

Impacts of Incentives on Struggling Readers

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Abstract

Reading is a complex process that requires many skills in order to make meaning of text. Therefore, when children struggle to read, it is not a simple fix. This study examined what impact an incentive program had on third- through fifth-grade struggling readers' motivation to participate in reading interventions and their perceptions of themselves as readers with the hope of increasing achievement and students' motivation to read. The findings of this study showed that the incentive program increased students' motivation to participate in the reading interventions but did not show significant improvement in students' self-perception as readers. A third unexpected finding came about as a result of analyzing the pre-survey data. Struggling readers' negative attitudes toward participating in a reading intervention were not communicated through responses on the pre-survey or were not as negative as initially believed to be by the teacher.

Keywords: incentive, intervention, reading motivation, self-perception

Introduction

With an increase in technology and screen time, teachers are faced with the difficult challenge of creating classroom environments that encourage a love of reading and develop lifelong readers. Some studies have cited a connection between motivation and achievement in reading (Gambrell, Palmer, Codling, & Mazzoni, 1996). The findings of these studies suggest that children who are motivated to read are better readers. What actually motivates children to read is a subject that also has been studied for many years. Turner and Paris found that "the most reliable indicator of motivation for literacy learning is not the type of reading program that districts follow, but the actual daily tasks that teachers provide in their classrooms" (p. 664).

This teacher action research study examined what impact an incentive program had on third-through fifth-grade struggling readers' motivation to participate in reading interventions and their perceptions of themselves as readers with the hope of increasing reading achievement and students' motivation to read. I taught fifth grade for 10 years before I became the reading interventionist for the elementary school. I have always believed teaching reading is the most important job an elementary teacher has. Because reading is essential to academic achievement in all content areas, students must master this skill and develop a love of reading early in their education.

In my current position, I provide research-based interventions for struggling readers in kindergarten through fifth grade. I work daily with students who struggle to read at grade level. I am charged with the important task of helping to close the gap and move these students toward grade level as quickly as possible. I have been working in this position for seven years and have been troubled over the years at the realization that my struggling readers are not motivated to read.

Although the research-based, intensive reading interventions that I provide have been proven to increase reading achievement, they often do little to motivate students to read or even participate

in the interventions. In my experience, students begin to have a poor perception of themselves as readers, particularly upper elementary students who have struggled for several years and have been in and out of interventions. They know they are not “graded” on the intervention and often do not take the intervention seriously and can be behavior issues or avoid the work all together. In spite of my efforts to ensure a safe environment where students feel good about themselves, there is a stigma associated with having to be in one of these intervention groups. These students need something that will motivate them to participate and do their best in the interventions. This teacher inquiry study documented the effects of the implementation of an incentive program with Tier 2 and Tier 3 third- through fifth-grade intervention students.

Literature Review

In an ideal world, all of our students would be motivated to learn every day. Unfortunately, this is not our reality and teachers are tasked with motivating students to learn in a fast-paced, highly digital world filled with distractions. Many studies have been done to examine the effects of motivation and particularly the motivation to read. Gambrell, Palmer, Codling, and Mazzone (1996) maintained that students want to read and are good readers when they are motivated and have a desire to read. Highly motivated students choose to read, which in turn, will develop into a lifelong reading habit. However, not all students are motivated in the same way (Gambrell, 2011).

Reading Incentives

Some studies have shown that intrinsic motivation is necessary for students to develop a love of reading and in turn become good readers, where extrinsic motivators could actually have a diminishing or undermining effect on students’ motivation and reading achievement. Nevertheless, widespread use of reading incentive programs exists in classrooms across the country.

Fawson, Reutzel, Read, Smith, and Moore (2009) investigated how four widely used classroom incentive paths impacted third graders’ reading achievement as well as their attitudes toward reading. Students in four different classrooms tracked their reading in one of the four incentive paths: number of pages read, number of books read, number of minutes read, and wide reading. No significant differences were found to exist across the four incentive paths on reading achievement or reading attitude. The four incentive paths did not impact students’ vocabulary, comprehension, or recreational reading attitude but did significantly influence students’ attitudes toward academic reading. A possible reason for this is that the incentives were given in school and students could have perceived this as an in-school reward and as a result influenced their attitude toward academic reading that happens mostly in the classroom. The wide reading path using the genre wheel generated the highest attitude impact of the four incentive paths implemented.

Stanfield (2006) had a similar finding in a study of third-grade students in a rural, farming, low-income community in Georgia. Students were given tangible incentive rewards for the number of books they read and the Accelerated Reader points they received. Through this study, Stanfield (2006) found that the average numbers of books stayed the same and the reading attitudes of students actually dropped. These were high readers and these students were hindered by the point system in the Accelerated Reader program. Students in this study had a more positive attitude toward reading when no rewards or points were attached, and their reading was for pure enjoyment. This study supports the suggestion that intrinsic motivation to read can be undermined by extrinsic motivators for high readers. In both studies, the incentives did very little to impact students’ motivation to read.

Reading Instruction

Struggling readers tend to be less intrinsically motivated to read since reading is difficult for them. What motivates struggling readers to read more? This is a topic that has been researched for many years and one that teachers continue to strive to understand. Some research has found that a variety of reading instructional techniques may actually be the key to encouraging struggling readers to read more. Turner and Paris (1995) found that the most reliable indicator of motivation for literacy learning is not the type of reading program that districts follow, but the actual daily tasks that teachers provide in their classrooms.

In a study done by Marinak (2013), a motivation intervention was implemented with 76 fifth-grade students in a suburban elementary school. The intervention included three parts: giving students choice in teacher read-aloud, using Jigsaw strategy during informational text reading, and allowing book clubs in addition to self-selected silent reading. The results of this study showed that students in the treatment groups were more motivated to read than the control classrooms and reported that they valued reading more after the intervention than the control groups. Data from this study suggested “that practices could be implemented to nurture intrinsic reading motivation without jeopardizing the fidelity of reading instruction” (Marinak, 2013, p. 47). Providing choice, challenge, collaboration, and authenticity resulted in higher reading motivation among students.

Similarly, Richardson (2016) sought to find out what impact the implementation of Reader’s Theatre into the curriculum would have on motivating struggling readers in high school to read and improve their reading skills. The weekly routine included assigning parts and reviewing vocabulary on day one, providing background knowledge and reading through the entire script on day two, an integrated art or writing component aligned with the story on day three, practicing individual parts on day four, and a recorded performance for various audiences on day five. The study found that all 24 participants passed the eighth-grade reading test, all students increased their words-per-minute fluency scores. Fifty-eight percent of students’ reading levels increased and 75% of students increased their vocabulary grade level. Reader’s Theatre is another viable strategy to increase students’ motivation to read (Richardson, 2016).

Richardson (2016) and Marinak (2013) both show that specific instructional methods in reading will lead to greater motivation to read among students. Reading motivation is clearly important in creating life-long readers. More research is still needed to determine the classroom environments and reading tasks that best motivate students to read. If rewards are provided for literacy tasks, teachers must be careful not to provide incentive programs that actually undermine the intrinsic motivation of students to read for the sheer joy of reading. There is a fine line between the two and finding the right amount of extrinsic rewards that leads to intrinsic motivation is the key to building a love of reading in all of our students.

Study Context

The students who took part in this study were all struggling readers. The participants attended a university laboratory school. At the time of the study, the population of the school was 1,135 students of whom 42.7% were White, 26.1% Hispanic, 15% African American, 10.5% Asian, 5.1% Multiracial, 0.4% Native American, and 0.2% Pacific Islander. Thirty-two percent of students qualified for free or reduced lunch. This study’s sample included students in third, fourth, and fifth grades. All of the students in this study had been placed in a reading intervention group that met with me for 30 minutes, five days per week during the 2019–2020 school year. The students were in small groups and the intervention used was determined based on students’ specific deficiencies in reading. Students were then grouped with other students with similar

needs. Students remained in the same intervention group with the same students for the duration of this study. Students in the groups were also all in the same grade level.

Researcher Teaching Philosophy

I believe it is important to foster a love of reading so that students will become lifelong readers. We must dedicate time for reading in our classrooms and make it clear to students that reading is a high priority for all of us. We must set goals as readers, make plans to reach those goals, and celebrate our successes. We must make reading real and fun and so that students see the hidden worlds and wonders behind the cover of every book. It is with this philosophy in mind that I look for ways to inspire and motivate the struggling readers in my classes to become lovers of reading.

Methods

I conducted an action research study with my struggling readers in grades 3, 4, and 5. The process required me to collect data to analyze and interpret, with the hopes of bettering my practice and sharing my findings with fellow educators and researchers. Through action research, I was able to address my concern of students' motivation as well as their self-perception as readers. I was able to focus my research on the question: What impact does an incentive program have on third through fifth grade struggling readers' motivation to participate in reading interventions and their perceptions of themselves as readers?

With the goal of increasing reading achievement and students' motivation to read, I implemented an incentive program. I collected data in many forms, including qualitative and quantitative data. This data was collected through student surveys and exit tickets on Google Forms and from my observations of students that were captured in my research journal.

Procedures

The research began in September, immediately after my intervention groups had been determined. During the first week, I just got to know my students and then at the beginning of week two, students answered the pre-survey. The pre-survey asked questions to determine students' level of motivation to read as well as their self-perceptions as readers. Observations were recorded in a research journal and were also used to determine motivation and self-perception. At the start of week three, the incentive program was introduced, and implementation began. After weeks four and five, students answered questions specific to the incentive program on an exit ticket at the end of the week. Finally, in week six, the post survey was given to students to examine any changes from the start of the intervention to after the implementation of the incentive program for four weeks.

ClassDojo was used to track points that students earned. Students were awarded points for completing their reading, staying on task, participating in discussions and having a positive attitude. Students were then given rewards each time they earned 20 points. Once 20 points were earned, students chose between several reward coupons that had been predetermined with student input to ensure the rewards were valued. The different coupons allowed students to have lunch with a buddy from another classroom or choose a snack from the basket.

Data Collection

I collected student data through pre and post surveys and exit tickets using Google Forms. I also recorded comments I heard students saying and behaviors I observed in a research journal. Some of the pre/post survey questions asked students if they liked to read at home or at school, if their friends thought they were good readers, and if they thought they were a good reader. Additionally, they were asked how they felt about coming to my group for interventions. After the incentive program was implemented, students responded to an exit ticket at the end of each

week. The questions on the exit ticket asked if they liked the lessons in my class, if they felt they were becoming better readers, and what they liked about my class in order to determine if they were motivated by the incentive.

For the study, 10 students participated in the pre and post surveys, and both the surveys and exit tickets were administered electronically and anonymously. The survey responses had four options, two of which would suggest a positive response to the question while the other two would suggest a more negative response to the question. For example, if students answered “very good reader” or “good reader,” those responses were considered to be positive responses. If students answered “ok reader” or “poor reader,” those responses were considered to be negative responses. Additionally, if students answered “often” or “sometimes,” those responses were considered to be positive responses. If students answered “not very often” or “never,” those responses were considered to be negative responses.

Data Analysis

When analyzing student responses, I used the knowledge I gained from the literature regarding reading motivation and instruction. I coded all qualitative data as a positive or negative response looking for themes that addressed my research question: What impact does an incentive program have on third through fifth grade struggling readers’ motivation to participate in reading interventions and their perceptions of themselves as readers? As I analyzed the data, I sorted the data by positive and negative responses and also if the responses represented students’ perceptions of themselves as readers or if they represented students’ motivation to take part in the interventions.

Findings

After analyzing the data with the research question in mind, the following themes emerged from the data: the role of an incentive program with struggling readers’ motivation and the impact on their perceptions of themselves as readers.

Incentive Program’s Impact on Motivation

The first finding of this study was that the incentive program increased students’ motivation to participate in the reading interventions. Some comments made after the incentive program was implemented were:

“This is awesome, that’s why I love this class.”

“If I finish reading will I get a point?”

“I’m done writing about my reading. Do I get a point for that?”

The comments made by students show that students were excited about the incentive program and were motivated to participate in the intervention. Students reminded me daily to award points and suggested that help in awarding points in ClassDojo on the smart board at the end of each class. In addition, quantitative results from exit tickets showed that 50% of students answered yes when they were asked if the incentive program made them want to read more and 50% of students answered maybe. No students said that the incentive program did not make them want to read more. Prior to the study, students were often off task, arguing with one another or just not participating in the discussions about their reading at all. As part of the study, students earned points for being on task, completing tasks, having a positive attitude, and participation in the group discussions. Students earned an average of two ClassDojo points per day before the start of the incentive and an average of four points per day after the incentive program was introduced, serving as evidence that motivation was improving. Furthermore, students earned an average of one reward every two weeks at the beginning of the of the six-week study and were earning an

average of one reward every week by the end of the six-week study. This data answers part of the research question that an incentive program is a viable method of increasing students' motivation to participate in reading interventions and to read more.

Readers' Self-Perceptions

The second finding showed that the implementation of an incentive program did not show significant improvement in students' self-perception as readers. Although their comments were positive, their ratings on the post survey showed otherwise. When asked how the reward program made them feel, students responded in a positive way. Some of the positive comments from the exit tickets and teacher journal were:

“I feel good because I get prizes.”

“It makes me feel great and makes me want to do good.”

“It makes me feel good because it makes me think I am a good reader.”

However, the quantitative data did not support the positive comments collected through the exit tickets or from the observations recorded in the teacher journal. A possible explanation for this is that the incentive was motivating them in the intervention, but the grade level work in their classes was becoming increasingly difficult causing students to develop more negative perceptions of themselves as readers. Before the incentive program was implemented, 20% of students thought they were very good readers and after implementation this had a slight increase to 22.2%. However, 60% of students thought they were very good or good readers before the incentive program and that percentage dropped to 33.3% after the implementation of the incentive program. The percentage of students that reported that they were ok readers rose from 40% to 66.7% after the implementation of the incentive program.

A third unexpected finding came about as a result of the second finding. Struggling readers' negative attitudes toward participating in a reading intervention was not communicated through students' responses on the pre-survey or were not as negative as initially believed to be by the teacher. Although observations before the incentive program was implemented suggested that students were not motivated in the intervention and had poor self-perceptions of themselves as readers, their responses on the pre-survey did not convey the same results. Some comments recorded in the teacher journal before the incentive program began are:

“Do we have to come every day?”

“When do we get out of this group?”

“How long do we have to come to you?”

Comments like these sparked the concern and initial motivation to implement this teacher research study. Frustration with students' lack of enthusiasm and dislike of certain reading interventions was an obstacle that I had faced for many years. So, it was surprising that 70% of students reported that they were either very good readers or good readers and 30% reported that they were ok readers. No students reported being poor readers despite the fact that they are all performing one to two years below grade level expectations according to several diagnostic measures. One possible explanation for the decrease in students' self-perception could be that students had false confidence before beginning the intervention. Another possible reason is that students were not yet comfortable enough with the teacher to report honestly about how they viewed themselves as readers. After six weeks in the intervention program, it is possible that students' struggles in class became more evident and contributed to their decrease in confidence. In addition, six weeks getting to know the teacher could provide students with the comfort level necessary to honestly report their self-perceptions as readers.

Implications

After conducting this research and analyzing my results, I am reminded again of the importance of early intervention. Students who are reading below grade level by third grade begin to develop poor self-perceptions of themselves as readers, and participation in reading interventions seems to do little to improve those perceptions and in fact made them feel worse. I also found that participating in reading interventions did not help improve students' attitudes toward reading. Many teachers have also reported that although students may show positive responses to interventions, they often do not transfer those skills to their reading in the classroom. Based on my findings, teachers may want to consider allowing students more choice in what they read in their reading interventions whenever possible. Although many of the interventions are highly scripted, allowing for some choice in what students are reading could increase students' participation. Additionally, allowing for partner work and group discussions when time allows may also be a viable method of increasing student motivation to participate in interventions.

Limitations

This study was limited by time constraints and small group sizes for interventions. Only 10 students participated in this study. Small test group size can make it difficult to generalize the data to be representative of all students. Also, due to the time constraints caused by the requirement of a final paper for course work, the time available to investigate the research problem, apply the methodology, and gather and interpret the results was limited.

Future Research

In the future, I would like to study how we can better support our struggling readers so that they transfer what they are learning in interventions into the classroom. I would like to implement a model where I work with students in their own classroom during their reading block rather than the pull-out intervention model that we have implemented for many years. I hope to pilot this model in one or two classrooms in the future to examine its impact on both student achievement in reading as well as their attitudes toward reading.

Conclusions Related to Teacher Research

I have learned the importance of teacher research is that it allows us time to investigate what we do and what students do so that we can create optimal learning experiences for all learners. But, equally as important, is that it also allows us the opportunity to collaborate with like-minded educators with similar goals and a passion to perfect our craft. Working with other teachers and sharing your findings can help increase student achievement and improve school-wide professional development.

Teacher research can also help improve instruction and contribute to improving the respect of the profession. Personally, I have learned that I can contribute to my profession. My knowledge and expertise as an educator are worth sharing. I found that conducting my own research and presenting my results gave me a sense of confidence and a restored feeling of worth in a profession where we are often made to feel worthless. I learned that the process of conducting research can be empowering. The practice of studying my students, my teaching and myself has transformed me. Because I kept a teacher research journal, I really listened to the things that students were saying, especially when they didn't notice that I was listening. Previously, I would have been so focused on completing my lesson in the 30-minute timeframe that I am given, that I would have missed a lot of what my students were saying. This process forced me to be present and reminded me to reflect daily on what went well in a lesson and how I can improve my instruction.

Teaching is a complex job. When I read about other teachers that are confronted with similar obstacles, I feel comforted in the fact that I am not alone. Teacher research gives teachers a voice and a way to share their learning about the profession. It is my hope that these contributions by teachers will increase the respect and value of the profession. I hope to participate in teacher research for many years to come and to continually examine my practice so that I can be the best I can be for all of my students.

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