Testing the Ohio Assess-Teach-Assess Model for Fourth Grade Problem Readers

Amanda J. Solether
solether@sbcglobal.net
Olentangy School District, Delaware, OH

Keywords
fourth grade, reading, assessment, proficiency testing, Qualitative Reading Inventory-3, Developmental Spelling Assessment

Abstract
The purpose of this study was to improve the reading achievement of fourth grade students who were reading at least one year below grade level. A standards-based approach was used for delivering instruction, monitoring progress, and improving the reading ability of all the students who participated in the study. The Qualitative Reading Inventory-3 and Bear’s Developmental Spelling Assessment were used as diagnostic measures. Information obtained from these assessments guided instructional decisions. Bi-weekly informal reading inventories were used as formative assessments to further drive instruction. All four students in the target group made adequate gains, but only three of the four were consistently reading on grade level by the end of the school year. However, all four passed the fourth grade Ohio Proficiency Test.

Table of Contents

Making a Difference for Struggling Readers ................................................................. 2
Students ......................................................................................................................... 2
Establishing a Baseline .................................................................................................. 3
Literacy Practices ........................................................................................................ 4
Findings ......................................................................................................................... 5
Reflections ................................................................................................................... 6
References ................................................................................................................... 6
Making a Difference for Struggling Readers

The 2003-2004 school year marked the beginning of my career in an affluent suburban district. The school population was homogeneous, consisting of predominately Caucasian students. Approximately 30-40% of the total student population had above average achievement test scores (http://www.olentangy.k12.oh.us/). There was a wide range of abilities found in my fourth grade classroom: 40% of my youngsters were reading above grade level, 40% were reading at grade level, and 20% were reading below grade level. Differentiation of instruction was the only way to meet all the needs of the students in my class. My goal was to have all my students reading on grade level by the end of the school year.

Word decoding, word study, comprehension strategies, and repeated reading for improved fluency were components of my instruction. All of these areas are included in the Ohio Literacy Model and are recommended practices from the Report of the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). The Ohio Literacy Model operates in a circular rather than a linear fashion. At the center of the model are Academic Content Standards. Assess-Teach-Assess is the framework for this model (http://ims.ode.state.oh.us/ODE/IMS/Lessons). Teaching explicit strategies is a key part of literacy instruction in the primary grades and for older students struggling with reading.

In October the fourth grade students took the Ohio Proficiency Test (OPT) in reading. This test determined those students who were advanced proficient, proficient, and non-proficient in reading. Four students tested as non-proficient. These four students became the participants in my study.

Students

Brandy was a 10-year-old special needs child with an Individualized Educational Plan. At the beginning of fourth grade, she was reading at a third grade reading level. She lacked basic decoding skills and was unfamiliar with phonics generalizations. Kate was reading one year below grade level. She had just turned 9 years old in November and was much less mature than her classmates. While she read aloud beautifully, she had no comprehension of what she had read. Josh, also a third grade level reader, had struggled with reading for several years. He had attended summer school for reading remediation since first grade. He lacked fluency and expression in his reading. He couldn’t use all the cueing systems when he read. Lastly, Sarah tested at a second grade instructional reading level in October. She had received individualized reading instruction since first grade. She had very weak decoding skills and did not enjoy reading at all. She was the poorest reader in my class.

Sarah] … did not enjoy reading at all. She stated that reading made her feel stupid.
Establishing a Baseline

I gave the Developmental Spelling Assessment ([http://ww.wordstheirway.com/](http://ww.wordstheirway.com/)) to assess each student’s orthographic knowledge and developmental stage (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, and Johnston, 2000). Each was spelling at the “syllables and affixes” stage. However, my observations of their writing indicated to me that they had serious gaps in their ability to correctly use digraphs and vowel patterns in their written expression. It is possible that the students tested at the “syllables and affixes” stage because of their familiarity with the words on the test. These students were already familiar with most single-syllable patterns, but they still needed to learn how these single-syllable patterns apply to polysyllabic words.

After my initial QRI-3 and Developmental Spelling Assessments, I analyzed the results of these assessments and developed an instructional plan. I had anticipated a greater need for direct comprehension instruction rather than focused instruction on decoding skills. My results did not support my hypothesis. I needed to go as far back as onsets and rimes. These students had a difficult time with digraphs and vowel patterns. I needed to instruct them at the “within words” stage of spelling development. Had I not pre-assessed these students, I would have unintentionally been doing a disservice to these children. They needed daily word study instruction, comprehension strategies, and repeated reading of familiar text to become more fluent, independent readers. With the knowledge that there is a reciprocal relationship between curriculum, assessment, and instruction, I implemented a program that fit within the framework of my reading block. Using the framework offered by Charlene Cobb, the diagram below illustrates this reciprocity:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Curriculum</th>
<th>Assessment</th>
<th>Instruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Where am I going?</td>
<td>How will I know that?</td>
<td>How will I get there?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guiding all students to achieve high levels of content standards, local benchmarks, and daily learning.</td>
<td>By providing students with multiple opportunities to demonstrate learning.</td>
<td>Through purposefully planned teaching and learning experiences.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Literacy Practices

Literacy Practices in My Classroom

Guided reading and literature circles are key components of my reading workshop block. I use flexible grouping and I try to meet with all my groups at least three times a week. I made it a priority to meet with my struggling reader group every day for at least 45 minutes at a time. I began using a standards-based instructional format in early December and continued through May. I kept field notes in a journal in order to track progress across the six months of the study.

December. After analyzing the results of the formative assessments, I decided to devote the first fifteen minutes of each meeting to explicit phonics instruction. After fifteen minutes of word study, the students read an excerpt or chapter of a book to work on comprehension strategies for approximately 25 minutes. The last five minutes were dedicated to rereading a familiar text to increase fluency. Bi-weekly Informal Reading Inventories (Miller, 1993) were given to help further guide my instruction for each week.

January. I was frustrated with my students’ lack of progress. The amount of time spent in the word study portion of the reading block grew to meet the demands of the group. The reading material selected gradually became more difficult allowing the students to practice decoding unknown words in actual text. Running records were taken to help me further examine the miscues made by each of the students. Oral reading was improving for all of the students except Sarah. She was still having a difficult time with decoding.

February-March. In preparation for the upcoming Ohio Proficiency Test a small portion of the reading block was dedicated to test-taking strategies. I was pleasantly surprised to see that Josh and Kate were using these strategies regularly. It was important for the students to see the connection between the strategies used in our reading group and those strategies used to take any written assessment. Stress and anxiety were constant battles Sarah needed to overcome. She was just beginning to emerge as a confident reader. She made great gains with the targeted word study lessons and repeated readings. Brandy was beginning to read more fluently. Unprompted she was using multiple strategies to help her comprehend what she was reading.

April-May. These last two months were the turning point for all but one of the students. This cycle of assessment and instruction helped me to hone in on the deficits each student was still facing in his/her reading. Josh, Brandy, and Kate were well on their way to becoming competent fourth grader readers. They were beginning to develop a sense of ownership over their reading. They enjoyed reading aloud, and they continued to develop fluency in their oral reading. Sarah was not making the progress that I had hoped she would. Her instructional focus continued to be on decoding words. She was able to read books below her independent level with ease, and this was helping her see herself as a reader. She required more one-on-one instruction. She was referred for special educational services and was in the process of being tested.
Findings

All four children made noticeable gains across the six months. Below are three graphs that compare pretest-posttest results on the three summative measures (QRI-3, Developmental Spelling Inventory, and OPT);

My initial hypothesis was that all my students would be reading comfortably at grade level by the end of the school year. Unfortunately that did not prove to be the case. Sarah came to me reading two years below grade level. She often selected material that was significantly above her independent reading level. She stated that reading made her feel stupid. Unfortunately she tested at a fourth grade instructional level on the QRI-3. She was now one year behind. Somehow she did manage to pass the reading proficiency test given again in March. Despite my disappointment, I did realize that there were positive consequences from this intense reading instruction. Sarah developed confidence in herself and now enjoys reading.

Early on in the study I could see Josh’s hidden potential. In December, his phonics skills were holding him back in his reading. He read aloud word by word with little expression. This was not the case four months later. He tested out of the group in early April. After giving him the QRI-3 again to test his growth, it was apparent to me that he was reading at grade level. He also passed the proficiency test in reading along with all the other sections of the test.

Kate learned to use strategies to decode unknown words as well as strategies for comprehension. Her oral reading was never a problem. She always used appropriate intonation and expression in her reading. She, too, tested on grade level in May. She passed the reading portion of the proficiency test with ease, improving over 20 points from the fall. Her written expression and oral retellings were still in need of further attention in May. Summer school will help reinforce the strategies taught throughout the school year.

Brandy also tested at a fourth grade reading level at the end of the school year. However, she barely passed the reading proficiency test. She suffered from test anxiety, becoming overwhelmed by task requirements. Brandy will continue to receive additional support because of her Individualized Educational Plan. She still lacks the confidence necessary to be an independent reader. She will be tutored throughout the summer.
Reflections

Through a careful application of the assess-teach-assess model I learned a great deal about quality education and the importance of teacher reflection in the planning process. Students come to us at different stages of skill development. In order to meet the needs of each individual, we first must find out what they already know and where they have “holes” in their knowledge. Differentiation is the only way to meet all of these needs. Assessment is a prerequisite for differentiation. After we find out where students are academically, we can develop a plan for instruction that meets the needs of all the students in our class.

I am still left with unanswered questions. Will the four children sustain the gains made or will they fall behind again in fifth grade? Can students who are more than a year behind make enough growth to be reading on grade level in one year with sufficient remediation? How would the results be different if I had started at the beginning of the year? Should I use this model with an entire class?

I am convinced that a standards-based, assess-teach-assess model makes sense for struggling readers. This approach was not only good for the four children but also good for me professionally. I became a reflective practitioner by learning to observe carefully and to analyze assessment data to inform my practice. I certainly plan to continue to build on skills that I have developed and to do everything I can do to “leave no child behind.”

References


