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Original Paper

How Benchmark Is Used in Third Grade Reading Instruction

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Abstract

Third grade reading teachers at the local setting are not consistently using formative benchmark data to improve student reading performance, creating a gap in practice. This gap in practice may be due to teachers' lack of capacity to use the data to make changes to their instructional practices. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how third grade reading teachers are using data from reading benchmark assessments to improve student reading performance. This research study was guided by two Research Questions (RQs). RQ 1 addressed how third grade teachers are using reading benchmark assessment data to improve student reading performance. RQ 2 addressed specific instructional strategies that third grade teachers are using from reading benchmark assessment data to effectively improve student reading performance. Data-driven decision making (DDDM) was the conceptual framework that was the foundation for this study. This basic qualitative design for this research study included 13 participants. Data were collected through open-ended semistructured interviews, and qualitative analyses were conducted through open coding and thematic analysis. According to the findings of this study, immediately analyzing data, collaboration, and data driven instruction were the themes that emerged guided by RQ 1. Emerging themes for RQ 2 included test taking strategies, modeling, and guided reading. Leadership in this district may use these findings to make decisions about the effectiveness of teachers' use of these benchmark assessments or the data gathered from the assessments to impact student reading proficiencies. This research may provide specific instructional strategies used through the DDDM process that increases student reading proficiency. The findings could possibly yield results that have positive social change implications for reading achievement.

Keywords

reading instruction, benchmark assessments, assessments, instructional strategies, third grade reading, reading proficiency

1. Introduction

Increased accountability has led to a focus on student achievement and data use (van Gasse et al., 2017). In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act became effective, mandating that instructional decisions be data driven (Mandinach & Gummer, 2016). This legislation dictated an increased emphasis in data collection beyond summative assessment and the use of these formative data to positively impact student proficiency (Mandinach & Gummer, 2016; Marsh & Farrell, 2015). While this has led to vast amounts of available data, many educators lack the capacity to effectively use data to make instructional changes (Little et al., 2019; Reeves & Chiang, 2018). In a large high poverty district in the Southeastern United States, instructional leadership began requiring third grade reading teachers to administer district-created reading benchmark assessments in an effort to increase student proficiency. The problem is that teachers are not consistently using these formative data to improve student reading performance, creating a gap in practice. This gap in practice may be due to the teachers' lack of capacity to use the data to make changes to their instructional practices. Researchers have indicated that there is a significant correlation between student achievement and teacher capacity to use data effectively (Ebbeler et al., 2016). Based on the 2019 State Report Card data, approximately 50% of third grade students in this district were not proficient readers. According to a content interventionist at the study site, district reading benchmark data also indicated that 57% of third graders did not meet state standard expectations for third grade proficiency. Based on the district's fall 2019 Reading Inventory data, 55% of third graders did not meet the beginning of third grade reading proficiency Lexile score. Currently, this southeastern state is in the bottom 25% in national literacy rankings. Based on national data, students in this state scored several points below the overall national average of 219 on the Reading portion of the National Assessment of Educational (*NAEP State Profiles*, 2019).

According to a content interventionist at the study site, in an effort to increase third grade student reading proficiency scores, the district's instructional support team created reading benchmark assessments to be administered at three intervals throughout the school year. The instructional support team at the study site shared that the goal of this formative data collection is to support teachers in communicating expectations for learning and lesson planning, assessing student learning, and predicting student future achievement. State report card data from 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019 may have indicated inconistentent use of data to improve third grade students'reading performance with 59%, 57%, 57%, and 50% respectively being nonproficient. Prior to this study, there had been no investigation into third grade reading teachers' use of these formative data to improve student reading performance.

The following research questions (RQs) guided this basic qualitative study:

RQ 1. How are third grade teachers using formative reading assessment data to improve student reading performance?

RQ 2. What specific instructional strategies are third grade teachers using as a result of formative reading assessment data to improve student reading performance?

2. Method

2.1 Purpose

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore how third grade reading teachers are using data from district reading benchmark assessments to effectively improve student reading performance. Open-ended semistructured interviews were used as the data collection method for this study. Qualitative data were used to explore how third grade teachers are using reading benchmark assessment data and specific strategies based on these data for increasing third grade students' reading proficiency. The study site for this research was a large school district in the Southeastern United States.

2.1.1 Sampling

Purposeful sampling was used for this study. Purposeful sampling was an appropriate strategy for this study as the participants had extensive knowledge of the district reading benchmark assessments, their data use, and instructional strategies used in response to these data. Purposeful sampling was used to support open-ended semistructured interviews. There were approximately 80 third grade reading teachers in this district during the 2018-2019 school year. Of these approximate 80 teachers, 20 of these teachers who met the specific criteria were asked to participate in this study.

The 20 teachers whose class average increased the most on the benchmark assessments from the October 2018 to March 2019 were invited to participate in this study. Of the 20 teachers invited to participate in this study, 13 agreed to take part in this research project. These participants were able to offer some insight into effective benchmark data use as their class averages showed significant increases. The average reading benchmark score of each third grade teacher's class from October of 2018 and March of 2019 was collected. This provided data from approximately the top 25% of teachers whose class averages increased the most from the fall of 2018 to the spring of 2019 on the reading benchmark assessment. These teachers participated in both the open-ended semistructured interviews and submission of their three data reflection tools that noted student's weaknesses, strengths, and teacher's next steps for the 2018-2019 school year. This was a sufficient number of participants for this type of research study. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), having fewer participants in qualitative research can promote more in-depth data. Interviewing this small sampling allowed extensive open-ended semistructured interviews to be conducted of the teachers whose students had the most growth on the benchmark assessments. By using purposeful sampling, a small number of participants, and these specific criteria, access was gained to the teachers whose third grade class averages were in the top 25% for growth in student reading achievement based on these benchmark assessments.

2.1.2 Data Collection

The data were collected through open-ended semistructured interviews. Teachers' data reflection tools were also available as these completed reflection documents were used by interviewees as part of the interview process. These data reflection tools noted student's weaknesses, strengths, and teacher's next steps for the 2018- 2019 school year. Open-ended semistructured interviews were conducted of the top

25% of third grade reading teachers' whose student classroom averages increased the most for the 2018-2019 school year on the district reading benchmark assessments.

Additionally, each of the participants whose students made the most gains from October 2018 to March 2019 on the district reading benchmark assessments used their data reflection tools from October, January, and March of the 2018-2019 school year. Interview data were collected through interview protocol and audio recordings.

3. Results

The findings provided an understanding of participants' perceptions of supporting ELLs and strategies to implement individual and cultural instruction. According to the findings in this study, as teachers received guidance on how to employ varied instructional practices, their level of self-efficacy improved in the learning environment. Provisions from school leaders for successful implementation of individual and culturally relevant instructional strategies will lead to creating strategies that will support the academic needs of ELLs. A presentation of how the themes align with the RQs is presented.

3.1 Findings for Research Question 1

Research Question 1 pertained to the following question: *How are third grade teachers using formative reading assessment data to improve student reading performance?* Three themes emerged during this research (see Figure 1).

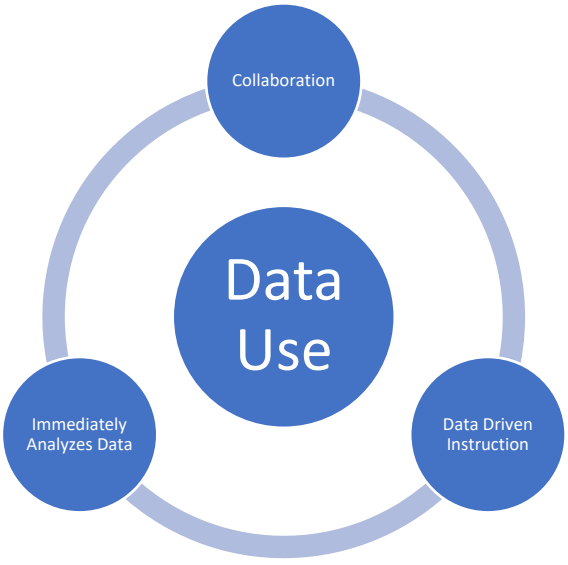

Figure 1. Themes for Data Use

Theme 1: Analyzing Data Immediately

During the data analysis of the open-ended semistructured interviews, analyzing data immediately was a theme that emerged. Twelve of the participants mentioned that they are eager to get the data from the reading benchmark assessments. While the student's score does not come up on the student's computer screen, it is immediately available through the teacher's benchmark assessment platform. The participants also shared that they are specifically looking for trends, standards assessed, strengths, and weaknesses. The theme of immediate data analysis emerged from the research. The participants shared that they begin to analyze data right away. During teacher analyzation of the data, they are noting strengths and weaknesses. They are seeking trends and noting specific student performance. The participants shared that they find the data reflection tool helpful in the data analysis process, as it guides their analysis and ensures that they are reflective users of data.

Theme 2: Collaboration

A theme of collaboration emerged during the interviews. When asked about what they find helpful in the data use process, 10 out the 13 participants specifically mentioned collaboration with other educators. The theme of collaboration emerged from the research. The participants shared that through collaborative efforts they were better able to understand and use their data. They further explained that through collaborating with their peers and content interventionist they were able to reflect on the data and their own instructional practices.

Theme 3: Data Driven Instruction

A third theme that materialized from the participant interviews was Data Driven Instruction (DDI). The participants use these data to plan their next steps. Through this data analysis process, these teachers are analyzing their student's strengths and weakness, and being reflective of their own teaching practices. The theme of DDI developed during this research study. The participants all explained they use the data to drive their reading instruction. While the specifics of how they implement the instruction varies, the teachers use the data to determine where reteaching and acceleration are needed and for what specific students. Most participants shared that they do this primary through small group instruction while others did mention station work and whole group instruction.

3.1.1 Findings for Research Question 2

Research Question 2 pertained to the following question: *What specific instructional strategies are third grade teachers using as a result of formative reading assessment data to improve student reading performance?*

During data analysis, the following three themes emerged: test taking strategies, modeling, and guided reading (see Figure 2).

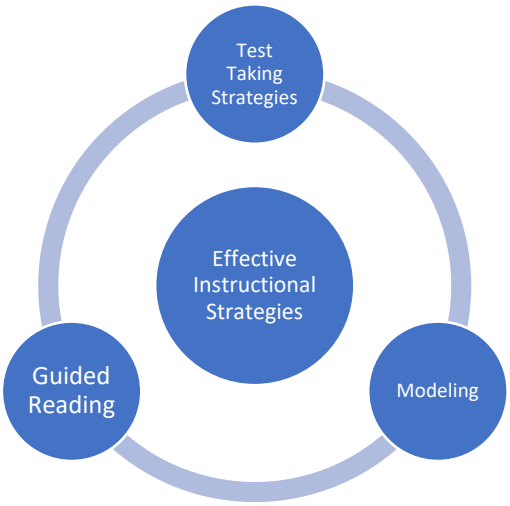

Figure 2. Themes for Effective Instructional Strategies

Theme 1: Test Taking Strategies

Test taking strategies was a theme that materialized from the research. Most participants throughout the course of the interview conveyed their belief that teaching students test taking strategies is an effective way to improve student reading performance. The theme of teaching students test taking strategies emerged during the research. The participants explained that teaching students how to test is an instructional strategy that they use to increase student performance on the reading benchmark assessments. One specific strategy included teaching students how to take tests online as this is a skill that third graders often have little exposure for taking assessments online. Another strategy included modeling thinking for teaching students the process of elimination.

Theme 2: Modeling

A second theme that appeared from the research was modeling. The participants often talked about building classroom assessments modeled after the benchmark assessments and discussed modeling their thinking. The district's content interventionists provide question stems that teachers can expect to see on benchmark assessments as a way of supporting teachers with the verbiage of the test and as a resource for teachers in questioning for discussion and for creating classroom assessments.

The participants shared that modeling is an effective instructional strategy for improving students' reading proficiency. They explained that modeling thinking of both skills and testing strategies are important. Some participants communicated that they model their classroom assessments after the reading benchmark assessments as an instructional strategy for improving student reading performance on the benchmark standards.

Theme 3: Guided Reading

Getting the students on grade level through guided reading is a third theme that emerged from the research. A theme of guided reading emerged from the research. The participants shared that in order to increase student reading performance, students need to be able to access grade level texts. They further

elaborated that oftentimes it is not that students have not mastered the standard or that they cannot perform the skill, it is that they cannot read the text (see Table 1).

Table 1. Themes and Descriptions

Theme	Description
Analyzes data immediately	Begins the data analysis process within 24 hours of reading benchmark
Collaboration	Cooperates with peers, literacy coach, and/or content interventionist about data
Data driven instruction	Uses data to plan for future instruction
Test taking strategies	Teaches students strategies for taking assessments
Modeling	Demonstrates thinking aloud
Guided reading	Uses a variety of strategies to make sure students have foundational reading skills

4. Discussion

4.1 Research Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how third grade reading teachers are using data from reading benchmark assessments to effectively improve student reading performance. The problem addressed in this study was teachers' inconsistent use of reading benchmark data to improve student reading performance. This lack of consistency created a gap in practice at the local level. This research study was guided by two RQs. The first RQ addressed how third grade teachers are using reading benchmark assessment data to improve student reading performance. The second RQ addressed specific instructional strategies that third grade teachers are using from reading benchmark assessment data to improve student reading performance. This basic qualitative design for this research study included 13 participants. Data were collected through open-ended semistructured interviews. Qualitative analyses were conducted through open coding and thematic analysis. Through the research, effective formative data use practices emerged.

4.1.1 Limitations

A limitation of this research design is time. The research developed was for the school district requires that participants dedicate three consecutive Saturdays to their Professional Development (PD). Therefore, timing may be a limitation of this research. Another consideration of a research limitation is resistance of the participants to engage in data use PD. As found in the research, teachers' capacity and beliefs about data use can impede their willingness to participate in data use practices (Datnow & Hubbard, 2015a; Reeves & Chiang, 2018).

4.1.2 Implications for Future Research

The problem involved teachers' inconsistent use of formative data from reading benchmark assessments. This gap in practice could have been addressed in other ways. One alternative approach could have been to address this problem through data culture. Instead of interviewing the third grade reading teachers whose class averages increased the most on reading benchmark assessments from fall of 2018 to the spring of 2019, schools who made the most gains could have been examined. This could have led to an exploration of data cultures in the more effective schools as a possible way to address this gap in practice at the local level. An additional approach could have been to interview the literacy coaches in each of the schools that had the most increases to better understand their role in supporting third grade reading teachers as they collaborate based on reading benchmark data. Another approach to analyzing this problem could be to explore the perceptions of the content interventionists in this district who serve as facilitators for data debriefings at each elementary school.

4.1.3 Conclusion

When teachers improve their instructional practices based on data there is the potential for positive change. This research study has the potential to impact teachers' data use practices which could increase students' reading proficiency. Social change may take place if teachers apply strategies in this PD in their data use to personalize student needs. This research study may be beneficial at the local level, as deeper understanding of DDDM could allow teachers to more effectively target students' specific needs. Social change may take place if teachers apply strategies from this PD in their data use to personalize student needs. If teachers apply the strategies that they learned in this PD, this could impact the school and district's data culture in a positive way. Further, this study has the potential to have a positive effect beyond that of the local level as it provides insight into effective instructional strategies as a result of the DDDM process that could be transferred to other grade levels and content areas.

Due to high accountability systems, there has been a focus on data use to increase student achievement (Marsh & Farrell, 2015). What it means to use data effectively has become a focus for school leaders. This has led to an emphasis on data collection. However, simply providing teachers with data does not mean that they will know how to analyze the data to modify their instructional practices. Many teachers lack the ability to use their data to improve both teaching and learning (Datnow & Hubbard, 2015a; Ebbeler et al., 2016; van Geel et al., 2017). Teachers need opportunities to grow in their efficacy of data use in order to provide students with needed personalized instruction. DDDM is a process that provides teachers with tools that can help teachers meet the ever changing needs of students and prepare them to be successful as 21st century learners.

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