Diggin' Deeper: What We Need To Know To Engage The Non-Proficient Minority Reader

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Abstract

This study explored the reading instructional needs of 187 non-proficient students in 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade. The sample purposefully included economic and ethnic minority students who failed to demonstrate proficiency on their state mandated-reading assessment. This inclusion allowed the students often omitted from research and allowed for the representation of those from the contrary ends of the opportunity gap the ability to be heard. This mixed-methods study used a heavy quantitative focus to determine the unique instructional needs of the students, including patterns of strengths and weaknesses concerning their reading skills. The quantitative component was followed with an interview analysis to provide a deeper understanding of the reading dispositions representing four focus students. An important finding from the study was the students' beliefs in the skill of word recognition as the essential component of reading, which the quantitative data validated with the students comprehending at least one grade level below their word recognition level. The discussion focuses on the critical characteristics of non-proficient readers which are vital for designing interventions to help this group of students to achieve success.

Introduction

 "…my momma says I'm not that good [of a reader] because she had trouble too and my [older] brother has trouble too. So, we're trying to improve my reading grade, me and my brother"
~Chris 4th Grade Non-proficient reader

A major problem facing schools in the United States is determining how to ensure all students, including those from marginalized populations based on their ethnicity, religion, cultural, gender, or socioeconomic status, are achieving success (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). Policymakers continue to implement policies to address this problem by placing a focus on the performance of non-proficient readers. This focus includes federal accountability policies that evaluate students' performances on various accountability measures and evaluating schools' performance based on standardized assessments. These accountability measures emphasize the goal of all students being successful with reading. This legislation determined that some students were not adequately performing and thus, the existence of an opportunity gap (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

Buly and Valencia (2002) designed a seminal research study to identify the underlying causes of reading failure for non-proficient readers. They analyzed the reading profiles of 5th-grade students deemed non-proficient on a state-mandated reading assessment. Instead of finding a sole reason for non-proficient students' reading struggles, Buly and Valencia discovered 10 reading profiles based on patterns of students' ability to identify words quickly (word identification), read fluently (fluency), and make meaning from the text read (meaning). In a later work, Valencia and Bully (2004) combined four pairs of double profiles based on their statistical similarities for a total of six profiles to focus on the implications of the reading profiles

for classroom practice. This reformulation of the profiles included a reference to prototypical students in each cluster. These ten reading profiles highlighted the need to develop different remedial programs based on students individualized instructional strengths and weaknesses, as non-proficient students are not a homogenous group. The seminal research of Buly and Valencia (2002) led to subsequent studies where researchers validated and identified multiple patterns of reading strengths and weaknesses for struggling readers across multiple grade levels (Dennis, 2013; Leach, Scarborough, & Rescorla, 2003; Leseaux & Kieffer, 2010; Morris, et al., 2017; Rupp & Leseaux, 2006; Pierce, Katzir, Wold, & Noam, 2007).

Absent from existent reading profile research are three key components which can impact our abilities to provide remediation and interventions to non-proficient students better. First, while their work helps with better understanding non-proficient readers, it does not include the populations continuously at the contrary ends of the opportunity gap, ethnic and economic minorities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Second, these studies fail to identify the precise literacy performance characteristics of non-proficient students. Last, none of these studies include a consideration of how students' motivation dispositions impact their instructional preferences (Brophy, 2008). This link is critical because motivation may be a significant predictor of classroom reading performances, particularly for non-proficient students (Graham & Taylor, 2002; Miller, Heafner, & Massey, 2009). Students' willingness to invest time and effort in their academic studies may relate more directly to their expectations for success and their perceived value of achievement (Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997) than to their scores on state-mandated reading assessments (Afflerbach, 2004). The inclusion of motivational interviews can provide essential insights into why non-proficient students either approach or avoid reading-related tasks as well as the reasons for their engagement or lack thereof with these tasks.

Motivation is one of the leading determinants of a student's beliefs about their reading performance, the value they place upon the act of reading (Cambria & Guthrie, 2010; Unrau & Quirk, 2014), and the importance of reading for later success (Guthrie, Wigfield, & You, 2012; Solis, Miciak, Vaugh, & Fletcher, 2014). Without acknowledging motivation, educators may implement best practice interventions with minimal success because students' beliefs, values, and understandings of reading are not considered (Wigfield, Gladstone, Turci, 2016).   The expectancy/value theory establishes that students' willingness to invest time and effort in academic studies depends on their expectations for success and the perceived value of achievement (Atkinson & Feather, 1966; Eccles, et al., 1983; Heckhausen, 1977). This study was grounded in this theory as it was an essential component to better understanding non-proficient students as it values the relationship between reading and motivation.

The work of existing researchers continues to challenge the assumptions of a one-size-fits-all model for addressing the needs of struggling readers. However, the research raises further questions about the specific needs of these struggling readers representing marginalized groups. Therefore, this study seeks to identify and understand the instructional trends and engagement dispositions of these students. These are necessary to provide instructional interventions and engagement for these students better. If we are to support struggling readers, particularly those from marginalized student populations, it is essential to gain this. More specifically, this work is essential as the results of accountability legislation continue to directly impact students in "zip code" schools (Au, 2009), those schools with large numbers of marginalized students who are living in poverty and are considered ethnic minorities (Gaddis & Lauen, 2014; Hursh, 2007;

Jackson, Johnson, & Persico, 2010). While these groups should be the focus of much research with reading profiles, analysis of previous research demonstrated a lack of adequate representation of these groups. As such, these schools and these students must be represented in research to demonstrate the patterns that represent their reading and motivations for reading.

Methods

Participants

A combined sample of 187 minority non-proficient readers, including third ($n = 83$), fourth ($n = 54$), and fifth graders ($n = 50$), participated in the study. The non-proficient readers defined as those who received scores less than proficient (>level 3 on a 1-5 scale) on their state-mandated assessment. Approximately three quarters (77.6%) of the sample were ethnic minorities. The ethnic group included Black (49.2%), Hispanic (19.3%), and other classifications (9.1%), with the remaining students being White at (22.5%) (these terms are those used by the school district for classification purposes). The sample had an unequal ratio of male (44.4%) to female (55.6%) students. All 187 participants attended a zipcode school (Au, 2009), specifically schools with 100% of its students receiving free or reduced lunch based on the economic characteristics of the neighborhood.

Reading Measures

Four assessments were administered to measure the five components of reading, as identified by the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000). The Elision Subtest of the Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing (Wagner, Torgeson & Rashotte, 1999) was used to assess phonemic awareness. The Qualitative Reading Inventory-6 (QRI) was used to assess word identification and comprehension (Leslie & Caldwell, 2017). The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) Oral Reading Fluency (DORF) assessment was used to measure fluency of grade-level text (Good & Kaminski, 2011). Last, the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Revised (PPVT) was used to measure receptive vocabulary knowledge (Dunn & Dunn, 2007).

Data Analysis

The study used a mixed-methods, sequential explanatory design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) to analyze the data. This design method was essential, given the goals of the study demanded a combination of both quantitative and qualitative components. The study gave priority to the quantitative data to determine the reading profiles representing the strengths and weaknesses of the students. Then qualitative data was used to understand better the dispositions of the students representing each profile. Using SAS software (SAS Institute, 2013), descriptive statistics were generated to determine overall trends for the students. Next, exploratory factor analysis was conducted to determine factors representing the student data. These factors were used within a cluster analysis to generate reading profiles of the sample (See Smith & Miller, 2018, for additional specific information on the steps of the quantitative methods). Following the analysis of the quantitative component, one student representing each profile was interviewed using semi-structured interviews (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999) to understand their engagement dispositions and understanding of reading better. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed for further analysis. Each interview was coded initially with descriptive themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994) then those codes were revisited to further clarify interpretations from the interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Results

Quantitative Results

As initially presented in Smith and Miller (2018) Table 1 presents descriptive information (means and standard deviations) representing student performance across grade levels for the reading data. When examining this table, five striking patterns were identified. First, and most importantly, overall performances for each reading variable for each grade level were below grade-level expectations. For each variable, there were grade-level expectations that were not met (for grades 3, 4, and 5 respectively DIBELS expected accuracy 96%, 97%, & 98%; *DIBELS* correct words per minute 86, 103, & 112; QRI scores for comprehension and the word list should be greater than or equal to the grade level). Second, apart from DIBELS accuracy scores at one grade level, students' performance for the reading scores increased by grade level. This means students are growing in reading performance, but not at an adequate pace to meet grade-level expectations. Third, students' ability to recognize and decode words were at a higher level than their comprehension levels. Comprehension scores were all at least a grade level lower than expected based on grade level placements. The students overall are not making meaning at the same levels as their decoding. Last, when examining comprehension, narrative comprehension scores for each grade level were on average, a grade level above expository comprehension.

Table 1

Reading Descriptive Statistics by Grade Level

Variable	3rd $n=83$	4th $n=54$	5th $n=50$	Mean Scores $n=187$
Phonemic Awareness				
CTOPP*	11.76	12.26	13.98	12.50
	4.95	*5.07*	*4.74*	*4.99*
Phonics/Word ID				
DIBELS ACC ***	94.25	94.17	97.40	95.07
	7.61	*12.21*	*3.66*	*8.58*
QRI Word List ****	2.89	3.28	4.20	3.35
	1.42	*1.55*	*1.53*	*1.57*
Vocabulary				
PPVT GE****	2.54	2.82	3.90	2.99
	1.28	*1.66*	*1.76*	*1.63*
Fluency				
DIBELS	76.84	86.93	106.92	87.80
	34.50	*33.94*	*32.54*	*35.83*
Comprehension				
QRI E ****	1.45	1.89	2.38	1.82
	.69	*.77*	*1.26*	*.97*
QRI N ****	2.31	2.70	3.58	2.77
	.91	*.94*	*1.20*	*1.13*

Note**:** E=Expository Text, N=Narrative Text, *Raw Score, ***Percent Correct, ****Grade Equivalent, number in italics is the standard deviation.

1. **Phonemic Awareness:** The raw scores for CTOPP range from 1-20 with average scores falling between 8 and 12.
2. **Phonics/Word Identification**: Percent correct, *DIBELS* expected accuracy 96%, 97%, and 98% for grades 3, 4 & 5 respectively. *QRI* word list expectation is to be able to read a grade-level word list successfully.
3. **Vocabulary:** PPVT expectation is grade level.
4. **Fluency Scores**: Correct Words read per Minute Expected scores for *DIBELS* are 86, 103, and 112 for grades 3, 4 & 5, respectively.
5. **Comprehension:** For the QRI, all scores represent the highest instructional level text read.

Four profiles were identified (see Table 2) to represent the patterns of reading performance for the sample. The profiles were named by matching the characteristics like the original profiles named by Buly and Valencia (2002). Within this analysis of the data, the researcher revisited the reading profiles by identifying a representative student for each of the reading profiles to provide additional clarity in understanding the characteristics of non-proficient readers. The additional student assessment data provides clarifying information to guide understanding of specific characteristics of student performance within the assessed areas. Several notable patterns emerged from the profiles to guide teachers' interpretation of how to provide interventions to meet the needs of struggling readers. While examining these patterns, they must interpret within the context of these students who are not meeting overall grade-level expectations.

The *Slow Comprehenders* profile contained 49 students who were the most successful with both word identification and meaning as each of these means scores are above the median. These students had the highest meaning scores of the sample. The students within this profile are decoding at a moderately adequate rate, but their ability to make meaning is not quite at the same level. Students within this profile are the closest to becoming proficient readers with minor comprehension interventions. "Isaac" is a 4th-grade student within this profile. His word recognition was at grade level with comprehension and meaning-making below grade level. His PPVT scores were within the grade level span of his comprehension scores; however, both performance levels were still below grade level.

The smallest profile membership was of the students in the *Word Stumblers* profile. These 35 students had a combination of low word identification and higher meaning scores. They also had the lowest word identification scores for the sample and meaning scores slightly above the median. This identification is vital as although these students cannot decode at grade level, they are comprehending the texts they can decode. These students need specific interventions that emphasize word recognition while also addressing comprehension with texts at the students' instructional level. "Chris" is a student within this profile. Most of his performance scores are several grades below grade level expectation. His word identification and comprehension levels were consistent at 1st grade. "Chris'" receptive vocabulary as noted from the PPVT fell just below the grade level expectation.

More than half of the participants *(n=103)* were grouped in the remaining two profiles, *Word Callers* and *Struggling Word Callers*. The profiles had students with the lowest word identification and meaning scores, while other scored above and below the median. The *Word Callers* had the highest word identification scores for the sample, with meaning scores that just below the median. The students within this profile can decode most texts put in front of them but fail to make meaning when reading these texts. Therefore, these students would not benefit from remediation interventions emphasizing word recognition. They need interventions focused on building comprehension skills. "Damien," a 5th grader fits within this profile. His word recognition scores (word list and words per minute) are at or close to grade-level expectations. The profile is also supported by his 100% accuracy on texts read. His comprehension is below grade level, with the lowest levels found for expository texts.

The students considered *Struggling Word Callers* had the lowest meaning scores for the sample with word identification scores just above the median. These students word identification skills are enough, but their meaning-making are significantly below grade-level expectations. Remediation for these students must reinforce building comprehension skills but with texts at a lower level than their word recognition level. "Jada," a 5th grader, scores provide a clear differentiator between word callers and struggling word callers. Her word recognition scores are at grade level expectation, with word list scores exceeding expectations. However, her meaning scores (vocabulary and comprehension) are several grade levels below grade-level expectations.

Table 2

Reading Profile Summary

Profile	n	Cluster Means		Representative Student
		WordID	Meaning	
Slow Comprehenders	49	.45	1.25	*"Isaac, 4th grade."*
				Word List: 4 **PPVT GE:** 2.7 **QRI N**: 3 **QRI E**:2 **DIBELS WPM:** 74 **DIBELS ACC*:** 96
Word Stumblers	35	-1.58	.06	*"Chris, 4th grade."*
				Word List: 1 **PPVT GE:** 3.8 **QRI N**: 1 **QRI E**: 1 **DIBELS WPM:** 31 **DIBELS ACC*:** 70

Word Callers	52	.53	-.18	"Damien, *5th grade*."
				Word List: 5 **PPVT GE:** 3.4 **QRI N**: 4 **QRI E**: 2 **DIBELS WPM:** 114 **DIBELS ACC*:** 100
Struggling Word Callers	51	.11	-1.06	"Jada, *5th grade*."
				Word List: 6 **PPVT GE:** 1.6 **QRI N**: 3 **QRI E**: 1 **DIBELS WPM:** 114 **DIBELS ACC*:** 100

Note: QRI Texts represent highest instructional level, E=Expository Text, N=Narrative Text, * Percent Correct, GE= Grade Equivalent, **Names used for students are pseudonyms

Qualitative Results

  With profiles established and a student representing each profile, I interviewed each student to better understand his/her beliefs about reading and their reading performance. This information will help teachers with providing remedial instruction to assist non-proficient readers with reading success. The results of this phase yielded three significant themes which will help with providing interventions for success. The three themes identified included *word recognition/decoding* as the essentials of reading, the *value/importance* of reading, and non-proficient readers have varying *confidence* levels in their reading.

  First, word recognition was the most salient theme among all the students interviewed. These non-proficient students believe reading is all about word recognition. "Chris" acknowledged his most successful area of reading is fluency. "Jada" noted she is a good reader because she gets most of the words right when she reads (accuracy), but that she needs to work on fluency (words per minute) to improve her reading because she is a slow reader. "Damien" noted that the most important part of reading is to pronounce words correctly.

  Additionally, he believes he is a good reader because if he does not know a word, he can sound it out. "Isaac" was excited to share he was on grade level with Mclass testing. In his grade level, Mclass testing is used as a measure to assess fluency and minor comprehension via a cloze reading passage. This theme is vital for teachers working with non-proficient readers as these students view word recognition as the most crucial component of reading. However, when generating remediation activities, teachers need to integrate word recognition as needed. While doing this, students must understand that the goal of reading is making meaning from texts read.

  Next, the value/importance of reading was found to be prevalent amongst the students. "Isaac" and "Jada" both understand the value in reading to acquire new knowledge. "Isaac" believes reading is essential because it helps him to learn more about life, and specifically, he can get information from texts. "Jada" believes reading is important because it helps you to get

new knowledge about things. "Damien" highlighted the real-world importance of reading. He believes that when you get a job, and you are going to have to know how to read the papers they give, if you do not know how to read, you will fail. "Chris" was vocal about the fact he was not on grade level and not a good reader. However, he stated that reading was something one must get good at because if you cannot read, you will not pass to the next grade. As seen here, the value of reading is present with the students in different ways. Although their interpretations of reading value were different, each of them understood reading is essential, and place value in reading is an essential component to success in life. Each student is non-proficient, but they still value reading. This understanding of the value of reading can be used when teachers are providing remediation by continuously emphasizing the importance and benefit of the activities they are completing.

The last theme of confidence was unique. Here, like the quantitative patterns present in the profile, the students had both beliefs of confidence and a lack of confidence in themselves as readers. "Chris" shared some personal details which help to understand his lack of confidence better. His mother shared with him that he is not a good reader because she was not a good reader, as well as his older brother. He feels he is not a good reader but believes he can learn to be a good reader. "Jada" also lacked confidence in her reading. She is a slow reader because her fluency is low (words per minute) but that she usually gets the word correct, but she believes she must improve. "Isaac" is a very confident reader. At several points, he acknowledged he is a good reader because he is on grade level and made the honor roll. He also helps others with their reading, so in his eyes, this makes him a good reader. Although "Damien" does not like reading, he tries to get good grades. He believes that he is a good reader because he has strategies to figure out words he does not know when he reads. Damien does not like to read books that have many pages because they are confusing. He had recently read a book in class, it was the worst ever for him, and he did not want to come to school. Here we see the patterns of confidence amongst the readers, which help teachers to understand how students feel about themselves as a reader. These patterns are important to note because teachers need to know the confidence level of their students. As well, teachers must address confidence within their remediation activities to ensure the students have confidence in their growth and their successes as readers.

Discussion

This study analyzed the reading performance and motivation dispositions for non-proficient readers. The results of this study confirm what we already know, non-proficient readers are not represented by a single set of profiles (Buly & Valencia, 2002; Dennis, 2013; Morris et al., 2017; Smith & Miller, 2018). However, the results extend the current research by including marginalized "zip code" populations (Au, 2009) often omitted from research but the emphasis of most accountability legislation (Hursh, 2007). This purposeful inclusion is essential as we must better understand the academic patterns of these students in order to meet their instructional needs better. More specifically, the results provide trends and characteristics which educators should be aware of when designing instructional interventions for non-proficient readers.

There are four essential things to note from the results of the study. First, the most notable characteristic is the difference in comprehension levels for expository and narrative texts. On average, these students are reading a minimum of one grade level lower for expository texts. This finding suggests instruction and interventions for these students should include appropriately leveled texts depending on the text type. Moreover, differences in comprehension

between the two text types suggest assessments for comprehension should include both narrative and expository texts. This would ensure we are providing instruction at students' instructional level, and thus meeting their instructional needs. Second, unlike most existing research of reading profiles (Buly & Valencia, 2002; Leach et. al, 2003; Leseaux & Kieffer, 2010; Morris et. al, 2017; Rupp & Leseaux, 2006; & Pierce et. al, 2007), this study's analysis failed to identify a group of non-proficient readers who had a combination of extremely low scores of both the word identification and meaning factors. The researcher believes this difference relates to students' word recognition abilities, which overall were somewhat stronger in this study than in previous related studies.

Next, students overall scored higher on their ability to decode or recognize words than on their comprehension of texts. Many of the students' results indicated word recognition scores close to grade level, if not above for certain assessment areas. While this characteristic differs from existing studies (Buly & Valencia, 2002; Dennis, 2013), this finding is consistent with the themes from the qualitative portion of the study. The students see reading as "word calling" and therefore assume this is the goal of reading, reading fluently and accurately decoding words. Educators must be aware of this finding as it should directly impact instruction and interventions. All readers, not just non-proficient, should understand that fluency is a component of successful reading, but the goal is to make meaning from texts. While many assessments such as DIBELS emphasize fluency, we must ensure students specifically in the non-proficient group understand the actual characteristics of a successful reading.

Results of the qualitative component show non-proficient students understand the value and importance of reading. Each student representing multiple profiles expressed an understanding that reading is an essential component of a successful life. This is important because the assumption is often made that these students have no interest in reading, which may be accurate, but we know they understand it is important. While these students understand the value and importance in reading, their confidence in their reading was in patterns like their reading performance levels. Here, educators need to assess confidence in reading for their non-proficient students. This will allow them to integrate activities that assist with increasing confidence in reading ability for these students.

Implications

This research highlights the need for differentiation with interventions addressing the individualized needs of non-proficient students. Specifically, this research supports the idea that identifying a student as non-proficient via a standardized assessment does not adequately describe the many facets of a student's reading performance. After identifying a student as non-proficient, assessments reflecting the multidimensional nature of reading should be used to determine the strengths and weaknesses of each student to design effective interventions (Wixson, Lipson, & Valencia, 2013). Therefore, teachers need to use assessments that measure beyond the word identification components of reading (Allington, 2009). These assessments addressing the five areas of reading will help teachers to identify specific patterns of reading patterns for these students. The patterns can then be used to identify specific areas for interventions to assist with remediating areas of weakness and ensuring the existing achievement gaps are closed.

Second, schools should continue to encourage differentiation and equitable interventions for each reader. This differentiation for reading could occur in two ways. First, schools can continue to require an intervention and enrichment time within instructional schedules. This

block of time could be used to provide direct needs-based instruction that is related to the students' weaknesses (Averill, Baker, & Rindaldi, 2014). Second, schools can continue to require a guided reading block. Guided reading is an essential component of a balanced literacy framework that provides small group explicit instruction rooted in the individual needs of students (Fawson & Reutzel, 2000; Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Guided reading time is beneficial for students to practice a variety of reading-related skills daily with text on their instructional level. This allows non-proficient readers like those in this study to receive instruction that directly addresses their weaknesses and rebuilds them to gain confidence in reading.

Conclusion

What we already know, despite vast amounts of federal funding, accountability-driven reforms with continued and frequent high-stakes testing only confirm what we already knew regarding student reading achievement, the same populations continue to lack success with standardized reading assessments (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). This opportunity gap between white and minority (ethnic and economic) students is a significant concern for schools (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2009; Milner 2013), and despite numerous efforts and initiatives, this gap continues to exist (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007). This study purposefully included students from zip code schools to ensure we are knowledgeable of what we need to know to help these students achieve success. There are multiple patterns and characteristics of non-proficient readers.

As existing research highlights, many interventions for non-proficient students emphasizes word recognition skills. Although the results of this study confirm that existing interventions are successful in their specific purpose of remediating word recognition skills, this overemphasis on word recognition negatively impacts non-proficient readers. These students believe their reading performance has improved based on improvements in word recognition skills but not an improvement in comprehension. Non-proficient students have specific needs that must be identified via assessments and remediated with interventions to build on their strengths while directly addressing their weaknesses.

A one-size-fits-all instructional approach does not benefit these students because it fails to place a direct emphasis on the areas of strength and weakness (Valencia & Buly, 2004). Therefore, to provide the most valuable interventions, assessments and instruction should identify the strengths and weaknesses of non-proficient readers and work to remediate the identified weaknesses. Therefore, remediation must first be based on assessment data; then second, it must emphasize the real goal of reading, comprehension, or making meaning.

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