

**Research Article**

Using Reader's Theatre to Improve Reading Fluency in African-American Male Students with Learning and Behavioral Challenges

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Abstract

This quantitative study documents the impact that using Reader's Theatre had on developing the reading fluency of 12 participants with learning and behavioral challenges. The study employed one group pre-test post-test design. Using a frequency count to collect pre and post-intervention data, researchers used Reader's Theatre scripts to determine if they would be useful in increasing reading fluency of students who struggled with reading and possessed learning and behavioral challenges. Results indicated that after three months of instruction that employed Reader's Theatre scripts as a pre-reading activity, students' rates of reading fluency and other classroom dynamics significantly improved. A paired-samples t-test indicated that there was a statistically significant decrease in the mean reading fluency errors from pre-intervention to post-intervention. Discussion of results and implications for the use of Reader's Theatre concludes the report.

Keywords: Learning and behavioral challenges; Reading fluency; Reader's theatre

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Introduction

Reading fluency has been defined as the ability to read orally in a smooth and effortless manner [1]. It is a critical component to the development of good reading skills. However, it is often a neglected component in reading instruction especially for African-American males who possess learning and behavioral challenges [2]. Benner [3] has suggested that students with challenging behaviors have made little progress in reading and reports that prevalence or reading difficulty in this population, range from thirty-one to eighty-one percent. Moreover, Hallahan and Kauffman [4] have reported that students with learning disabilities are likely to experience reading problems in the areas of decoding, fluency, and comprehension. Furthermore, Drummond [5] has suggested that eighty percent of students with learning disabilities have problems with reading; while the National Center for Learning Disabilities [6] have noted that sixty-nine percent and sixty percent students with learning disabilities, in grades 4 and 8 respectively, scored below the basic level on reading assessments. These statistics support the idea that most students with learning and behavioral challenges have what Benner [3] classifies as moderate to severe reading difficulties. Much of this difficulty may be related to problems with fluency in reading and the inability for students to comprehend what is read.

Wehby, Lunsford, and Phy in their examination of students with learning and behavioral challenges and reading skills, found that reading fluency and accuracy, word attack skills, and overall reading rate were significantly lower for this category of students than their peers without this designation. Additionally, researchers who have examined the phenomenon of reading in students with learning and behavioral challenges have all concluded that this population is less likely to make significant gains in this area. Furthermore, because of the range of difficult behaviors manifested by students with behavioral challenges, their overall academic performance tends to be more than one or more years behind peers without this classification [7]. These revelations are particularly interesting as it relates to African American male students. For example, the National Education Association (NEA) in its 2011 brief, *Race against Time: Educating Black Boys*, reported that in one high performing school district, located in the northeastern United States, Black and Hispanic males made up eighty percent of students in special education [8]. The brief also suggested that while Black males constituted only nineteen percent of the student population in 2005, they comprised sixty-seven percent of all males identified as mentally retarded, fifty-seven percent of those with emotional and behavior disorders, and forty-four percent of students with developmental delays. Furthermore, the report suggested that Black males were three times more likely to be suspended or expelled from school.

While many school districts across the United States have implemented strategies to offset these statistics, there remains a disproportionate representation of African American male students in special education and programs that serve students with intellectual disabilities and behavioral challenges. To address both the academic deficiency that is often associated with students, who possess learning

and behavioral challenges, and perhaps encourage African-American school-aged males to enhance their fluency in reading, alternate approaches are necessary. Such an approach could be seen in the use of Reader's Theatre.

Theoretical Context

The practice of reading fluency has been hypothesized to be the result of automaticity in the decoding of words that involves the accuracy of word recognition and prosody. Moreover, automaticity, the ability of proficient readers to read words in a text correctly and effortlessly, allows the reader to use finite cognitive structures to attend to meaning while reading. In fluent reading, automaticity connects with prosody to encourage the reader to read with appropriate expression and phrasing to reflect the semantic and syntactic content of a reading passage, which then leads to good reading comprehension [9].

Building automaticity with reading tasks not only improves overall academic functioning, but also increases neurological activity in the brain that deals with automatic retrieval of information [3]. However, students with learning and behavior challenges are unlikely to possess an adequate grasp of the automaticity and prosody in the production of fluent reading. Rather, like many struggling readers, they will progress at a slower rate [10]. They are more likely to engage in such behaviors as reading without a purpose, failing to preview the text by activating prior knowledge, lacking motivation and interest to begin reading, not comprehending what is read, reading slowly and overlooking punctuation, reading quickly or skips, and substituting words. Furthermore, because many students with learning and behavioral challenges may have a co-diagnosis of learning disabilities, there may be a dysfunction in the basic psychological processes necessary for reading.

The disparity in reading related tasks, to include fluency, among students with learning and behavioral challenges and their peers without this designation may be a function of instructional practices and the display of negative behaviors that impact academic success. According to Gibb and Wilder [11], there is little agreement among professionals about how best to teach reading related tasks. Moreover, they suggest that many students with learning and behavioral challenges fail to read because of ineffective instruction.

Fluent reading for students with learning and behavioral challenges is further complicated by inappropriate and unproductive behaviors within the learning environment. These students are more likely to operate from one of two dimensions when confronted with learning activities. First, they may display behaviors that characterize external dimension of behaviors. Such behaviors may involve fighting, arguing, using profanity and others who generally fall within the realm of conduct disorders. Secondly, these students may appear withdrawn, depressed, exhibit fears and phobias, and other actions that embody the internalize dimension of behaviors [12]. Additionally, they may respond to the learning environment by presenting deficits in oral expression, auditory processing, written expression, reading problems, math calculations, sustained attention, time management, social interactions, and executive functioning. These deficits make it difficult for them to properly engage in more acceptable behaviors and create difficulty in learning academic tasks [3,13]. Research has shown that reading difficulties are linked to conduct disorders and delinquent behavior in older students with behavioral challenges; likewise, students

with behavioral challenges have a history of underachievement in reading fluency, which affects their ability to engage in fluent reading automatically [14,15]. Therefore, additional strategies and supports are needed.

A variety of strategies and procedures to increase fluency have been explored. Benner [3] has suggested that educators and researchers have identified four best practices for improving reading fluency in students with learning and behavioral challenges. These practices include explicit instruction and instructional design principles; the application of positive behavioral supports; use of instructional strategies to improve automaticity in phonemic awareness, phonics, and reading fluency; and using curriculum-based measurements to monitor automaticity.

Other strategies to improve fluency in reading for students with learning and behavioral challenges were also investigated. Using a group of second graders to test the effects of teacher modeling, choral reading, and paired reading, it was found that participants who experienced these strategies demonstrated higher rates of oral reading than peers who were not exposed to the strategies [9]. Moreover, Bray et al., [16] examined the effects of self-modeling on students' reading fluency. In this investigation students viewed videotapes of themselves, which had been edited to show them reading fluently? Results indicated that the procedure of having students watch videotapes of themselves reading fluently produced gains in oral reading.

A commonly recommended strategy to improve reading fluency is repeated readings. Previous research has shown this strategy to be effective in helping students with learning disabilities and those with reading difficulties to increase fluency [17-23]. The strategy involves allowing students to read and reread selected short passages until they reach a level of satisfactory in fluency [24]. In many ways it correlates with the concept of Reader's Theatre, an approach that has been defined by Wilcutt [25], as a style of theatre in which the actors do not learn lines but uses narrative scripts and vocal expression to tell and understand a story. Like repeated reading, Reader's Theatre affords participants an opportunity to reread scripts until they develop fluency with words. It allows them to gain confidence in self-expression and develop a willingness to try, which provides a measure of success. Because reading is a complex cognitive process that involve making meaning while decoding, reading with accuracy and prosody, and developing a knowledge of the pronunciation and meaning of words, many students with learning and behavioral challenges often lack these critical skills necessary for the rich engagement and understanding of texts that is needed for the development of higher-level comprehension. Lack of motivation and decreased or no connectivity with a wide range of texts and printed material, that is presented in an array of multimedia sources, are extended issues struggling readers face when engaging with reading resources.

Research supports the use of Reader's Theater as a multi-dimensional instructional practice that has been successful in promoting all aspects of reading [9,26,27]. Used as a reading strategy, Reader's Theater allows for repeated oral readings and multiple opportunities for students to practice retelling, expressiveness, and reading rate. Reading instruction that includes Reader's Theater as a critical component in the classroom contributes to oral fluency growth and increased comprehension [25,26,28].

Though the reciprocal relationship between fluency and comprehension has been well established in research, some argue that fluency and comprehension do not always develop in the same manner [29]. Students who have developed strong decoding skills and excel in oral reading can have deficits in comprehension. However, studies have shown that Reader's Theater provides students with opportunities to interact with texts and self-monitor their reading when they are engaged in repeated practice. As a result, students are improving their reading fluency and comprehension by developing an understanding of story elements and context while implementing self-monitoring strategies [30]. In addition, Reader's Theater allows for students to improve their making meaning while decoding abilities, which also enhances fluency and comprehension growth.

Another factor pertinent to fluency and comprehension growth is student motivation and self-efficacy. How students view themselves as readers and their ability in reading deeply impacts reading ability, as well as their motivation to read. Using Reader's Theater addresses students reading difficulties and contributes to struggling readers' motivation. While Reader's Theater increases fluency and comprehension, it is an instructional practice that can also increase self-confidence in struggling readers [9,31]. Through consistent exposure to the practice of reading and rereading, students are encouraged and exposed to multiple opportunities to decode multisyllabic words, learn vocabulary, and connect their lives and experiences to characters within texts [32]. In addition, Reader's Theater promotes a classroom culture that encourages social interactions with peers and the inclusion of students' background knowledge and experiences. Thus, Reader's Theater allows students to become interested in what they read and to actively participate in improving their reading and the overall learning process.

As research has supported, Reader's Theater is an effective instructional method to support struggling readers. It spans the critical components of developmental reading that provides targeted support and meaningful connections that will lead to lifelong readers for all students. Therefore, the purpose of this investigation was to ascertain whether African American male students with learning and behavioral challenges, who were exposed to Reader's Theatre, would increase their reading fluency.

Method

Design

The design of this study was one group pre-test/post-test design. The researchers measured reading fluency of 12 participants with learning and behavioral challenges, and then introduced three months of instruction that employed Reader's Theatre scripts to increase reading fluency. Following the three months of instruction, researchers again measured these participants' rates of reading fluency and proceeded to account for differences between pre- and post-test scores to determine if any significant outcomes occurred.

Study participants and setting

This study involved 12 African American male students who had a primary diagnosis of emotional and behavioral disorders and a secondary diagnosis of learning disability, as defined by the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (2004). They received their education in a self-contained classroom that consisted of grades 4-6. Their ages ranged between 9 and 11 years of age. The mean age for the group

was 10.08 years. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the demographic information related to age and grade level.

Participant Number	Grade Level	Age
S1	4 th	9
S2	4 th	9
S3	5 th	10
S4	5 th	10
S5	5 th	10
S6	5 th	10
S7	5 th	10
S8	5 th	10
S9	5 th	10
S10	6 th	11
S11	6 th	11
S12	6 th	11
N=12		X= 10.08

Table 1: Study Participants demographic information (n=12).

The study was conducted in an elementary school located in the northeastern section of the United States. Four hundred and forty-eight students were enrolled. Eighty-one students received special education services, representing 18.1 percent of the student body. The building served students in grades pre-K through 6 grades. Two hundred and thirty-nine students of the four hundred and forty-eight received free and reduced meals.

Participants in this investigation exhibited many behaviors that made it difficult for less fluent readers to engage in oral reading activities. For example, students were less likely to volunteer to read orally, students who were less fluent often had more fluent readers make negative comments about their reading, comprehension of reading material was less pronounced in all but 2 of the subjects, and because of the negative comments from more fluent readers, social relationships among the students were non-productive and disruptive to the classroom environment.

Measures

The measures used to collect data were sixty teacher-made adaptations of stories formatted to reflect Reader's Theatre scripts (See Appendix A for a sample of the scripts). These scripts were two pages in length, had 567 words, 3,091 characters with spaces, and 50 lines. The scripts also had multiple characters to allow for all participants a chance to read individually. All scripts had a narrator to provide a context for dialogue. The scripts were intentionally designed to be short to accommodate the complexity of academic and behavioral issues experienced by study participants. The themes and topics of the scripts were varied to allow study participants to be able to access many different genres of literature.

Research Procedures

Pre-intervention

At the pre-intervention phase, to assess participant's problems with fluency with reading tasks, two female classroom assistants served as recorders and collected data using a simple frequency count during a 90-minute reading block for a total of 5 days. The data collected served to establish a baseline of fluency productivity before the intervention was applied. Each recorder was given sample copies of pre-intervention reading material that was used to gain baseline data and taught how to conduct frequency counting to document

fluency errors among the participants. They were instructed to listen to subjects reading and record the number of fluency errors of each by placing a check mark by each participant's name. Recorders were further asked to tally the number of fluency errors (i.e., mispronunciations, omissions, substitutions, word attack, etc.,) made by each of the subjects during the 5-day baseline period. A tape recorder was used to record subjects reading fluency performance before and after the intervention to help confirm reliability. At the end of each day of baseline data collection, recorders met with the research staff to review their frequency counting results and compare them with those from the tape recorder. Using this method produce 100 percent agreement in what the human recorders heard and what was garnered from tape recorder. Table 2 provides baseline performance for each participant.

Subject Number	Number of Errors
S1	29
S2	32
S3	20
S4	15
S5	19
S6	23
S7	20
S8	10
S9	27
S10	18
S11	15
S12	9
N=12	X=19.75

Table 2: Pre-Intervention fluency errors.

Intervention/Treatment

Prior to the introduction of Reader's Theatre scripts, as the intervention to improve reading fluency for study participants, regular reading material was reformatted by the teacher to reflect Reader's Theatre scripts that were structured to include narrators, characters, dialogue, and group reads. Figure 1 (Appendix A) provides a sample of how these scripts appeared for the students.

When the scripts were completed, the classroom teacher, who was an African American male, with training in both theatre techniques and special education, met with the subjects to tell them that the format for their reading block would change. Instead of spending the entire 90-minute block of doing traditional reading activities, the block would consist of doing pre-readings utilizing reader's theatre scripts for the first 30 minutes. An explanation of what Reader's Theatre was and how it was executed was given. Following this discussion, the classroom teacher and two classroom assistants modeled the concepts of reading and the execution of Reader's Theatre. After modeling, study participants were challenged to demonstrate their understanding of how to execute the Reader's Theatre process. Two readings were done to confirm the study participants understanding and execution of reader's theatre. Receiving confirmation that participants understood the Reader's Theatre process, study participants were exposed to scripts five days a week for twelve weeks.

Results

Post-intervention

After three months of reading scripts, formatted to reflect the Reader's Theatre approach, classroom assistants again executed another frequency count to determine if the rate of oral fluency had

improved for study participants. Using the same format to collect pre-intervention data as used to collect post-intervention data, the frequency count produced a drastic decrease in fluency errors. Where subjects had a mean of 19.5 errors prior to the introduction of Reader's Theatre, post-intervention calculations of their performance revealed that subjects had a mean of 9.4 errors. Table 3 provides individual performances of subjects after the introduction of Reader's Theatre.

Moreover, the exposure to Reader's Theatre seemed to have encouraged participants to become more active in the reading process. Those participants who were initially reluctant to attempt reading tasks appeared less reluctant as they would often volunteer to read dialogue of characters found in the scripts.

Participant	Fluency errors before intervention	Fluency errors after intervention	Fluency errors difference
S1	29	15	14
S2	32	20	12
S3	20	10	10
S4	15	7	8
S5	19	8	11
S6	23	15	8
S7	20	8	12
S8	10	3	7
S9	27	15	12
S10	18	7	11
S11	15	5	10
S12	9	0	9
N=12	X=19.75	X=9.41	X=10.33

Table 3: Post-Intervention fluency errors compared with pre-intervention.

Fluency errors

Participants were also less likely to comment negatively about a struggling reader's attempt at reading. Rather, subjects were observed assisting less fluent readers with pronunciation of words, the use of vocal expression, voice projections, and other activities that promoted a sense of confidence for less fluent readers.

Another benefit that resulted because of the exposure to Reader's Theatre was improved comprehension of story content and sequence of events. Using closed questioning (the kind of questions that require short responses that can be found in the text) and open questioning (require more in-depth answers) techniques, students were asked questions like, "What happened first in the story?" or "How would you describe the setting of the story?" Observations from classroom assistants and the classroom teacher revealed that subjects had become much more fluent in their ability to comprehend information and provide detailed accounts of the sequence of actions.

Finally, because difficult social relationships are a hallmark of the lives of students with learning and behavior challenges, it appears that participation in Reader's Theatre was able to enhance relationships among subjects. Before the introduction of Reader's Theatre, subjects often exhibited verbal outburst toward classmates, expressed frustration, argued, and sometime fought. However, as a sense of community was gradually built via the ensemble nature of Reader's Theatre, subjects became less combative and more cooperative, which created a classroom dynamic, that allowed for a more productive environment.

Mr. Taylor and His Students Earn Money for the Class Trip

Characters: Narrator Mr. Taylor, Joshua, Alvin, Michael, Edward, De'Lon, Jeremiah, Chris, Issaac, Miller, Jonathan
Setting: A small community about twenty miles from Washington, DC
Narrator: Mr. Taylor and his sixth-grade students have just been told that funds for their annual class trip are not available.
Joshua: That's not fair. Mr. White's class got to take its trip. Why can't we take ours?
Mr. Taylor: Mr. White's students sold candy to earn the money for their trip.
Michael: It's too bad we didn't find out sooner. We could have sold stuff too.
Alvin: Well, this suck! Our trip is supposed to be in two weeks. What are we going to do?
Narrator: All the students look at each other with expressions of dismay. Edward then speaks.
Edward: We could always pay for it with our own money.
Jeremiah: I don't have that kind of money and I am not going to ask my mother. She will only take it outta the grocery money and we won't get good stuff to eat.
Miller: How much money do we need, Mr. Taylor?
Mr. Taylor: Well, we need money to pay for our bus ride, money for our admission to the Spy Museum, tickets for the movie, and money for our lunch. Let's see, that adds up to about \$35.00 per student.
Isaac: There is no way I could come up with that much money, unless my mother won the lottery.
Jonathan: I heard Mr. Johnson tell Mr. Scott that the Student Council couldn't run the hot dog stand Friday at the football game.
Narrator: Chris looks at Joshua before speaking.
Chris: Are you thinking what I am thinking?
Joshua: Mr. Taylor, could you ask Mr. Johnson if our class could run the hot dog stand on Friday night?
Mr. Taylor: I could, but I think another student organization may have already been scheduled to do it. Let me make a call to him to see if that is true.
Narrator: Mr. Taylor goes to the phone and dial Mr. Johnson's extension while students discuss the problem among themselves.
De'Lon: (In a low voice). Hey guys, what if another student organization is scheduled to run the hot dog stand? I think we should come up with some other ideas.
Narrator: Students began to contemplate other ideas and discuss their merits while Mr. Taylor continues to talk with Mr. Johnson.
Mr. Taylor: Guys, it was tough trying to get Mr. Johnson to agree to let our class run the hotdog stand on Friday. He indicated that it is a big responsibility and he is aware of some of your behaviors. Are you all willing to work together to make it work? Mr. Johnson is concerned that you all may not be responsible.
Everyone: (Looking at Mr. Taylor). Please! Mr. Taylor, we can do it and we can be responsible.
Mr. Taylor: Well, since you said please and you have said that you will be responsible, I will call him back and tell him that I think you can do it.
Narrator: Mr. Taylor returns to the phone and calls Mr. Johnson again.
Everyone: It looks like we are going to DC.
Narrator: Mr. Taylor received permission from Mr. Johnson for the students to run the hot dog stand at the football game. They earned enough money to pay for their class trip.

Figure 1: Sample reader's theatre script.

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to evaluate the impact of Reader's Theatre scripts as an intervention to improve students' reading fluency. There was a statistically significant decrease in the mean reading fluency errors from pre- intervention (M = 19.75, SD = 7.12) to post-intervention 2 (M = 9.42, SD = 5.81), $t(11) = 17.38$, $P < 0.001$ (two-tailed). The mean decrease in the reading fluency errors was 10.33 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 9.02 to 11.64. The eta squared statistics 0.96 indicated large effect size. Table 4 captures the results of this significance.

	Mean	SD	df	t	sig
Pre-test	19.75	7.12	11	17.38	P=0.000
Post-test	9.42	5.81			

Table 4: Paired samples t-test.

Paired-Sample t-test Comparison between Pre-intervention and Post-intervention on Number of Fluency Errors.

NB: Effect size can tell us the magnitude of the effect of intervention and can be calculated by the following formula.

$$\text{Eta squared} = \frac{t^2}{(t^2 + N - 1)}$$

To interpret the strength of the different effect size statistics, the following guidelines were proposed by Cohen [33] when assessing research involving the comparison of different groups. Although Cohen specified for eta squared, they can be used to interpret the strength of partial eta squared. Partial eta squared involves a slightly different formula, using a different denominator than for eta squared (Table 5).

Size	Eta squared (% of variance explained)	Cohen's d (standard deviation units)
Small	0.01 or 1%	0.2
Medium	0.06 or 6%	0.5
Large	0.138 or 13.8%	0.8

Table 5: Comparison of groups.

Discussion

This investigation examined the impact of Reader's Theatre on the reading fluency of elementary-aged African American males with learning and behavioral challenges. Results indicate that the exposure to Reader's Theatre reduced pre-intervention fluency errors by 48.2 percent. The results of this investigation support the use of Reader's Theater as a multi-dimensional instructional practice that has been successful in promoting all aspects of reading [9,26,27]. Used as a reading strategy, Reader's Theater allows for repeated oral readings and multiple opportunities for students to practice retelling, expressiveness, and reading rate. Reading instruction that includes Reader's Theater as a critical component in the classroom contributes to oral fluency growth and increased comprehension [25,26,28]. The outcomes associated with the results of this study seem to support what appears in previous literature. Study Participants not only improved their reading fluency with respects to gaining a much better grasp of the automaticity associated with reading fluency and comprehension, but they managed to gain additional benefits that positively impacted classroom behaviors and dynamics. In many instances, subjects were able to improve their reading fluency and comprehension by

developing an understanding of story elements and context while implementing self-monitoring strategies as reported by Trainin and Andrzejczak [30].

Other benefits that surfaced from the exposure to Reader's Theatre were the growth in student motivation and self-efficacy. Prior to the introduction of Reader's Theatre, many of the subjects did not view themselves as good readers. Many of them appeared overwhelmed by the narrative format in which traditional reading textbooks appeared and simply would not attempt reading. However, the reformatted texts in the form of Reader's Theatre scripts seemed to have helped students gain confidence with the streamlined approach to reading. Students started to see themselves as capable, which appeared to have impacted reading ability as well as their motivation to read. These findings are in line with previous research [9,31] that suggested that Reader's Theater as an instructional practice can also increase self-confidence in struggling readers. Through consistent exposure to the practice of reading and rereading, students are encouraged and exposed to multiple opportunities to decode multisyllabic words, learn vocabulary and connect their lives and experiences to characters within texts [32]. In addition, Reader's Theater promotes a classroom culture that encourages social interactions with peers and the inclusion of student's background knowledge and experiences. Thus, Reader's Theater allows students to become interested in what they read and to actively participate in improving their reading and the overall learning process.

While this investigation has demonstrated a level of success for African American male students with learning and behavioral challenges, it comes with some limitations. First, the small sample size makes it difficult for the results to be generalized to a larger group of individuals. Secondly, the fact that the classroom teacher, who introduced the concept of Reader's Theatre, had both knowledge of special education and theatre may have influenced the results. Nonetheless, because research has suggested that African American and other minority students tend to display gifts and talents in non-traditional ways, Reader's Theatre could be a useful strategy to help students with learning and behavioral challenges gain a measure of success. Furthermore, students with this designation seem to benefit from learning activities that allows them to be actively engaged in their learning. The results of this research seem to support that idea. However, it is important to note that if Reader's Theatre and other arts-based programs are used in educating students with learning and behavioral challenges, it will be important that appropriate planning be done. Moreover, educators must be willing to demonstrate skills, establish standards by which students will operate and provide appropriate guidance without diminishing students' natural ability and creativity.

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