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RESEARCH ARTICLE

IDENTIFYING TEACHERS AND PARENTS PERCEPTION BEHIND LOW COMPREHENSION SKILLS FOR STUDENTS IN THE SECOND GRADE IN THE KSA

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, there has been a plethora of literature centered on low reading comprehension skills among students. As such, it is essential to identify the possible reasons behind this predicament, consequently assess, and determine the most effective and efficient reading methods and strategies to improve reading and comprehension skills for students. Typically, reading is one of the most fundamental process students learn. Traditionally, in primary grades, most students are not exposed to varied genres of texts and textbooks, educational expectations shift in higher education where they are exposed to extensive reading materials that require independent reading. This research highlights the reasons behind low reading and comprehension skills with a focus on second-grade students in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's public schools. Also, this research highlights reading materials, methods, and strategies essential for improving students' reading comprehension skills, thereby enhancing their chances of academic success.

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INTRODUCTION

According to the Ministry of Education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (2018), about 25% of public schools in 2017 administered an end of course exam called "Hassan." This exam measures students' comprehension capabilities in all areas of the second-grade curriculum, including reading comprehension. The results of the exam indicated that of the 63,114 students who took the exam in 2017, 55% of the students scored below the expected average, and 14% of those students received the lowest average scores. Students were assessed on required skills, such as making simple conclusions, identifying the meaning of synonyms, contradictions, and word meanings. According to Snyder and Golightly (2017), reading development throughout a student's academic life is undergirded by early childhood practices. Therefore, it is imperative that students are properly taught and equipped with the skills during early childhood to avoid difficulties in subsequent years. The basic early academic years of kindergarten through third grade are fundamental in shaping students reading development. This is where foundational skills of phonemes, auditory discrimination, letter recognition, and letter-sound relationships are learned. Several studies show common trends where students who are at risk of reading difficulties would have improved if there were varied levels of reading interventions (Snyder & Golightly, 2017).

The National Reading Panel (2000) described the five key components of reading including phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, word recognition and text recognition, which are integral components of reading that can improve students' reading comprehension. It is critical to identify and intervene for students with deficits in reading in the early stages of learning, as this impairment will negatively influence the rest of their academic careers (Snyder & Golightly, 2017). There is an assumption that implementing interventions, such as using a variety of reading materials and methodology with emerging readers will serve as foundational skills in reading improvement throughout their academic careers. Farrall (2012) conducted a study in England, the United States, and Australia to evaluate the different types of interventions used for kindergarten to fifth-grade students who struggle with reading. They found that one-on-one reading interventions with an emphasis on phonics greatly improved reading skills. The purpose of this study is to identify the teachers and parents perception behind low comprehension skills for students in the second grade in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia's public schools. It is important to recognize the reading materials that support students' mastery of reading comprehension strategies, the methods and strategies that teachers and parents feel are essential for reading comprehension.

Literature Review

Reading is a fundamental in the lives of human beings. Reading and understanding are skills typically taught during

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childhood. If students are not taught to read for understanding during the early stages of life, they risk a life of struggle (Snyder & Golightly, 2017). Abbott *et al.* (2012) have observed that of the ten to fifteen percent of students who have serious reading problems, only two percent will make it to a college level education. Their study shows the relationship between reading and comprehension failure in early stages with future consequences. Knowing the importance of early reading and comprehension success, researchers investigated the importance of reading with speed and determination to try and solve the mystery of learning in first, second, and third-grade students (Gersten *et al.*, 2017). Maloch and Horse (2013) indicated that studies undertaken have helped to develop different approaches for second-grade students' reading and comprehension problems such as using informational texts as resources in purposeful ways. Numerous studies explained similar reading and comprehension interventions and methods to solve elementary students' challenges with reading (Gersten *et al.*, 2017). Similarly, Wilson *et al.* (2008) tested and noted that with different methodologies, educators can achieve success in teaching students to read and understand, provided all methods are used to complement one another.

Good Reading Skills

Comprehension and fluency are the bases for adequate reading skills instruction (WalpoleMcKenna, 2014). Reading comprehension is an individual's ability to understand what a text means. This understanding varies from knowledge-level skills like retelling a story to advanced-level metacognition strategies such as questioning and synthesizing text. According to Byrd (2015), reading skills utilized by someone may be influenced by specific reading behaviors and habits. Reading habits include how often a student reads, their preferred genre of books, and whether he or she reads one book at a time, or skims through several of them. A student's level of concentration while reading can also affect his or her comprehension and fluency (Cotter, 2012). On the other hand, fluency includes a student's ability to decode words accurately and with the right expression and pacing. Such skills impact each other, as the ability of a student to decode words will be influenced directly by their familiarity with letter sounds. There are several decoding skills such as reading by analogy, phonetic, morphemic, and syllabic analysis that a good reader employs when decoding text. One aspect of fluency that also aids comprehension is reading with ideal expression since the reader shows an understanding of tension or dialogue in a text (Byrd, 2015).

Reading Materials

As second-grade students grow and their reading goals change, various kinds of reading materials can serve them, such as children's storybooks, workbooks, basal readers, trade books, familiar fiction, and nonfiction books to achieve the required goals. By late first grade, most students will have mastered important concepts about one-to-one matching, print, and other evolving literacy skills easily taught with extended text (Dougherty, 2012). To develop automatic and fluent reading skills, students should be exposed to a wide range of texts and large numbers of words within meaningful contexts. For students in late first grade through early third grade, picture books with large numbers of words, conceptual density, and a rich vocabulary are recommended shared reading materials (Dougherty, 2012).

Beginning readers with limited decoding abilities can move to texts with more words and complex themes as well as richer vocabulary during readings. In reading, however, all students have their eyes on the text and should be responsible for taking part in reading and activities at any stage of the process (Dougherty, 2012). Byrd (2015) adopted a reading workshop approach for students aged three to twelve years old in Metropolitan Montessori School in Manhattan's Upper West Side. There were two factors for this decision. The first was to provide teachers with a literacy framework with clear instructions, especially with regards to reading levels. Another factor was to support students to gain significant reading skills, specifically decoding, phonics, reading development, and comprehension. This type of reading workshop benefitted students' reading skills when it came to tasks such as making choices about their work, building independence, and monitoring their own progress. Furthermore, Cockerille (2014) demonstrated that the focus of creating a reading workshop is to teach students higher-order comprehension skills such as inference, interpretation, and critical thinking. Additionally, Maloch& Horsey (2013) observed that inquiry-focused classrooms are the most productive when it comes to reading informational texts. They show the importance of finding ways to create authentic reading experiences by requiring students to read informational texts. This was done through reading and acting out plays and fictional stories based on interesting characters famous for academic inventions, such Alexander Graham Bell. If a teacher introduces a dull topic of who invented the telephone, for example, students might be uninterested, but once the teacher gets their attention with a story about a man and the telephone, the students will pay more attention. In this case, using such a story helped the teacher to break down the lesson through this engaging story. Through questions and answers posed during the session, students begin reading together as a classroom activity. By reading together, students who might not have understood and shied away from asking questions are encouraged to participate and learn through observation and listening. Children's curious nature draws them closer to informational texts. Through examining the texts around us, children are motivated to read any information they come across regardless of whether it is relevant or irrelevant to them. For instance, children can read restaurant menus without any intention to order food.

Teaching Methods and Strategies

Planning and instructing. Planning and instructing are basic tools for teaching. Instruction should be designed by a group of teachers to address strategies that could help students succeed in certain skills. Likewise, instruction planning should focus on how effective methods can be used to motivate students to achieve the learning targets. Some researchers have suggested reading instruction should be created through three tiers of instruction (Walpole & McKenna, 2014). The first tier is high-quality whole-group instruction, and in this tier all students participate in reading activities simultaneously. The teacher should employ direct instruction; students can participate individually or in a group. The second tier is differentiated small-group instruction. With this level, students work in small groups structured by the teacher. One group works directly with the teacher, while the other groups work on other reading activities. The third tier is called intensive instruction, and it is designed for students who did not do well in tiers one or two (Walpole & McKenna, 2014).

Fluency-Oriented Reading Instruction (FORI): Two widely used reading meant to increase second-grade students' reading fluency are Fluency-Oriented Reading Instruction (FORI) and a wide reading approach (Schwanenflugel *et al.*, 2009). FORI is a shared reading protocol that is mainly used in second-grade classroom settings. However, it can also be effectively used for late first-grade up to early third-grade. It was set up after a district mandate specified that all students should read grade-level reading materials irrespective of their individual reading levels. Both FORI and the wide reading approach can be used to scaffold students' reading skills as they engage with various reading materials. Supported reading of several texts or repeated reading of a single material can be used to support gains in comprehension and fluency (Schwanenflugel *et al.*, 2009). Partner, echo, and choral readings are excellent ways of supporting students' readings of difficult texts; these strategies require about half an hour of reading per day. However, none of them should replace independent reading or small instructional-level groups (Schwanenflugel *et al.*, 2009).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A survey was used to collect the views of second grade teachers and parents on low comprehension skills for students in the second grade. Second-grade teachers who taught in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and parents who had a second-grade child in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's public schools were eligible for this study. The inclusion criteria for teachers included accessibility via email, the use of the reading and writing curriculum and a textbook called, *My Language*. Teachers consisting of both genders that met all the inclusion criteria and were surveyed were about 146. Parents of both genders who were selected and completed the questionnaire were 266. The semi-structured online survey questionnaires for teachers were developed with open ended-questions asking the respondents to identify reading comprehension skills and the reading strategies they depend on while teaching. Teachers were also asked several basic questions intended to measure their understanding of how to use a variety of teaching methods, instruction, and reading materials, and their methods of involving students' parents in the learning process. The parents' questionnaire consisted of multiple-choice and open-ended questions aimed to measure the students' capabilities and their habits of acquiring foundational reading and comprehension skills, children's affinity for reading at home, students' motivation and self-awareness of the importance of reading. The surveys were sent via Saudi teachers' associations in different regions; northern region, southern region, eastern region, western region, and middle region in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

RESULTS

The results of both surveys show how participants are well conversant with the importance of gaining reading comprehension skills in the early ages. The respondents show their care and desire to change the learning style whether at home or in schools. Besides, the respondents indicated the need for the students to explore a wide range of reading genres to help them improve reading comprehension skills. Furthermore, both the teachers and parents respondents indicated the desire for the use effective tools to meet their children's needs. Therefore, the researcher recorded some important points about the teachers and parents' surveys. In the

teachers' survey, most of the participants preferred using effective methods and strategies to impart reading skills such as applying small groups or integrating different types of reading materials as well as using the required text books. Besides, the data shows that teachers have acceptable knowledge in teaching students reading comprehension skills. One of the teaching skills includes the ability to understand students' level of reading proficiency as well as difficulties they face while reading. The level of students' ability informs the instructional method that would meet the individual student needs. However, according to the data, teachers face diverse barriers preventing them attaining the goals of teaching reading comprehension skills. The observed in the survey include significantly high number of students in one class usually over 30 students, which make it difficult to pay attention to the needs of every student. The high number of students also makes it difficult to grab full attention and reactions of every student. In addition, some of the students did not have full preparation on reading and writing skills during their first grades. Further, teachers also cited lack of time to practice individually with each student. Some students have difficulties in reading, writing or even decoding the words while others have attention deficit particularly on standard issues between themselves. Moreover, a lot of students do not have self-motivation to learn or have one or more learning disabilities are the common problem that faces teachers in teaching second-grade reading comprehension skills.

On the part of the parents' survey, the respondents indicated increased awareness about their children's reading abilities. The parents also indicated increased knowledge on why their children like reading or not and the reason their children did not prefer reading. Besides, the parents know the problems facing their children while reading. Some of the obstacles identified by the parents include children preferring spending a lot of time on other activities at home besides reading. Moreover, the parents show their concern about their children's self-motivation in reading. Most of the participants indicated that their children do not prefer reading books or stories due to the lack of motivation or having learning disabilities. Furthermore, some of children prefer to spend time on other activities such as playing online games or watching T.V than read books. Another problem is some children did not prepare very well in the first grade, so they still have difficulty to identify the alphabet or decoding words correctly. The parents also indicated the desire to help their children pass these obstacles. Another point that was clearly indicated in the survey is that the majority of parents want to change the learning style in reading classes. Parents want teachers to use diverse books and not rely completely on the textbook while teaching reading skills. In addition, parents recommended the need for teachers to give the children more time to choose their favorite books or stories to improve their reading comprehension skills. Parents also want teachers to focus solely on reading skills. According to the participants' responses, parents preferred teachers to apply innovative approaches such as using online applications such as websites to attract students to learn and comprehend more on their reading skills.

DISCUSSION

According to Chall (1983), there is a continual transition of reading and comprehension goals among second-grade students as they grow. As such, various kinds of reading

materials such as children's storybooks, workbooks, basal readers, fiction, and nonfiction books can play a vital role in helping second-grade students achieve required goals. Teachers are expected to facilitate reading skills among students through the integration of extra-curricular programs. Through these programs, teachers should be able to teach reading and comprehension skills effectively. However, reading instruction should be differentiated based on the abilities of each student. That notwithstanding, most students particularly those in the late first grade will have learned vital concepts about one-to-one matching, print, and other evolving literacy skills easily taught with extended text. To enhance automatic and fluent reading skills, students need to be exposed to a wide range of books and large numbers of words within meaningful contexts.

In addition, there is need to establish solid teacher-student relationships to help increase motivation among students. Consequently, self-learning and motivation among individual students will also improve (Dougherty, 2012). Additionally, reading curriculum is directly related to required reading skills. According to Cockerille (2014), the reading curriculum provides a clear literacy framework and clear instructions for teachers, especially in increasing reading skills. Therefore, teachers should emphasize the reading curriculum to equip students with significant skills in decoding, phonics, reading development, and comprehension. Moreover, the reading curriculum helps students make better choices about their works, builds independence, and monitors their progress (Abbott, *et al*, 2012). To implement an effective reading curriculum, it is vital to make classrooms the most potent tools particularly when it comes to reading informational texts. One-way teachers can do this is to find ways of making the class active and lively through plays and fictional stories that have interesting characters (Maloch& Horsey 2013). Consequently, there is the need to adopt proven procedures, policies, and principles of teaching reading and comprehension skills to second-grade students, especially in the content areas.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to identify what teachers and parents perception behind low comprehension skills for students in the second grade in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia's public-schools. The study was guided by questions on the type of reading materials that support students' mastery of reading comprehension strategies in Saudi Arabia's public schools and the methods and strategies do teachers and parents feel are essential for reading comprehension. On the type of reading materials, various kinds of reading materials such as children's storybooks, workbooks, basal readers, fiction, and nonfiction books were found to play a vital role in helping second-grade students achieve required goals. There is a need for teachers to facilitate reading skills among students through the integration of extra-curricular programs. Through these programs, teachers will be able to teach reading and comprehension skills effectively. However, reading instruction should be differentiated based on the abilities of each student. In terms of method, it was found that teaching reading in small groups was compelling and it took just a few minutes for each session. The other method that was found to be compelling and can be employed during small-group instruction is response to intervention. The response to intervention is an integral strategy concerning improving second-grade students' reading and comprehension skills.

This is because response to intervention helps to detect and provide help, especially to those students struggling and lagging behind in class. This model has three critical elements, which include general definition, typical prevention, and advanced intervention. The aspect of general definition is a standard prevention measure to help those students struggling in class. Conversely, advanced intervention is sufficient to those who fail the intervention prescribed in the first and second interventions.

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