent</u> manner at the teacher, she was sent to the principal’s office.

terms, and then providing brief explanations of the word meanings. During the first day, the teacher also revisited the selected words in the context of the story to explain and elaborate meaning. The teacher followed this procedure in both the intervention and comparison classrooms for the six short stories. Students in the Readers Theater class received multiple exposures to the words as they repeatedly read their scripts. Moreover, during successive practices with the scripts in repertory groups, the teacher clarified the targeted vocabulary and extended word meanings. Students in the intervention classroom completed the vocabulary post-test for each short story immediately before their Readers Theater performances each Friday. The vocabulary pretests and posttests were the same.

Motivation

After the six-week intervention, students from the Readers Theater group responded orally to questions about their participation in Readers Theater. The open-ended questions were designed to uncover student attitudes regarding their experience with Readers Theater, as well as any insights or self-awareness they might have gained through the experience. Students in the comparison group were not interviewed with these questions because they had not experienced Readers Theater. Interview questions included the following:

- What did you like about Readers Theater?
- What did you not like about Readers Theater?
- What did you learn about yourself as a reader from Readers Theater?

The responses were taped and transcribed for analysis.

Data Sources and Analyses

Data sources came from five major assessment tools. To measure reading growth and comprehension, the Ekwall/Shanker Reading Inventory (Shanker & Ekwall, 2000) was administered to both groups. The Reading Inventory involved each student's reading of leveled passages followed by comprehension questions regarding the content of those passages. The NAEP Fluency Rating Scale (Pinnell, Pikulski, Wixson, Campbell, Gough, & Beatty, 1995) measured changes in the student's oral reading of the sixth-grade level passages of the Reading Inventory. Because the NAEP Scale emphasizes reading in "syntactically meaningful phrases," that is, the phrasing dimension

of fluency, each student's oral reading was also evaluated using the fluidity and expression components of the Diagnostic Fluency Scale (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1999). (Appendices A and B present these fluency scales.) The sixth-grade passages were used for pre- and post-assessments of oral reading fluency because many of the eighth-grade students were reading below grade level. For comparison purposes, comprehension was also assessed on these sixth-grade passages. The pre- and post-tests for vocabulary assessment and the interview questions regarding Readers Theater are described above.

The outcome variables were analyzed using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). ANOVA was selected over independent t-tests due to its robustness. Subsequent to any significant ANOVA findings, the researchers conducted multiple Tukey-b tests to determine the nature of significant differences between the two groups. To insure the statistical equivalence of the experimental and comparison groups at the beginning, an analysis using Levene's test of equality was also conducted. It was determined that the intervention and comparison groups were statistically equivalent in reading levels at the beginning of the study. The dependent variables were gain scores on the following measures: Ekwall/Shanker Reading Inventory reading levels and comprehension scores on the sixth-grade passage; the NAEP fluency score; the fluidity, phrasing, and expression subscale scores of the Diagnostic Fluency Scale; and a total vocabulary score. The primary independent variable for this study was whether students were in the intervention (Readers Theater) group or the comparison group. The predetermined level of significance used for the study was $p < .05$.

To analyze the qualitative data from the interviews, the researchers used a constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). They coded each meaningful unit individually and then came together to identify common categories. Researchers then collaboratively recategorized each meaningful unit with 100% agreement.

Comments were then tallied by category. Some students offered multiple responses to a single question. If the multiple responses all addressed one category, then only a single tally was made for that category. If the responses to one question varied, then a tally was placed under the each appropriate category.

FINDINGS

Data analyses revealed major findings in regard to reading level, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary.

Reading Ability

Readers Theater students outgained the comparison group students by a statistically significant margin in growth in reading level as measured by the Ekwall/Shanker Reading Inventory. A comparison of the reading improvement between the two groups of students produced a statistically significant difference favoring the Readers Theater students. An ANOVA produced $F(1, 34) = 10.68, p = .002$. The significance of the statistical difference is further substantiated by the moderate effect size produced ($\eta^2 = .239$).

Fluency

The two groups were assessed on measures of fluency using recordings of their oral readings of the Ekwall/Shanker sixth grade passages. The results indicated that the Readers Theater students did significantly better than the comparison groups students on both fluidity ($F[1, 34] = 5.353, p = .027$) and expression ($F[1, 34] = 12.855, p = .001$). The corresponding effect sizes showed that Readers Theater students had a small advantage in fluidity ($\eta^2 = .136$) and a moderate advantage in expression ($\eta^2 = .274$) over students in the comparison group. There was no statistical significance between the Readers Theater and comparison groups in phrasing as measured by the NAEP Fluency Scale.

Comprehension

Readers Theater students demonstrated higher levels of comprehension than the comparison group as measured by the Ekwall/Shanker Reading Inventory. While the mean gain score in comprehension for Readers Theater students was almost double the gain score achieved by the comparison group, the ANOVA produced an insignificant result.

Vocabulary

Readers Theater students outperformed the comparison group students in vocabulary learning by a statistically significant amount. Students in the Readers Theater group did significantly better than the comparison group ($F[1, 34] = 6.63, p = .019$). This result produced a moderate effect size ($\eta^2 = .269$) indicating the difference had some practical significance. Students in the Readers Theater class

Table 7. Gain scores (posttest–pretest) for intervention and comparison groups

Dependent variable	Readers Theater		Comparison group		F-score	p value	eta ²
	M	SD	M	SD			
Reading level (Ekwall IRI measure)	1.75	1.23	.70	.66	10.68	.002*	.239
Comprehension (percentage on Ekwall IRI passage)	17.8	16.73	9.25	18.59	2.06	.160	.057
NAEP Score (four-point scale)	.50	.83	.24	.51	1.265	.269	.039
Fluidity (five-point scale)	0.20	.36	(.48)	.75	5.353	.027*	.136
Expression (five-point scale)	1.13	.72	.25	.73	12.855	.001*	.274
Total vocabulary (percentage points)	17.1	8.75	9.00	5.48	6.63	.019*	.269

*indicates statistically significant difference between Readers Theater students and comparison students.

nearly doubled the vocabulary acquisition of words of their peers in the comparison group. Table 7 summarizes all the results.

Motivation

Analyses of the 16 Readers Theater participants’ responses to the interview questions resulted in the following findings:

Likes. Regarding what they liked about Readers Theater, students offered three categories of responses: story, performance, and engagement. The category of “story” represented responses that referred directly to the story scripts. Eleven students mentioned the stories as a positive aspect of Readers Theater. Some cited specific stories, while others, like Jonathan, made a general statement: “I liked the stories.” The “performance” category included students’ statements directly related to the Readers Theater presentations before an audience. Ten students noted aspects of performance that they enjoyed. Jackie said, “It’s fun ’cuz you get to do it in front of people.” Brandi responded, “I liked doing the accents...and yelling as loud as I want.” Finally, the “engagement” category represented positive affective responses to the experience. Nine students noted some aspect of engagement, mentioning the enjoyable aspects of Readers Theater and the social aspect of working in a repertory group. For example, Jerome said, “We had fun doing the plays.” Reggie commented, “It gave us something interesting to do together.”

Dislikes. Student responses regarding dislikes about Readers Theater fell into three categories: practice, performance, and story. The “practice” category included comments regarding repeated readings and the work required of repertory group members. Seven students mentioned the constant practice of scripts as a negative. Rosie said, “I didn’t like when we had to keep on reading it and reading it.” Margie expressed her dislike this way, “I didn’t like that we had to read all the time.” Five students mentioned the performances before an audience as a negative aspect of Readers Theater. Casey responded, “I didn’t like going up in front of the class to read.” Only two participants responded negatively about the stories. Both commented, “Some stories were too long.” Four students in the class could not identify any negative aspect associated with their participation in Readers Theater. They responded with the word “nothing” when asked what they did not like about Readers Theater.

Self-awareness as a reader. When asked, What did you learn about yourself as a reader from Readers Theater?, all 16 participants had something to say about their own self-efficacy, their own sense of accomplishment. Patterns of response to this question fell into three major categories: confidence, expressive ability, and voice projection. The students expressed growth in confidence as they learned that they could perform successfully in Readers Theater. This success, in turn, fostered an awareness of their ability as readers. For example, Kenneth said, “I learned that I was a good reader as a character.” Jason said, “I learned how to read better,” and Reggie commented, “I learned that I do read pretty good.” Brandi said, “I learned I could read in different selves and that people really liked some ways I read.” Students specifically addressed their improvement in expression and voice projection with comments, such as “I can read as loud as when I’m talking to my friends in the hallway” and “I can read louder and with expression.” One student, in particular, identified his awareness of immersion in the story with this comment: “As I got more into the plays, I would bring out the character in myself.”

DISCUSSION

This study responds to the need for effective literacy instructional practices to use with middle school students who read below grade level and who have little interest in reading. The findings suggest that Readers Theater may be a promising technique to use with this

student population. We discuss the findings as they relate to both the cognitive aspects of the reading process in terms of growth in overall reading ability, in fluency, and in vocabulary, as well as the affective domain in terms of motivation.

Cognitive Aspects

Reading growth. Students who participated in Readers Theater showed increases in their overall reading growth. Readers Theater requires that students read accurately, as well as attend to the meaning, as they assume roles for performance. The students' willingness to repeatedly read the same text and willingness to give a good effort may be attributed to the motivational nature of preparation for public performance. This effort, in turn, may have impacted student outcomes. The positive findings in overall reading growth support existing research regarding the relationship between student engagement/motivation and student outcomes (Pintrich, Marx, & Boyle, 1993; Pintrich & Schrauben, 1992).

Growth in the students' reading levels may also be attributed to the benefit of time-on-task (Allington, 2001; Fisher & Berliner, 1985). There is clear evidence that the more time children spend reading connected text, the higher their achievement (Berliner, 1981; Leinhardt, Zigmond, & Cooley, 1981). Students in the intervention classroom averaged 42 minutes of the 50 minutes of class time each day engaged in oral reading of the scripts. At any given point during this 42-minute time frame, students were reading orally, following the texts as others read their parts, and listening to the teacher as she modeled expressive oral reading. In contrast, students in the comparison group averaged 17 minutes of 50 minutes of class time each day reading connected text. The increases in reading growth may be a result of the increased time devoted to the reading of connected text over the six weeks of the study.

Fluency. As noted earlier, the measures of fluency were made on the students' reading of sixth-grade level passages. For the students in both groups reading at grade levels 3–5, these passages were too difficult. Nevertheless, the students in the Readers Theater class made significant growth in two aspects of fluency: fluidity (i.e., smoothness of the reading) and expression (intonation and dramatic quality). Such fluency growth is important for struggling readers: “[w]hile fluency in and of itself is not sufficient to ensure high levels of reading achievement, fluency is absolutely necessary for that achievement because it depends upon...comprehension” (Pikulski & Chard,

2005, p. 517). Students' growth in fluency may be attributed to the repeated readings, an intervention well-documented in research, and to the modeling and coaching for fluent reading by the adult facilitator.

The rubric for scoring fluidity (see Appendix B for descriptors) emphasizes two elements: cadence and flow. That is, students who hesitate to identify words, who stop to sound out words, or who repeat portions of text are penalized in the resulting choppiness of their oral reading. The improvement in fluidity among the Readers Theater participants may be the result of constant coaching to "read right along" and "read more smoothly." As discussed above, the increase in fluidity also may be the result of oral reading practice via the repeated readings of the scripts.

Similarly, the significant growth in expression made by the Readers Theater participants may be due to the weeks of attention to prosodic reading and the modeling of expressiveness by the adults. This result replicates the findings of other studies of Readers Theater by Keehn (2001) and Martinez, Roser, and Strecker (1999), in which the modeling of expressiveness by the teacher and the ongoing encouragement to add a dramatic quality to their oral reading result in more expressive oral reading by students.

Vocabulary. Students in the Readers Theater group showed statistically significant gains in vocabulary during the six weeks of the study. This growth may be attributed to several features of the intervention. First, overall level of student engagement with each Readers Theater script was high. Students had little off-task time during each class session. Such engagement is a necessary component of effective vocabulary instruction (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2000). Second, students had multiple exposures to the words as they practiced their parts, listened to others rehearse various roles, and participated in facilitator-led discussions about the authors' use of the words in context. Multiple exposures to words in meaningful contexts are essential to learning of word meanings (Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). It is important to note that students in the Readers Theater group dealt with the targeted words over five days, while students in the "control classroom" dealt with the targeted words over two days. The additional class days devoted to the words also contributed to the "multiple exposures." Third, through their performances of various character and narrator roles, students had to understand the meanings of words in order to provide an accurate interpretation of those roles. Such performance practice allows students to process word meanings at a high cognitive level because they must use the meanings of words rather than just

associate a word with its definition. With this deeper level of word processing, students are more likely to remember word meanings (Nagy, 1988; Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985). It appears that Readers Theater may be an appropriate instructional venue for providing the multiple exposures and deep processing needed to acquire new vocabulary.

Affective Aspects

Readers Theater appears to have nurtured students' motivation to practice oral reading and may have fostered feelings of success as a reader via the public performances. Given the negative attitudes that many struggling middle school students have about reading (Baker, 2002; Ivey & Broaddus, 1999), the positive responses of the students in the intervention group to Readers Theater attest to its potential for engagement and also mirror previous findings about the motivating effects of Readers Theater (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1999).

The lively coaching and encouragement of the adults working with each repertory group constantly spurred students to give a best effort. Moreover, the positive accolades that followed each public performance provided many students with an awareness that they *could* read well, when prepared. The resulting sense of pride and flush of success were reflected in the many favorable comments the students offered about performances. However, a few students never were comfortable with public performance, as reflected in their negative comments about performance.

The stories themselves were chosen for their potential to interest middle school readers and included fantasy, humor, and life situations relevant to young adolescents. The fact that the students themselves specifically mentioned the stories as a positive aspect of the Readers Theater experience attests to the engaging qualities of the stories. The two negative comments regarding the stories did not deal with story content, but with story length. Moreover, because students negotiated their parts for each performance, they had some control over the character they performed. This may also have contributed to "ownership" or "buy-in" of these readers.

Less-skilled readers often find themselves reading texts that are too difficult for them (Allington, 1977, 2001; Gambrell, Wilson, & Gant, 1981). Although the readability of the scripts exceeded the level of the less-skilled members of the repertory groups, these students were able to be successful. The presence of an adult to scaffold the reading of these less-skilled readers, coupled with the positive effects of repeated

readings, made the texts manageable for even the weakest readers within the repertory groups. However, the negative comments regarding the amount of reading and the tedious nature of repeatedly reading the same story indicate that some students resisted making the effort to read lengthier portions and to read aloud often.

The students' comments regarding their changed perceptions of themselves as readers resulting from their participation in the repertory groups attest to the potential of Readers Theater to foster feelings of success among poor readers. Reading success is crucial to motivating students for whom reading is a struggle, because motivated students actually read more and, in turn, become better readers (Allington, 2001; Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Baker & Wigfield, 1999). Thus, Readers Theater may offer the potential to ensure success and fuel the confidence needed to continue reading.

Limitations

There are several limitations involved in this study. First, the use of a passage at sixth-grade readability to assess fluency may not have offered the best information regarding each student's oral reading fluency. The passage was too difficult for some students and quite easy for others. Second, the study may have been constrained by the fluency assessment instruments themselves (i.e., NAEP fluency scale and Diagnostic Fluency Assessment subscales). Although there is consensus (Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005; Rasinski, 2003) that assessment of fluency in all its dimensions must include subscales that attend to the reader's phrase boundaries, inflection, and expression, there is "little [empirical] research available to guide the assessment of fluency" (Pikulski & Chard, 2005, p. 518). Additionally, the use of gains scores may have an inherent limitation. Cronbach and Furby (1970) have dismissed pre-/post-testing as a valid gauge of effectiveness on the grounds that change scores are unreliable. Rogosa and Willett (1983, 1985), however, assert that gain scores can accurately reflect the group score. Finally, the fact that the researchers initially delivered part of the "treatment," serving as coaches to repertory groups to model for the classroom teacher and the special education teacher, may have biased the results.

CONCLUSION

In the search for literacy interventions to support adolescent readers, Readers Theater may be a promising practice. As the Commission on

Adolescent Literacy (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw & Rycik, 1999) points out, “adolescents deserve instruction that builds both the skill and desire to read increasingly complex materials.” Struggling adolescent readers are in special need of instructional interventions that not only improve their reading development, but also maintain their interest and motivation (Ivey, 1999). Readers Theater may hold promise as instruction to counter low reading performance and disinterest—instruction that all struggling adolescent readers need and deserve.

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APPENDIX A: NAEP'S ORAL READING FLUENCY SCALE

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|---------|--|
| Level 4 | Reads primarily in larger, meaningful phrase groups. Although some regressions, repetitions, and deviations from text may be present, these do not detract from the overall structure of the story. Preservation of the author's syntax is consistent. Some or most of the story is read with expressive interpretation. |
| Level 3 | Reads primarily in three- or four-word groups. Some small groupings may be present. However, the majority of the phrasing seems appropriate and preserves the syntax of the author. Little or no expressive interpretation is present. |
| Level 2 | Reads primarily in two-word phrases with some three- or four-word groupings. Some word-by-word reading may be present. Word groupings may seem awkward and unrelated to larger context of sentence or passage. |
| Level 1 | Reads primarily word-by-word. Occasional two-word or three-word phrases may occur—but these are infrequent and/or they do not preserve meaningful syntax. |
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Source. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. *Listening to children read aloud*, 15. Washington, D.C.: 1995.

APPENDIX B: DIAGNOSTIC FLUENCY ASSESSMENT, SUBMEASURES FOR FLUIDITY AND EXPRESSION

Fluidity (Smoothness of the Reading)

- Hesitations in every line of print with many false starts; frequent prompting; frequent repetitions; no rhythm or cadence
- Several extended pauses, hesitations, and/or repetitions that are disruptive to the reading; occasional prompting; impression of choppiness
- Occasional inappropriate pauses; only occasional hesitation or repetition; rare prompting; only occasional choppiness
- Smooth reading overall with few pauses, hesitations, or repetitions; word or structural difficulties are quickly self-corrected; no choppiness
- Smooth, connected reading with no inappropriate pauses or hesitations; rare false start is immediately self-corrected; appropriate varied rhythm and cadence

Expressiveness

- Reads with equal stress to each word; reads in a monotone with no expression; fails to mark end of sentences or dialogue with rise/fall of voice
- Uses minimal expression; reads with inappropriate stress; uses intonation that fails to mark end of sentences and clauses
- Uses some appropriate expressions; reads with reasonable stress; uses intonation, which marks end of sentences and clauses
- Generally uses appropriate stress and intonation with adequate attention to expression, including voice change at dialogue and appropriate rise and fall of voice
- Consistently attends to appropriate stress, intonation, and expression including consistent voice changes for dialogue; demonstrates sensitivity to mood and tone; alters rate as need for dramatic effect

Source. Martinez, M.G., Roser, N.L., & Strecker, S.K. (1999). *Diagnostic Fluency Assessment*. Unpublished assessment. University of Texas, Austin.