Teaching Reading to Students with Special Needs: A Case Study of One High Performing High Poverty Urban Elementary School

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Closing the achievement gap is of paramount importance in order to ensure educational equity for all children, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or ability. In the United States, there is a large gap in reading abilities between students identified with exceptionalities and those without such identification (Toldson, 2012). This does not need to be the case.

This case study begins with a literature review identifying issues in teaching reading to students with exceptionalities across the United States. Toldson (2012; Noguera, 2008). Further, there is an achievement gap in the reading abilities when comparing general education scores to those of students with exceptionalities (Toldson, 2012). In Texas, there is a 20 percent gap between general education students and students receiving special education services in passing rates on the State Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) Reading exam (Texas Education Agency, 2013). All public schools are accountable for the number of students receiving special education services and their academic performance (Salend, 2008). While both state and federal laws require individualized education plans for all students with exceptionalities in order to ensure their learning success, achievement results demonstrate that a gap clearly remains (Texas Education Agency, 2013).

The Nation at Risk report argued that American students were poorly educated, making them unable to contend in the global marketplace (A Nation at Risk, 1983). Masumoto and Welty (2009) note that the last 30 years in American education have been defined by, "our nation's collective movement towards school reform, to increase overall achievement of all students while minimizing, and ideally eliminating, achievement gaps between subsets of students" (p. 2). For students with disabilities, this becomes even more critical. Jenkins, Schiller, Blackorby, Thayer, and Tilly (2013) examined positive relationships between using evidence-based practices and individualizing education programs for students in special education and noted a relationship did exist. Cook and Odom (2013) discussed the importance of evidence-based practices that work best when reinforced by a teacher's willingness to implement them with fidelity.

Closing achievement gaps
One useful way to identify evidence-based instructional practices that work in closing achievement gaps is to conduct case study investigations at high performing high poverty campuses. To this end, Reeves (2003) has investigated 90/90/90 schools to shed light on schools having the following characteristics: 90% or more of students are eligible to receive free or reduced lunch, 90% of more of the students are members of ethnic minorities, and 90% or more of the students meet or exceed state or national academic standards in reading or math. Some of the common traits Reeves has found among such campuses include a focus on academic achievement; clear curriculum choices; frequent assessment of student progress with multiple opportunities for improvement; and collaborative scoring of student work (Reeves, 2003).

Similarly, Jensen (2009) provides a set of research-based strategies on how some high poverty schools are able to achieve their success. These include: data analysis, collaboration and cooperation among teachers, parents and adults directly working with the student, prioritizing reading instruction, and having clear and high expectations to achieve (Jensen, 2009). As reported by Lingo, Barton-Arwood, and Jolivette (2011), collaboration between general education teachers and special education teachers is a vital factor in improving students' outcomes.

Students make academic gains when they are provided extra support for their academic skills (Deshler, Hock, Pulvers, & Schumaker, 2001). In order to be effective, high quality and targeted instruction should be more intensive than is available in the general education classroom setting (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009). To make gains in reading, students need a well-
developed, structured reading curriculum that incorporates certain components such as phonics, vocabulary, reading fluency, and phonemic awareness (Odden, 2012). This is just as true for general education students as it is for students receiving special education services. According to Eriks-son-Gustavsson and Samuelsson (2013), “reading and writing ability is supposed to develop and subsequently become a tool for continued life-long learning... developing the skills with which to function in a democratic society” (p. 174). Technology may also be a useful tool in teaching reading to students with special needs as it can provide individualized assignments for each learner (Marston & Deno, 1995). Jensen (2009) recommends a blended approach that incorporates technology support in conjunction with face to face reading instruction to help close achievement gaps.

Methodology

Information on Case Study Campus

The case study presented here is a qualitative investigation of one elementary school that performed above the state required standard in the area of reading for special education populations. Building on Reeves’ (2003) work as its theoretical foundation, this investigation began with the search for an elementary school in the Texas Education Agency’s Accountability Rating System Comparison Group (Texas Education Agency, 2013) in order to find a campus that had greater than 90% of special needs students passing the Reading portion of the STAAR test (which was our criteria for high performance) and at least 90% of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch (high poverty).

We identified one elementary school that met these criteria. In order to put the performance of special education students on this campus into context, it may be useful to compare their reading scores with those of their general education counterparts across the state of Texas. According to the Texas Academic Performance Report, 94% of special needs students on this campus passed the STAAR Reading exam, which not only exceeded the passing rate for all special needs students in the State of Texas (60% passing rate), but also far exceeded the passing rate for all general education students in the State of Texas (Texas Education Agency, 2014). It is important to note that this is not a one-time fluke. In fact, the special education Reading passing rate for this campus exceeded the passing rate for all general education students in the State of Texas in 2013 and once again in 2014. (Texas Education Agency, 2014). It was based on this data that this campus was identified and selected for case study analysis.

Data Collection Procedures

After obtaining Internal Review Board (IRB) approval, the school principal was contacted in order to request interviews with individuals who could speak to this campus’ success in teaching reading to students with exceptionalities. The principal agreed to allow a case study investigation of this campus’ success. In order to conduct a rigorous investigation, four strategies were used: interviews with administrators, interviews with teachers, researcher observations during campus visits, and member checking. Interviews were conducted with six key knowledge holders. These interviewees included a general education teacher, two special education teachers, an instructional reading coach, a vice principal, and the school principal.

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol in which six interview questions were asked of each of the selected participants. Having obtained consent from each participant, all interviews were audio recorded. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes each. At a separate time, a walk through was conducted of the campus, including observations of both general education and special education classrooms. Each research team member took notes which they compared following the interviews and site visit.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis. Teacher and administrator perspectives were compared to allow a higher level of triangulation against which to compare the findings. Member checking was conducted with follow-up visits and phone calls to ensure accuracy of the quotes and corroboration of theories developed by the researchers. Each of the researchers coded the transcripts independently before working together to identify common themes. Three themes emerged endemically from the data: collaborative planning; intensive reading curriculum with individualized interventions; and thoughtful scheduling of intervention and tutoring. The conversation now turns to an examination of each of these three themes.

Findings

Collaborative Planning

Everyone we spoke with on this campus seemed to take ownership of student achievement. Administrators, reading intervention specialists, special education teachers, and general education teachers don’t blame one another for failures. Instead they work together to come up with a plan based on student performance data. As the principal explained,
We plan very closely. The general ed (education) teacher and the special ed (education) teachers plan together. So at grade level meetings, our special ed (education) teachers do come, they are aware, they do know what the standards are. They assist with modifying [the instruction] to make sure that our special ed (education) students get what they need. I lead those meetings. I pretty much have a standing agenda which is always going to be data. [Moreover] lesson plans, that’s one thing they have to always come with, their lesson plans. The teachers come with their lesson plans. That’s always on my agenda... [we also look at] the pacing, where we are at, and then whatever data we may have.

Planning together on a weekly basis is a task in which everyone is involved. The teachers we spoke with agreed that the principal and vice principal on this campus are 100% committed to meeting with all the teachers every Tuesday to plan and analyze data. As the instructional reading coach put it, “[administrators] support them [the teachers] by meeting with them on a regular basis, going over data, providing different lessons, we brainstorm together, collaborate together.”

Intensive Reading Curriculum with Individualized Interventions
This campus has found a unique way to blend computer-based learning with face to face instruction. The campus has purchased two different reading intervention curricula and uses both to help close achievement gaps. Teachers utilize these software applications as tools to help assist in individualizing instruction to the unique needs of each student. They then work with students face to face both individually and in small groups to ensure student understanding. The first software tool which the interviewees spoke about was System 44, which is specifically designed to be utilized in combination with face-to-face instruction (Scholastic Research and Results, 2013). In speaking about this software tool, the special education teacher said, “[it] has been very helpful for a lot of students... in getting them to read... it’s a phonics based program teaching those phonics skills.” The instructional reading coach also talked about the value of having a reading curriculum that individualizes based on the student’s ability level, saying, “There’s a comprehension piece to it, but it’s mainly phonics and decoding at their level. Even though they’re assessed on grade level, this targets them (the students) at their own Lexile level.”

Another program that is used on this campus for the development of reading skills is Istation. As the special education behavior unit teacher stated, “We have a program that we use that’s computer-based called Istation. It gives me [the students’]... Lexile scores, and then it aggregates everything... and they go on it every morning... for 30 minutes.”

The general education teacher emphasized that this software tool, “gives them the specified instruction... at their own pace.” Moreover, the instructional coach accentuated that, “[it] tracks their progress in all areas in reading... and it moves them along. Then [the special education teacher] is able to pull small groups as well, to reteach some of the things that... they didn’t quite grasp.” What appears to be working on this campus is a blended model which utilizes both computer based and face to face instruction.

Thoughtful Scheduling of Intervention and Tutoring
The third major theme that became apparent in this investigation was the scheduling of intervention and tutoring time provided to special education students. According to the vice principal, scheduling the time allotted for interventions in the right way was particularly important to the students’ for their reading level gains. “Scheduling our groups where they can be pulled, so we’re not interfering with any subject areas because our System 44 is an hour a day. It’s five hours a week of intervention... and it’s uninterrupted.”

On this campus everyone seems to help with tutoring. Tutoring was being done by the principal, vice principal, and counselor. As the vice principal noted, “During school, the... principal and... [I] would pull students. The counselor would pull students, so we did a lot of targeted tutoring during school as well as after school. Then our principal would do Saturday school.” The vice principal went on to explain that Saturday tutoring was led by the principal himself. All fifth grade students were invited to attend. During Saturday school, the principal specifically targeted the areas of Reading, Science and Math, as these had been identified as the campus’ greatest area of need.

Reading support is scheduled for students receiving a wide variety of special education services. As the special education teacher indicated, “I have students from the ALE [Alternative Learning Environment], or Life Strides, as well as [students] from the BAC [Behavior Adjustment Center] unit, and [students who are] dyslexic”. It is important to note that with both pull out intervention and
instruction in the general education classroom, students with special needs receive twice the amount of reading instruction as general education students.

Limitations and Next Steps
As with any similar study, there are certain limitations to this particular investigation. First of all, the data accumulated involved the incorporation of one school in particular from the comparison group in the 2014 Accountability Rating System in Texas. This limits the findings because the researchers only have a single source of artifacts from which they obtained their information. Moreover, the particular interview process involved one visit and one set of observations. While we are confident that the data we collected was accurate as a reflection of a single case study, repeated observations on a wider group of similar campuses may yield somewhat different findings. In addition, the data obtained incorporated only feedback from professionals working directly with the students. It did not include the parent and/or student feedback on their success stories. This is important to note due to the fact that students and parents may provide pertinent information on their perceptions of program effectiveness.

In the future, the researchers would like to continue their investigations in how to better provide reading instruction to students with exceptionalities and to extend this to post-secondary readiness. Additionally, we are interested in expanding our research into examinations of practices at other schools with similar student populations in order to compare a wider variety of programs and practices.

Implications and Conclusion
This case study examined one high performing high poverty urban elementary school that has demonstrated success in teaching reading to students with exceptionalities. Three key findings emerged that led to this campus’ success: collaborative planning; intensive reading curriculum with individualized instruction; and thoughtful scheduling of intervention and tutoring. We believe the findings have potential implications for both researchers and practitioners. We believe it is vital that schools find a way to meet the reading needs of students with exceptionalities. Researchers provide a valuable service to the educational community by continuing to conduct case studies in high performing schools across the United States and internationally. Schools that are having difficulties providing successful reading instruction to students with exceptionalities may wish to explore the strategies presented within this case study (and other similar case studies) in order to determine if the findings may be transferrable to their own campus. It is hoped that this research may contribute in some small way to the growing body of literature into how best to provide reading instruction to students with exceptionalities.

References


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