

Investigating the Impact of Reader's Theater on the Prosody Scores of Middle School Students  
with Disabilities

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### Abstract

The purpose of this single-subject, pre- and post-test design action research study was to determine how implementing Reader's Theater as a prosody intervention might impact the prosody scores of middle school students with disabilities. Fluency rubrics and self-assessments were analyzed to determine any increase in prosody over the course of the intervention. Results indicated a positive impact on prosody scores.

*Keywords:* prosody, fluency, Reader's Theater, modeling, repeated reading

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While fluency is often regarded as a combination of rate and accuracy, research suggests a multi-faceted definition of fluency, which includes prosody (expression, intonation, and phrasing) in addition to accuracy and rate (Rasinski & Padak, 2005). Although it is imperative that students understand that comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading (Veenendaal, Groen, & Verhoeven, 2015), research indicates a link between fluency and the construction of meaning which implies the necessity of fluency instruction in the classroom (Rasinski & Padak, 2005). The general focus on fluency has been at the elementary level. Nevertheless, numerous researchers have made the case for the inclusion of fluency instruction at the middle school level (Guerin & Murphy, 2015; Rasinski, Rikli, & Johnston, 2009).

The teacher-researcher for this study taught a modified language arts class for middle school students with disabilities who were reading up to five grade levels below their same-age peers. Students read disfluently, reading word by word, with little or no expression, and without following punctuation cues, even when reading independent-level materials. Repeated reading had been implemented in the past with some success (increased reading rate), but there had been no specific focus on the prosodic components of reading. Research indicates that increased prosody is linked to increased silent reading comprehension (Rasinski et al., 2009), and this led the researcher to believe that prosody was a worthy focus for study. The purpose of this paper is to present an action research study that investigated how the implementation of Reader's Theater affected the prosody scores of middle school students with disabilities. The research that led the teacher-researcher to choose this topic, and to choose Reader's Theater as a strategy to improve students' oral reading prosody, is discussed in the following literature review.

### **Literature Review**

Conversations between teachers regarding student reading data generally include two key terms: comprehension and fluency. There are volumes written about strategies for addressing comprehension skills at both the primary and secondary school levels. After all, reading is literally meaningless if the reader does not understand what has been read. But what of fluency? Developing oral reading fluency is a crucial component of a primary student's literacy development, but does it continue to be a concern for students in middle school? Do struggling readers, and particularly students with disabilities, benefit from fluency instruction that is part of the daily classroom literacy routine? Research suggests that the answer to these questions is "yes."

This literature review addresses the multi-dimensional nature of fluency, the fluency/comprehension link, strategies for fluency instruction, and activities and materials that boost student motivation, engagement, and attitude toward reading. Reader's Theater is examined as an instructional activity that encompasses several of the most recommended practices for increasing fluency and making reading an enjoyable experience. Finally, a word of caution is shared regarding the focus of such instruction.

### **Oral Reading Fluency**

A great number of research and practitioner articles are dedicated to oral reading fluency, but some common themes do occur. The following paragraphs summarize the most widely accepted and agreed upon information regarding the topic of fluency. This information is broken down into three main categories: the multidimensional definition of oral reading fluency, the link between fluency and comprehension, and fluency instruction.

**A multidimensional definition.** In the past, oral reading fluency has been perceived as simplistic in nature, with a focus on accuracy and rate. Over the past several years, a more multifaceted picture of fluency has developed. This evolved view of fluency encompasses prosody (expression, intonation, attention to punctuation, and phrasing) in addition to accuracy and rate (Guerin & Murphy, 2015; Keehn, 2003; Kuhn, 2005; Rasinski & Padak, 2005; Rasinski et al., 2009; Veenendaal et al., 2015; Worthy & Broaddus, 2002; Worthy & Prater, 2002). Rasinski et al. (2009) note that readers who are fluent are able to convey meaning through speech. A student's ability to read fluently goes beyond the capability to sound like a good reader to indicate that the student truly understands what is being read (Worthy & Prater, 2002).

**The fluency/comprehension link.** The idea that increased fluency leads to increased comprehension is not new. LaBerge and Samuels' automaticity theory (as cited in Kuhn, 2005; Rasinski et al., 2009) contends that a reader who must pay a great deal of attention to decoding will lack the cognitive energy necessary for comprehension. When Rasinski and Padak (2005) instructed 303 students to read a ninth-grade level passage, and compared those results with the students' performance on a general measure of reading, they found a significant correlation between fluency and overall reading achievement. Improved fluency also supports metacognitive skills, such as the use of fix-up strategies in order to construct meaning (Guerin & Murphy, 2015).

Prosody, in particular, has been shown to increase both oral and silent reading comprehension. A study of third-, fifth-, and seventh-grade students by Rasinski et al. (2009), showed a significant association between prosodic reading and silent reading comprehension. According to Kuhn (2005), the oral reading of poor readers is often difficult for the listener to comprehend, and if the listener struggles to understand what is being read, the reader is most

likely challenged as well. Kuhn (2005) asserts that since prosody is linked to increased comprehension and is an essential component of fluency, fluent readers are better equipped than disfluent readers to construct meaning from text. Veenendaal et al. (2015) investigated whether reading rate and prosody were better predictors of reading comprehension scores than decoding and language comprehension. They found that when they controlled for language comprehension and decoding efficacy, prosody accounted for the additional variances in comprehension scores (Veenendaal et al., 2015). Therefore, it was concluded that prosody is an essential component of the complex framework of fluency.

**Fluency instruction.** Fluency instruction has traditionally been viewed as a component of reading instruction in the elementary grades. In recent years, more researchers have identified a need for fluency instruction to be carried over into the middle school years (Guerin & Murphy, 2015; Rasinski et al., 2009). According to Kuhn (2005), elementary students who struggle with fluency may continue to need fluency instruction in the middle grades. Rasinski and Padak (2005) also argue that disfluency may be a source of difficulty for some older struggling readers. Broaddus and Ivey (2002) suggest that reading fluency is not yet fully developed in many middle school students. For these reasons, a strong case can be made for including fluency instruction at the middle school level, particularly for struggling adolescent readers who often do not have sufficient opportunities to read connected texts (Kuhn, 2005).

Among the fluency instructional strategies encountered during the review of literature, repeated reading stood out as the most widely recommended. Repeated reading has been shown to help build content vocabulary (Broaddus & Ivey, 2002) and improve multiple components of reading development, including word recognition, rate, accuracy, and comprehension (Corcoran & Davis, 2005; Worthy & Broaddus, 2002). A small-scale study by Guerin and Murphy (2015)

showed that repeated reading led to increases in correct words per minute, oral and silent reading comprehension scores, and overall prosody scores. Noltemeyer, Joseph, and Watson's (2014) comparison study of three prosody and retell fluency interventions also indicated that repeated reading positively influences oral reading prosody scores. Kuhn (2005) stated that repeated reading gives students an opportunity to read a text until they can read it fluently. In turn, this gives students a measure of success they might not otherwise be afforded. Rasinski and Padak (2005) posit that students not only improve on the practiced passages, but even improve their performance on new, unfamiliar passages. As stated by Rasinski and Padak (2005), "When readers demonstrate significant improvement on never-before-seen passages, real learning is taking place" (p. 38).

Also recommended is the implementation of teacher modeling. Modeling is noted as an essential component of effective fluency instruction and is necessary for fluency development (Corcoran & Davis, 2005; Guerin & Murphy, 2015; Worthy & Broaddus, 2002). Keehn (2005) also identifies teacher modeling as an effective method for increasing student reading fluency, as students who hear fluent reading demonstrated have an advantage over those who do not. Teachers take on the role of coach when they model fluent reading and help students develop a metacognitive awareness of fluency, stressing that fluent reading is characterized by more than an elevated reading rate (Rasinski & Padak, 2005). It is also demonstrated by using one's voice to give meaning to the text (Rasinski & Padak, 2005).

### **Keeping Students Engaged**

Also worth noting is the importance of increasing motivation, engagement, and reading attitude when working with struggling readers of all ages. During the review of literature, five

key themes were identified regarding motivation, engagement, and attitude: authentic purposes for reading, performance activities, rehearsed reading, easy and appropriate texts, and shared reading experiences. Students are motivated to read when they have specific reasons for doing so (Ivey, 1999). Worthy and Broaddus (2002) state that when students know why fluency is important and how they can improve it, engagement in fluency practice is increased. Teachers should provide a distinct purpose for instructional activities in accordance to student needs and interests (Worthy & Prater, 2002).

Ivey (1999) contends that struggling adolescent readers enjoy performance-based reading activities. While students may not become overly-enthusiastic about repeated reading in and of itself, if they know that they will be expected to read for an audience, they have an authentic reason for engaging in the activity (Rasinski & Padak, 2005). As stated by Worthy and Broaddus (2002), when reading for performance, students are more likely to read at an appropriate rate for the text instead of focusing on speed alone.

Books that are easy to read give students a taste of reading success, as well as a sense of relief for struggling readers (Ivey, 1999). Ivey also states that students need many experiences with instructional-level texts. In addition, Keehn (2003) recognizes the importance of practice with manageable texts. Also important to the engagement and attitude of struggling middle school readers are opportunities to share reading experiences with peers and teachers (Ivey, 1999).

### **Reader's Theater**

Reader's Theater is an instructional activity in which students repeatedly rehearse assigned parts in a script that will eventually be performed before an audience. It is important to

note that the script is not memorized, but read aloud. In addition to incorporating repeated reading and teacher modeling, Reader's Theater positively reinforces student interest and motivation (Corcoran & Davis, 2005). In the context of Reader's Theater, repeated readings become rehearsals for a concluding performance (Keehn, 2003). For low-achieving students, attitude and confidence are improved through the implementation of Reader's Theater and repeated reading (Corcoran & Davis, 2005), because the repeated practice gives them a sense of accomplishment as they perform their assigned parts with the appropriate prosody for conveying meaning. In Keehn's (2003) study, which investigated the effect of Reader's Theater implementation on the oral reading fluency of second-grade students, the treatment groups showed significant growth in rate, prosody, comprehension, and word recognition. When compared to gains in rate, retelling, expression, and comprehension made by students at average and high achievement levels, gains made by students at low achievement levels were significant (Keehn, 2003).

The focus in Reader's Theater is reading fluently in order to communicate meaning through speech (Worthy & Broaddus, 2002). According to Worthy and Prater (2002), Reader's Theater provides the critical authentic purpose for repeated/rehearsed readings. During rehearsals for the activity, students are not reading the text repeatedly to meet an abstract goal, but in order to participate in a performance before an audience of peers, teachers, or parents. It becomes a meaningful endeavor. Teacher modeling, instruction, and feedback are incorporated into rehearsals (Worthy & Prater, 2002). In addition, Worthy and Prater (2002) state that participation in Reader's Theater can increase the comfort level of struggling and/or reluctant readers.

Young and Rasinski (2009) completed an action research study which focused on Reader's Theater as a year-long instructional activity for improving fluency and overall reading

achievement in elementary students. After the year of implementation, students' oral reading rates had increased substantially more than expected—sixty-five words over the course of the year. Prosody scores increased 20% overall and twice as much as the previous year in which Reader's Theater was not implemented. Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) scores also increased significantly more than expected. The authors also noted positive effects on engagement and motivation.

### **A Word of Caution**

One should approach explicit fluency instruction with a degree of caution. In Kuhn's (2005) study of small group fluency instruction, it was found that students may have focused solely on rate, accuracy, and expression to the point of disregarding text comprehension, which is identified by Veenendaal et al. (2015) as the definitive goal of reading. It is imperative that when incorporating fluency instruction into the daily routine, teachers maintain the major focus on comprehension instead of leading students to believe that the simple act of reading quickly or with a lot of expression will make them great readers (Worthy & Broaddus, 2002). On the contrary, accurate reading with the acceptable prosodic elements should support the construction and conveyance of meaning.

### **Conclusion**

The research has made it clear that fluency, as a multidimensional concept, is related to comprehension achievement. If prosody is a component of oral reading fluency, and fluency supports text comprehension, then it can be reasonably concluded that increasing prosody scores will ultimately increase comprehension achievement. Fluency instruction, once the domain of primary teachers, should also be a key component of literacy instruction at the middle school

level. This literature review presented evidence that Reader's Theater is an effective instructional activity that can increase prosody, word recognition, and comprehension while also supporting student engagement and motivation. Benefits may be particularly significant for low-achieving readers.

Each of the reviewed studies pertaining to Reader's Theater was carried out within elementary school settings; however, the researcher believed that the evidence supporting fluency instruction for middle school students, and Reader's Theater as an effective instructional activity for increasing oral reading prosody, demonstrated that an investigation of the effects of Reader's Theater at the middle school level was worthy of the time and resources involved in the implementation. In consideration of the teacher-researcher's teaching context, the following research question was formed: How does the implementation of Reader's Theater affect the prosody scores of middle school students with disabilities? The methodological details of the resulting study follow.

### **Methodology**

This study was a single group, pretest-posttest design. The independent variable was fluency instruction. Specifically, Reader's Theater was implemented as a fluency intervention. Reader's Theater is a week-long instructional activity consisting of a comprehension strategy lesson, explicit prosody instruction, and teacher modeling along with repeated readings/rehearsals of a script culminating in a read-aloud performance in front of an audience. The dependent variable, prosody, was operationally defined as scores obtained from both the multidimensional fluency rubric from TimRasinski.com (see Appendix A) and the fluency self-

assessment rubric from mshouser.com (see Appendix B). See Figure 1 for a graphic representation of the study design.

|                                |   |
|--------------------------------|---|
|                                | Independent Variable: Reader’s Theater<br>Fluency Instruction Intervention  |
| Dependent Variable:<br>Prosody | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Rasinski’s Fluency Rubric (pretest/posttest)</li> <li>2. Fluency Self-assessment Rubric (pretest/posttest)</li> <li>3. Researcher Log observations and reflections</li> </ol> |

*Figure 1. The study design.*

**Participants and Setting**

The participants in this study included a group of five students who attended a small public middle school of approximately 280 students in rural Western North Carolina. This school has been identified as a high-poverty school and receives Title I funding. Each of the five student participants was identified as having a learning disability, and each attended the researcher’s modified language arts class for one hour each day. The age range of the students was 12 to 14 years. Instructional reading levels of the five students ranged from third to fourth grade. All participants read at least three to five grade levels below their same-age peers. Four of the students also attended one of the researcher’s modified math classes, but otherwise the students attended general education classes for the rest of the school day. Two of the students were in sixth grade, and three were in eighth grade. The group was comprised of two females and three males. All of the students were Caucasian and considered to be members of families with low socioeconomic status. Figure 2 (on page 13) shows an overview of specific participant characteristics.

| Participant Number | Age | Grade | Male/Female    | Instructional Reading Level |
|--------------------|-----|-------|----------------|-----------------------------|
| 1                  | 12  | 6     | Female (Betty) | 3                           |
| 2                  | 12  | 6     | Female (Holly) | 4                           |
| 3                  | 14  | 8     | Male (Adam)    | 3                           |
| 4                  | 14  | 8     | Male (Evan)    | 4                           |
| 5                  | 14  | 8     | Male (James)   | 3                           |

*Figure 2. Specific participant characteristics.*

The researcher was the language arts teacher of record for the participant group. She had been teaching for just under four years, all of which were completed at the aforementioned school as an exceptional children’s teacher. The researcher had a bachelor’s degree in special education and initial North Carolina licensure (highly qualified) in Special Education: General Curriculum. In addition, she was highly qualified in the following certification areas: Middle School Language Arts, Middle School Math, Middle School Social Studies, and K-6 Elementary. The researcher was pursuing a master’s degree in Reading Education from East Carolina University at the time of the study.

### **Intervention**

Reader’s Theater has been identified as an effective instructional activity for increasing prosody (Keehn, 2003; Chase & Young, 2009) and was implemented as part of the daily classroom routine for the duration of the study. The daily schedule was adapted from Chase Young’s year-long implementation of Reader’s Theater (Young & Rasinski, 2009). Young

utilized a five-day schedule for each script the class rehearsed and performed (Young & Rasinski, 2009).

On day one, a new script was introduced to the class through a teacher read-aloud with students listening and following along. The researcher used this whole-script introduction to both model prosodic reading and present a 30-minute lesson focusing on one comprehension strategy. Students took the script home for homework and read it as a whole text for meaning. As recommended by Worthy and Broaddus (2002), the focus on comprehension and prosody for conveying meaning continued throughout the week-long script work.

On day two, the researcher assigned individual parts based on each student's instructional level. The researcher adapted the scripts from hi-lo chapter books (high-interest, low-level) that students had not yet read in order to ensure that parts were available for each student's instructional reading level. The use of these hi-lo chapter books is supported by generalizations made by Ivey (1999) which point to the use of more accessible texts to increase the engagement of struggling readers while providing materials that are not seen as embarrassing. Next, the group did its first run-through of the script with teacher and peer modeling of prosodic reading as needed.

On days three and four, students continued to spend a portion of the class time on rehearsals. Students were also expected to read their parts at home each night for homework/additional practice. On day five, students performed their read-aloud of the script in front of an audience of staff, families, or other students.

The read-aloud presentations were recorded on the classroom iPad so that students were able to go back and review their performances. Students were able to use the recordings to

identify what they did well and what they needed to work on during the next week. They were able to watch these recordings on days when rotation work was planned. This was outside of the regularly scheduled Reader's Theater block of time. The listening station included a copy of the self-assessment rubric that students were able to use to help them identify strengths and weaknesses from each performance.

Six weeks were allotted for the intervention, but because of the impact of winter weather on the school schedule, three extra days were required in order for the group to complete a third script. The intervention began on January 11, 2016 and ended on February 24, 2016. Figure 3 shows a schedule of the daily activities.

| <i>Day</i> | <i>Activity</i>                                     | <i>Estimated Time</i> |
|------------|---|-----------------------|
| 1          | Whole-script introduction with strategy lesson      | 30 minutes            |
| 2          | Assign instructional-level parts; first run-through | 25 minutes            |
| 3          | Rehearsal   | 20 minutes            |
| 4          | Rehearsal   | 20 minutes            |
| 5          | Performance   | 20 minutes            |

*Figure 3. A schedule of daily intervention activities.*

### **Data Sources and Data Collection Procedures**

Data from this study were collected through both quantitative and qualitative methods. Three data sources were gathered: a fluency rubric, a student self-assessment fluency rubric, and a researcher log (see Appendix C). Each is described in detail in the paragraphs that follow.

The researcher utilized a multi-dimensional fluency rubric (Rasinski, n.d.) that was created to assess student prosody by assigning a score of one to four in each of four areas: expression and volume, phrasing, smoothness, and pace. A score of four is the highest available score in a particular area. Students were given a short paragraph written at an independent reading level and were allowed to first read it silently and then out loud one time for practice. Students read the paragraph aloud once more, and the data collector used this reading to assess student prosody. The use of independent-level texts for data collection is important, because students cannot exhibit prosody if they are struggling to decode words. This assessment occurred both pre- and post-intervention during the weeks of January 4, 2016 and February 29, 2016.

The multidimensional fluency rubric (Rasinski, n.d.) was used a second time to assess student prosody in the context of a Reader's Theater performance. This assessment occurred in order for the researcher to determine whether any increase in prosody that occurred from the first performance to the last performance actually carried over to show a comparable increase in prosody when students read short paragraphs without the added purpose of performance. In order to complete this assessment, the data collector used the multidimensional fluency rubric to assign students a score of one to four for each measured component. The data collector referred to video recordings of the first and last performances in order to assess students' performance-based reading prosody. These two assessments were completed on January 18, 2016 and February 29, 2016.

Students completed a fluency self-assessment, both pre- and post-intervention, using the "kid friendly fluency rubric" (Ms. Houser, n.d.). This occurred during the weeks of January 4, 2016 and February 29, 2016. First, students were given a new independent-level paragraph to read silently. Next, they read it aloud one time for practice. On the second read-aloud, the

students were recorded. Once all students had been recorded the first time, the researcher introduced the rubric to the group during a class activity. Each of the four components being measured (phrasing, rate, punctuation, and expression) was discussed, and the researcher gave examples of what reading would sound like at each level of measurement. A score of one to four is assigned for each component with a score of four being the highest available in any one area. Students also had the opportunity to rate teacher examples of oral reading for practice. Once the students were comfortable using the rubric, they listened to their own recordings in order to complete the self-assessment.

The third piece of data collected was a researcher log. The researcher log was used to record observations and reflections throughout the duration of the study. Examples of researcher log entries included student reactions to the activities, changes in instruction that need to be made due to student needs, adjustments made in the teaching schedule or amount of time needed for activities, and reflections on discussions that occurred in the classroom during the study.

There was no specific reliability information available for either the multidimensional fluency rubric or the kid-friendly fluency rubric. However, Rasinski's (n.d.) multidimensional fluency rubric was based on Zutell and Rasinski's multidimensional fluency scale (as cited in Haskins & Aleccia, 2014). Similar scales and guides used by Rasinski were purported to show a consensus estimate of 81% for two raters and 94% reliability for adjacent and exact matches (Haskins & Aleccia, 2014).

### **Data Analysis**

Both quantitative and qualitative data were scrutinized in order to examine the role of Reader's Theater in the prosody development of the participants. Quantitative measures included

the rating of student oral reading prosody through the use of two fluency rubrics. Rasinski's (n.d.) multidimensional fluency rubric was utilized to measure prosody in both performance-based and general oral reading. The self-assessment fluency rubric from Ms. Houser (n.d.) was used by students to rate their own prosody using voice recordings. Qualitative data were gathered from the researcher log.

Quantitative data were analyzed for each participant in three different ways. First, the fluency scores as measured by the multidimensional fluency rubric (Rasinski, n.d.) and the kid-friendly fluency rubric (Ms. Houser, n.d.) were compared to determine differences and gains. Each student's pre- and post-intervention rubrics were compared to determine changes in individual scores. Those changes were used to find the mean increase for the participant group. Next, participant scores on each individual rubric component were compared to determine differences and gains. Finally, the pre- and post-intervention differences for each component were compared to determine if the intervention had more of an effect on some components compared to others.

Qualitative data were analyzed by the researcher through the identification of themes and patterns within the researcher log. The researcher carefully read the log after the intervention had concluded. Colored highlighters were used to code the entries. These codes were grouped into various themes and patterns which related to the research question.

### **Validity and Reliability or Trustworthiness**

Triangulation of data was ensured through the use of two separate fluency measurement rubrics and a researcher log to increase the credibility of the study. In addition, several possible threats to validity and reliability were identified and addressed in the preparation of this action

research study. The first threat identified was mortality threat. There was the possibility that one or more students could withdraw from the school, experience excessive absences, or leave the study for other reasons. In the event that one or more of these events had occurred, the scores of the affected student would have been invalidated and would not have been included in the final study results. The participant would not have been replaced, and the loss of any one student would not have significantly affected the demographics of the study since all participants were similar in age, disability identification, classroom placement, etc. Normally, the loss of one or more subjects in a study could limit generalizability (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012), though in the case of action research, the study results are not expected to be generalizable outside of the study setting (Hendricks, 2013). Consequently, this was not a concern for this particular study.

The second threat which was considered was location threat. It was important to address location threat in order to reduce the likelihood that results may have been skewed due to the location in which the intervention was implemented or in which the data were collected (Fraenkel et al., 2012). To control for this, all intervention activities occurred in the same classroom in which students received their daily language arts instruction. In addition, students were always assessed in a separate room that was used for curriculum based assessments at the time the study was carried out. Distractions were limited during assessments. A sign was placed on the door during the collection of data to prevent interruptions, and the assessment room was away from the main hallway to limit distraction due to noise during class changes.

A third threat considered was data collector bias. Because the researcher was the teacher of record for the participant group, data could have inadvertently been distorted in ways that may have supported the hypothesis (Fraenkel et al., 2012). In order to minimize this risk, data collection was completed by another classroom teacher with no direct interests tied to the study

results. The data collector assigned a random number to each student's scores in order to prevent the researcher from having any knowledge of individual scores until after data were analyzed.

### **Findings and Results**

At the conclusion of the intervention, data was collected and analyzed from three sources. Quantitative data collected from the multidimensional fluency rubric (Rasinski, n.d.) and the kid-friendly fluency rubric (Ms. Houser, n.d.) were analyzed to find the average growth, if any, in prosody scores for the participant group and the individual growth, if any, for each specific participant. Qualitative data was collected from the researcher log. Specific findings regarding each of the data sources are discussed in the following paragraphs.

#### **Multidimensional Fluency Rubric**

The multidimensional fluency rubric (Rasinski, n.d.) was used to assess students' prosody on an independent-level passage pre- and post-intervention. The five study participants showed an average growth of 3.2 points from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment. All five participants showed growth over the span of the intervention. Figure 4 shows individual participant pre- and post-intervention scores and growth.

The multidimensional fluency rubric (Rasinski, n.d.) was also used to assess each participant's prosody based on the first and last Reader's Theater performances. One student, Adam, was hospitalized during the final performance, but was able to be complete all other assessments and is included in these results. Of the four participants who completed both performances, there was an average of 2.5 points of growth. All four of those participants

showed growth from the first to last performance. Figure 5 shows the available scores and growth (if any) for all five participants.

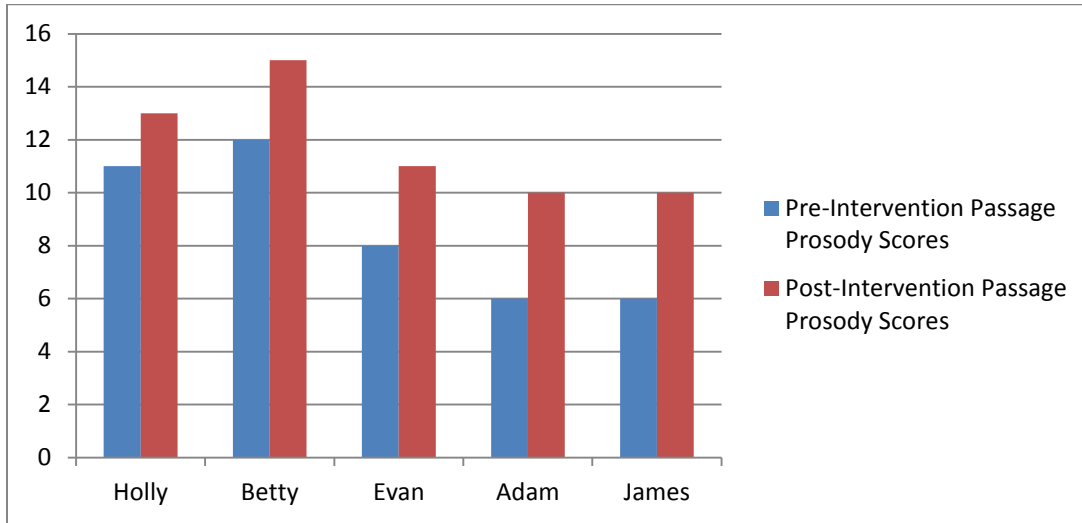


Figure 4. A comparison of pre- and post-intervention passage prosody scores.

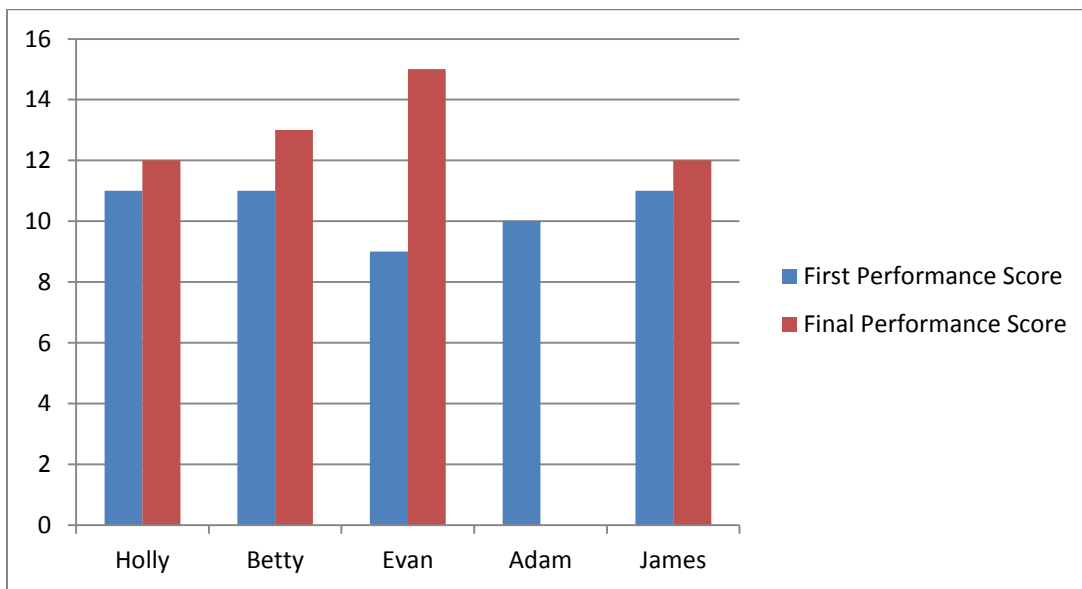


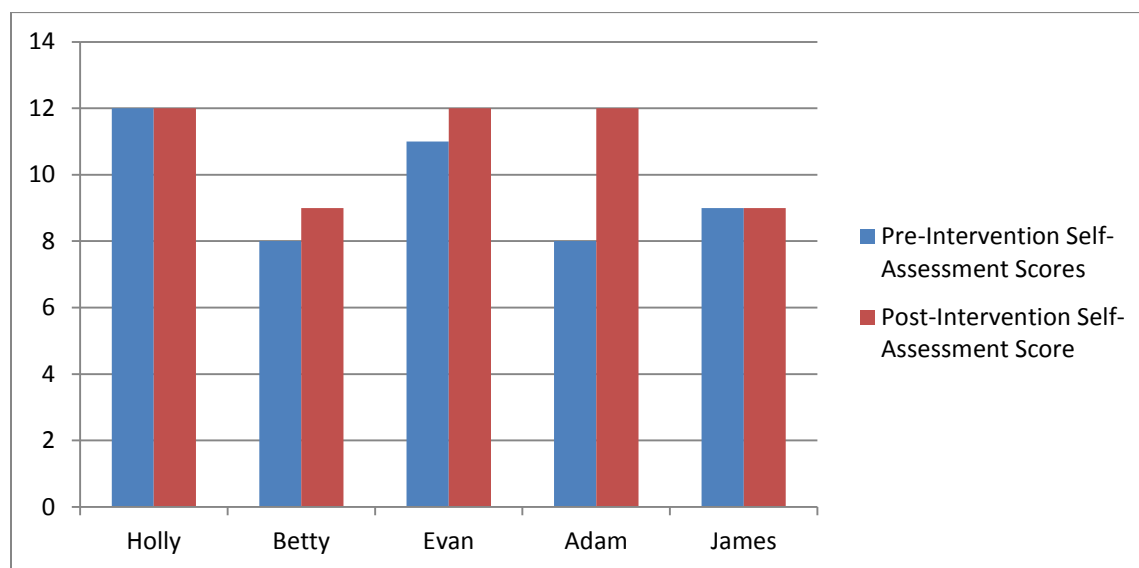
Figure 5. A comparison of pre- and post-intervention performance prosody scores.

The results from the multi-dimensional fluency rubrics (Rasinski, n.d.) assessing both passage and performance prosody showed that the greatest increases in scores occurred in the

area of expression and volume. Five of five participants showed growth in this area on the passage prosody assessment with an average increase of 1.6 points. Four of four participants who completed both performances showed improvement in the same area with an average increase of one point. Other fluency areas assessed with this rubric included phrasing, smoothness, and pace.

### **Kid-Friendly Fluency Rubric**

The kid-friendly fluency rubric (Ms. Houser, n.d.) was used by study participants to complete a prosody self-assessment both pre- and post-intervention. Three students showed growth, while the other two students' scores did not change from pre- to post-intervention. The average growth across all five students' scores was 1.2 points over the span of the intervention. Figure 6 shows participant scores and any growth that occurred. The rubrics showed that the greatest increase in scores occurred in the area of punctuation. Three of the five participants showed growth in this area with an average increase of one point for each of those three participants. Other fluency areas assessed included expression, phrasing, and rate.



*Figure 6. A comparison of pre- and post-intervention student self-assessment scores.*

## Researcher Log

The researcher analyzed qualitative data by identifying general themes in the researcher log related to student prosody scores, Reader's Theater components, and students with disabilities. These were further refined into the following more specific themes: knowledge of prosody, comfort level and confidence, peer modeling and feedback, speech and processing issues, and the lower achievement/significant improvement link.

**Knowledge of prosody.** An early entry in the researcher log noted a thought regarding student's knowledge of the multiple facets of prosody and how that might relate to their self-assessment scores. At that time, the researcher theorized that as students' understanding of the multidimensional nature of fluency increased, self-assessment scores may become more accurate. Student understanding of prosody did increase over the course of the intervention as evidenced by participants' ability to insightfully provide peer feedback. Examples of this noted in the researcher log included, "The first 'Pa' line needed more expression" and "They need to watch more for commas and periods."

As early as the first Reader's Theater performance, the participants were showing increased knowledge of prosody, particularly in the area of expression. Part of the researcher log entry for that day read, "When questioned about how they felt their performances went, all students felt they had done a good job, which shows their self-confidence is already increasing. When asked what they felt they needed to improve, they all identified expression and/or punctuation as trouble spots." Students were able to critique themselves with great insights into what areas they needed to improve upon. All students identified expression and/or punctuation as trouble spots.

**Comfort level and confidence.** There were several indications throughout the researcher log that confidence and comfort level impacted participants' participation and/or prosody improvement. Early in the intervention, a researcher observation was made about Betty, one of the higher readers in the class. She was reluctant to use the level of expression she had previously exhibited in the classroom. During rehearsals for the same script, the log noted that students used expression more freely in pairs than in the bigger groups.

Betty and Holly were the only two girls in the class, and they were always working together on collaborative assignments. When the two were separated to work with different groups, their reading became awkward and, at times, less fluent. After showing progress during rehearsals for the second script, it was noted in the log that their reading regressed during the performance, and they read in a softer voice. The audience for the performances usually included at least one parent or teacher with whom they were not familiar. Despite James's progress after the first group feedback session, his expression also regressed during the final script performance. The researcher log read, "James's expression wasn't quite as good as yesterday, but I attributed this to a bit of nervousness, as he is definitely not an outgoing student. Maybe, for some students, having an audience reduces their self-confidence."

There were also indicators of increased confidence and comfort level for some students. When asked how they felt about their first Reader's Theater performance, all students felt they had done a "good job" which highlighted increased self-confidence. During rehearsals for the second script, it was noted that "Students have begun to seek me out so they can ask if they are reading with the correct expression," implying an increased comfort level with the activity.

**Speech and processing issues.** Students' particular characteristics impacted their personal level of performance and improvement. In James's case, an issue with his speech created a major stumbling block as he continued to work toward improving his prosody skills. "James is a more monotone speaker even in everyday conversation, so although he is trying to read with expression, it is a struggle for him. He ends all his sentences with an upward inflection as if he's trying to ask a question." In the case of Adam, his processing delays affected his ability to read with automaticity and to keep up with the script as other students read aloud. The researcher noted, "Adam has trouble keeping up with the script, as his ability to read along is impaired due to his processing speed. There is usually a delay in his reaction time when it's his turn to read." Both James and Adam showed improvement despite these obstacles. The researcher reasonably assumed that personal motivation and engagement in the activities were catalysts for their progress.

**The lower achievement/significant improvement link.** Evan was one of the lower readers in the class, reading at approximately a third-grade reading level in the eighth grade. He began to understand the concept of expression linked to meaning quite quickly. The day before the first performance, it was noted in the researcher log that "Evan has been successful at using expression while reading his lines, even if he is not able to read some of the longer lines with smoothness." As the intervention continued, he was successful in using expression even when he was not able to read some of the longer lines of text with a high level of fluidity. Toward the middle of the second Reader's Theater script cycle, the researcher noticed that "Evan read quite haltingly today, but by the end of class, I could hear improvements from the repeated practice. Just like with the last script, he tries so hard to read with expression, even when he struggles with the phrasing."

By the end of the intervention, Evan was the student who showed the greatest overall increase in the area of expression and volume. Evan's success aligns what the literature says regarding lower-achieving students showing more substantial improvements over time. It is important to note that the greatest majority of Evan's read-aloud practice occurred at school. He freely admitted that he often did not read at home. Despite this, his prosody increased dramatically from pre- to post-assessment.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of a Reader's Theater intervention on the prosody scores of middle school students with disabilities. Reader's Theater incorporates multiple components of effective, evidence-based fluency instruction. Repeated reading, the most widely recommended strategy for increasing fluency, was the foundation of the Reader's Theater intervention. It has been shown to improve word recognition, rate, accuracy, and comprehension (Corcoran & Davis, 2005; Worthy & Broaddus, 2002) and leads to increased comprehension and prosody (Guerin & Murphy, 2015).

Modeling, another recommended strategy for improving fluency (Corcoran & Davis, 2005; Guerin & Murphy, 2015; Worthy & Broaddus, 2002), was integrated into each of the rehearsal sessions. Students were given multiple opportunities to hear the text modeled by their peers and by the teacher. Keehn (2005) indicated that students who hear fluent reading have an advantage over those who do not. Because of the research base regarding modeling for fluency improvement, teacher and peer modeling was implemented extensively throughout the intervention.

Engagement is a crucial component to any evidence-based intervention. Reader's Theater keeps students engaged through an authentic purpose for reading, which Ivey (1999) recommended. Because students knew they would have to perform the script, they had a valid reason to repeatedly read the same text over the course of the week. Reader's Theater also supports performance-based reading activities, also advocated by Ivey (1999) for adolescent readers. Several participants attended regular education drama classes during the arts block. The performance-based nature of Reader's Theater was appealing to these students who enjoyed reading their lines dramatically. Some students were excited about performing in front of an audience.

Because struggling readers need to feel reading success, Ivey (1999) emphasized the need for experiences with instructional-level texts. Keehn (2004) also stressed the importance of manageable texts for this population. The feeling of success supports student engagement. With this in mind, the intervention was designed for use with Reader's Theater scripts which were adapted from three hi-lo books in the classroom library.

The Reader's Theater scripts acted as teasers to pique students' interest in reading the books from which they were adapted. For two out of the three scripts performed, this worked well, as evidenced by the waiting lists that had to be created for struggling readers who suddenly wanted to check out books in order to find out what happened next in the stories.

Using hi-lo chapter books likely played a part in this increased engagement, particularly because students were involved in the process of choosing and ordering the new classroom books at the beginning of the year. Not only were the books interesting and readable for these particular

students, but they also felt a sense of ownership in these materials due to their participation in acquiring them.

In revisiting the research question, quantitative data indicated that the Reader's Theater intervention positively impacted the prosody scores of the study participants. On passage reading assessments, all five participants increased their total prosody scores from two to four points. One student, Adam, was absent on the day of the last Reader's Theater performance and, therefore, shows a zero increase due to a lack of data in this area. The other four participants increased their total prosody scores from one to six points on the performance reading assessments over the course of the intervention. The researcher had originally theorized that performance scores would increase more than passage reading scores because of the prolonged, repeated reading practice before performances. This was not the case, though, with the exception of one student, Evan.

On passage reading self-assessments, three of the five participants showed an increased score post-intervention. The other two participants' scores were unchanged from pre- to post-intervention. Student self-assessment pre-intervention showed inflated scores as compared to teacher-administered assessments. As noted previously, the researcher theorized that as student understanding of prosody increased, students would be able to more accurately score their self-assessments. The lower increases in self-assessment scores post-intervention, as compared to the increases in scores seen on the teacher-administered assessments, indicated that this theory may have been correct.

Qualitative data showed that participants' understanding of prosody did increase over the course of the intervention. It also emphasized the impact of teacher and peer modeling on the

prosody growth for this group of participants. The researcher log highlighted the impact of comfort level and self-confidence, as well as speech and processing issues, as related to student progress. In the case of Evan, the qualitative data corresponded to research of Keehn (2003) which indicated that students at lower achievement levels who participated in Reader's Theater activities showed significant growth compared to students at average and high achievement levels.

The qualitative data also pointed to added benefits for participants which were above and beyond increased prosody. As stated previously, participant self-confidence improved. Participants also discovered the value of self-assessment and peer feedback in relation to motivation and pinpointing areas in which improvements were needed. The use of scripts adapted from hi-lo classroom books, which were used as teasers to pique students' interest, led to increased reading motivation for the participants.

One particularly interesting piece of qualitative data from the researcher log was a section regarding classroom oral reading fluency assessments which were already part of the classroom schedule and not part of this study. During these assessments, students were given a grade-level passage and asked to read it aloud for one minute with no practice beforehand. During these assessments, which occurred during the third Reader's Theater script cycle, participants began applying their new knowledge of prosody to grade-level passages they had never seen before. This type of skill application was specifically mentioned in Rasinski and Padak's (2005) study which read, "When readers demonstrate significant improvement on never-before-seen passages, real learning is taking place" (p. 38).

## **Limitations**

There were certain limitations of this study which prevent the results from being generalized for other populations. The results indicated that the intervention worked for this group; however, the participant group was small and quite specific in the diverse needs of the students.

The sample size for this study was five participants; furthermore, these participants formed a unique group for a few reasons. First, all participants received Exceptional Children's services with an Individualized Education Plan due to the diagnosis of one or more disabilities. Second, these students received their core language arts instruction in an Exceptional Children's classroom away from non-disabled peers. Finally, the teacher-researcher for this study saw most of the participants for at least two hours per day (including other subjects), and she had taught some of the participants for multiple years. Because of this, the teacher-researcher had more insights into the needs and learning abilities of these students than a single-year and/or single-subject teacher might have had.

The length and consistency of the intervention were also limiting factors for this study. While the original window for the intervention was six weeks, multiple school delays and closings necessitated extending the window for a seventh week. The seven weeks of instruction were not consistent due to reasons explained in the following paragraph.

There were twelve school days missed due to inclement weather. School was held on a delayed schedule three times. Practice was missed a total of four more days for various other reasons. Because of the amount of inclement weather, the intervention window was expanded by one week so that students could complete at least three scripts in their entirety. Despite this

intermittent nature of the intervention, all students had improved prosody scores and increased in one or more areas of fluency by the end of the intervention. This led the researcher to question whether the improvements seen would have been greater with a more consistent school schedule. During practice days for the third script, it seemed that some participants were regressing. This was proven not to be the case during the final performance in which the participants read aloud with evidence of overall prosody improvement despite earlier indicators of regression.

### **Implications for Educators and Future Research**

The results of this study indicated that the Reader's Theater intervention positively impacted prosody scores for middle school students with disabilities. Based on these results, Reader's Theater is worthy of consideration when teachers plan fluency instruction for this population. Nonetheless, given the small sample size and specific qualities of the participant group, further research is recommended to test the effectiveness of the intervention in larger groups of students both with and without diverse disabilities.

Qualitative data from the researcher log suggests that peer- and teacher-modeling, along with repeated reading, are key to successful prosody instruction. It would be reasonable to suggest that teachers implementing the Reader's Theater prosody intervention incorporate the modeling strategies extensively. Teachers may also want to consider implementing the modeling and repeated reading strategies outside the Reader's Theater context. Further research may be able to determine whether using these strategies on their own is as effective (or more effective) than their implementation within the Reader's Theater context.

While this study included participants with disabilities, Young and Rasinski's (2009) study implies that Reader's Theater is not limited in its suitability for students with disabilities,

but that it can also be successfully implemented in the general education classroom. Though most of the research regarding fluency instruction focuses on elementary school students, this action research study suggests that Reader's Theater, as a fluency intervention, can be successfully used at the middle school level. Further research is needed to determine the effectiveness of Reader's Theater in the middle school general education classroom. General education students may benefit from the implementation of Reader's Theater in the language arts classroom. Additionally, teachers may find the Reader's Theater activity suitable for providing differentiated instruction to struggling readers.

### **Reflection**

When reflecting on this action research project, what stands out most to me is that everything comes down to knowing the students you serve and backing instructional decisions with research and data. I feel that a study such as this one really needs to be carried out in an action research context. Knowing the participants--their strengths and weaknesses, their interests, their learning styles, etc.--was essential to designing an intervention that had a good chance of supporting student growth. Something that might seem inconsequential to an outside researcher (adapting scripts from the hi-lo books versus downloading a stand-alone script) could have an impact on student engagement or success.

I have enjoyed experiencing the shift from "teacher" to "teacher-researcher" for a number of reasons. First, it has allowed me to see how students react to my instructional practices from a more objective perspective as I step back and really observe what is happening in my classroom. It goes much farther than realizing that a student does or does not respond well to the instruction. It means actively looking for, and understanding, *why* an instructional practice does or does not

work well for my students. It means knowing the particular issues each student deals with on a daily basis and finding out how to work around, or even play off of, those issues in order to improve student learning.

Reflection plays an essential role in the action research process and in the daily process of working to become a better educator. It has taught me to question myself and evaluate my own effectiveness in my classroom. It has helped me become more objective when it comes to measuring student growth. In my case, that meant looking beyond an increase in reading rate for some students to realize that those students still were not exhibiting real reading fluency.

Second, I have come to understand that identifying the problems that impede student learning requires looking deeper than surface-level. Sure, it was easy to know that fluency was a problem for my students—but why? What was it, exactly, that was at the root of the problem? In my case, the problem was narrowed down to reading prosody. As a teacher-researcher, I have learned that my own understanding must change and deepen before I can effectively improve student learning. It has become a constant process of narrowing down, troubleshooting, and problem-solving. It has meant digging deep into the available research to really understand what lies at the root of the problem and letting that research guide my own practice. Implementing this study meant that I could investigate the effects of this evidence-based practice in the context of my own classroom, taking it from an abstract concept on paper to concrete data that indicated increased student growth and improved student learning.

Third, the role of teacher-researcher has not only led to increased student growth, but it has led to increased professional growth for myself. As teacher-researcher, I have grown as an educator and my practice has changed for the better as evidenced by increased student

engagement and student growth. My view of reading fluency has been altered by the recognition of fluency as a multi-dimensional concept which is directly linked to improved comprehension. My understanding of the importance of evidence-based practices such as teacher modeling and repeated reading, as well as the concept of fluency as a secondary-level component of reading instruction, will continue to influence and guide my reading instruction in the years to come.

In addition to growing personally and professionally, I have also been able to contribute to the knowledge base in the area of reading and, more specifically in this case, the area of teaching students with disabilities. This has led to increased collaboration with other educators as I seek more knowledge, ask for advice from more seasoned educators, and share what I have learned with colleagues.

Implementing this action research study has been a rewarding and invaluable experience. While it required a significant time commitment and sometimes resulted in added stress, the added effort does not compare to the incredible feeling of watching students bloom under the right instructional conditions. Being able to witness students' increased self-confidence as they "took the stage" and read with more fluency and comprehension than ever before has helped remind me of the reasons why I first became a teacher for students with disabilities.

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Appendix A

Multidimensional Fluency Rubric (Rasinski, n.d.)

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

**FLUENCY RUBRIC**

|                              | <b>1</b>   | <b>2</b>  | <b>3</b>  | <b>4</b>  |
|------------------------------|--|---|---|---|
| <b>Expression and Volume</b> | Reads in a quiet voice as if to get words out. The reading does not sound natural like talking to a friend.                                      | Reads in a quiet voice. The reading sounds natural in part of the text, but the reader does not always sound like they are talking to a friend. | Reads with volume and expression. However, sometimes the reader slips into expressionless reading and does not sound like they are talking to a friend. | Reads with varied volume and expression. The reader sounds like they are talking to a friend with their voice matching the interpretation of the passage. |
| <b>Phrasing</b>              | Reads word-by-word in a monotone voice.  | Reads in two or three word phrases, not adhering to punctuation, stress and intonation.   | Reads with a mixture of run-ons, mid sentence pauses for breath, and some choppiness. There is reasonable stress and intonation.                        | Reads with good phrasing, adhering to punctuation, stress and intonation.   |
| <b>Smoothness</b>            | Frequently hesitates while reading, sounds out words, and repeats words or phrases. The reader makes multiple attempts to read the same passage. | Reads with extended pauses or hesitations. The reader has many “rough spots.”   | Reads with occasional breaks in rhythm. The reader has difficulty with specific words and/or sentence structures.                                       | Reads smoothly with some breaks, but self-corrects with difficult words and/ or sentence structures.  |
| <b>Pace</b>                  | Reads slowly and laboriously.  | Reads moderately slowly.  | Reads fast and slow throughout reading.   | Reads at a conversational pace throughout the reading.  |


Scores of 10 or more indicate that the student is making good progress in fluency. Score \_\_\_\_\_

Scores below 10 indicate that the student needs additional instruction in fluency.

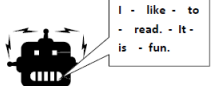
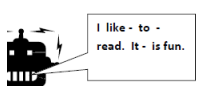
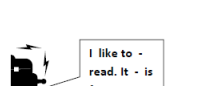

Rubric modified from Tim Rasinski – [Creating Fluent Readers](#)


Appendix B

Kid-Friendly Fluency Rubric (Ms. Houser, n.d.)





 I can read with fluency. I put my words together so my reading sounds right and makes sense. This means that I am paying attention to my phrasing.


PHRASING:

| 1  | 2  | 3   | 4   |
|--|--|---|---|
| <p>I read word-by-word, or one word at a time, like a robot.</p>  | <p>I am trying to read the way the author wrote the words. Sometimes I read 2 or 3 words at a time. Sometimes I read word by word, like a robot.</p>  | <p>I am really close to reading the words the way the author wrote them. I usually read in 3 or 4 word groups.</p>  | <p>I put the words together the way the author wrote them. I put the words together so that it makes sense.</p>  |





 I can read with fluency. I read at the correct rate. Not too quickly, and not too slowly. My reading sounds right and makes sense.

RATE:

| 1   | 2   | 3  | 4  |
|---|---|--|--|
| <p>I am really slow and have to figure out each word on the page. I read so slowly that it really does not make sense.</p>  | <p>I can be slow because I have to read word-by-word when I don't know the words. I take breaks, pause too much, and repeat words when I read.</p>  | <p>I try to read like I talk. Sometimes I go too fast, or too slow. I might slow down when I am trying to figure out a tricky word. Sometimes I pause or stop when it doesn't make sense.</p>  | <p>I read like I talk. I only slow down, stop, or repeat words when it make sense and sounds right.</p>  |





 I can read fluently. I use the punctuation to help me know how to read the story, so that it sounds right and makes sense.

PUNCTUATION:

| 1   | 2   | 3   | 4  |
|---|---|---|--|
| <p>I don't pay attention to periods, commas, exclamation points, question marks, and quotation marks when I read. My reading doesn't sound right or make sense.</p>  | <p>Sometimes I use the punctuation, but I might use it the wrong way.</p>  | <p>I usually pay attention to the punctuation. I may make a mistake every once in a while.</p>  | <p>I always pay attention to the punctuation. My reading sounds right and makes sense.</p>  |

 I can read fluently. I read with expression so that it sounds interesting and makes sense.

EXPRESSION:

| 1   | 2  | 3   | 4  |
|---|--|---|--|
| <p>My reading sounds boring and doesn't really make sense because I don't read with expression.</p>  | <p>I am trying to read with expression, but I may read it the wrong way sometimes.</p>  | <p>I read with expression most of the time. My reading sounds interesting most of the time.</p>  | <p>I always read with expression so it always sounds interesting and exciting.</p>  |

Appendix C

Sample Pages from Researcher’s Log

|               |  |  |   |
|---------------|--|--|---|
|               | <p>for a couple of teachers who had planning during our language arts period.</p>  | <p>Betty really struggled to read today, stumbling over many words. She read very haltingly. Betty also reads quietly, so volume is something I will need to help her with in the next script.</p> <p>James’s main struggle was the ending of sentences. Many of his sentences all end the same, whether questions, statements, or otherwise. I have noticed, however, that when one of his lines consists of two sentences, he sometimes reads the first sentence more correctly than the final sentence.</p> <p>Like Betty, Holly read quietly today. Volume is something we will definitely address over the next week. There are still some issues with the endings and beginnings of sentences for Holly.</p> | <p>had read substantially better during practices.</p> <p>I feel that Adam’s continued struggles with expression likely stems from his processing issues. He works very hard to try to keep up with the rest of the students’ reading so that he doesn’t cause too much of a delay. I think that with his focus on that, it can use up some of his cognitive power that might be channeled into his expression otherwise.</p> <p>It is unlike Betty to struggle as much as she did today. Normally, she is one of the top readers in this group, so I don’t know if maybe she felt nervous in front of unfamiliar teachers or if there was some other issue that caused her to have problems today.</p> <p>Other than reading too quietly today, Holly read quite well.</p> <p>Overall, I can see vast improvements in most of the students’ oral reading already with the repeated reading. I am anxious to find out whether this</p>  |
| <p>2/8/16</p> | <p>I introduced script #3, <i>Along the Santa Fe Trail</i>, this morning. After handing out the student copies, I read the script aloud with students following along. We worked on using context clues to figure out the time period in which the story is set. We also used inferences to understand why there were few women and almost no girls on the wagon train. Vocabulary was discussed as well, including terms such as canvas, yoke, prairie, Pawnees, Comanches, corral, and the homophones field/filled.</p> <p>I noted that this script is a bit more “wordy” than the previous two, and explained that they might want to do some extra read-aloud practice because of that. There were not as many characters to choose from in this story, so I had to assign the narrator part to two of the</p> | <p>Students did not read aloud today. They responded well to the inferential questions, recognizing that the mention of wagons, oxen, and the wagon trail meant that the story was likely set in the 1800s. This was confirmed later in the story. Two students, one of which was <u>Evan</u>, stated that they didn’t think this story would be as interesting as the first two that we read.</p> <p>James was absent today, so with the likelihood of missing some school due to snow, he is going to be behind in practicing his script.</p>  | <p>Thinking back to Adam’s issues with keeping up with the rest of the class in reading aloud, as well as the time it takes him to turn pages and flip the script (he has physical issues with his right hand due to CP), I printed a one-sided copy of the script so it’s not so complicated for him to go from one page to the next. Hopefully this will help him.</p> <p>Students seemed ready to get started on the new script today. They seemed pleased when I told them they had bigger parts to read this time. I can see the progress they are making, and I think they see it, too. I have not had any student who did not want to participate in this activity. Most seem to relish the opportunity to be in the spotlight!</p> <p>Although this story does not start out with as much adventure as the other two, I do think they will enjoy reading it later, especially if I can link it to the real perils and adventures of traveling across the country during that time period.</p> |

Appendix D

IRB Expedited Study Approval Letter



**EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY**  
**University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board Office**  
 4N-70 Brody Medical Sciences Building · Mail Stop 682  
 600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834  
 Office 252-744-2914 · Fax 252-744-2284 · [www.ecu.edu/irb](http://www.ecu.edu/irb)

Notification of Initial Approval: Expedited

From: Social/Behavioral IRB  
 To: [Karen Gurley](#)  
 CC: [Elizabeth Swaggerty](#)  
 Date: 12/9/2015  
 Re: [UMCIRB 15-002087](#)  
 GURLEY: Impact of Reader's Theater on Prosody of Middle School Students with Disabilities

I am pleased to inform you that your Expedited Application was approved. Approval of the study and any consent form(s) is for the period of 12/8/2015 to 12/7/2016. The research study is eligible for review under expedited category # 6, 7. The Chairperson (or designee) deemed this study no more than minimal risk.

Changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. The investigator must submit a continuing review/closure application to the UMCIRB prior to the date of study expiration. The Investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

Approved consent documents with the IRB approval date stamped on the document should be used to consent participants (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found under the Documents tab in the study workspace).

The approval includes the following items:

| Name  | Description  |
|---|--|
| Gurley AR Proposal.docx                       | Study Protocol or Grant Application                |
| Kid-Friendly-Fluency-Rubric1.doc              | Standardized/Non-Standardized Instruments/Measures |
| multidimensional_fluency_rubric_4_factors.pdf | Standardized/Non-Standardized Instruments/Measures |
| Parent Guardian Consent K Gurley.docx         | Consent Forms                                      |
| StudentAssentFormKGurley.docx                 | Consent Forms                                      |

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

## Appendix E

## IRB Approved Parent/Guardian Consent Letter

Study ID:UMCIRB 15-002087 Date Approved: 12/8/2015 Expiration Date: 12/7/2016



College of Education

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December XX, 2015

Dear Parent/Guardian,

As part of my Master's of Reading Education degree requirements at East Carolina University, I am planning an educational research project that will help me learn more about improving reading achievement for middle school students with disabilities.

The fundamental goal of this project is to improve reading fluency. I have investigated an effective instructional practice, Reader's Theater, that I will be implementing during reading instruction in January 2015. I am going to track student improvement during reading instruction for six weeks. A fluency rubric and student self-assessment rubric will allow me to track student progress.

As part of the intervention and the research, I will be making both audio and video recordings. All of the recordings will be kept on a password-protected iPad. When not in use, this iPad will be kept locked in a cabinet inside my locked office. Access to the recordings will be limited to my data collector for this study, Mrs. Brinkley Fox, and me. Students will have limited access to the video recordings as outlined in the section marked "Video Recordings" below.

**Purpose and Use of Audio Recordings**

The audio recordings will be used by the students to assess their own fluency. They will listen to the recordings and use a rubric to assign themselves a score. These scores will be collected as part of the data for the study.

**Purpose and Use of Video Recordings**

Video recordings will be made of the students while they perform the Reader's Theater scripts after at least four days of practice. The video recordings will be used in two ways. First, students will have access to the recordings during specified times in order to review

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their performances and identify the areas in which they feel they did well and those areas in which they feel they need more work. In addition, the video recordings will be used by my data collector for this study, Mrs. Brinkley Fox, in order to assess student fluency during the performance of the first and last scripts. These scores will also be collected as data for the study.

This project has been approved by my instructor at ECU, Dr. Elizabeth Swaggerty, and the ECU Institutional Review Board.

All students will participate in the Reader's Theater activities as part of our language arts curriculum. I am asking permission to include your child's *progress* in my project report. Your child will not be responsible for "extra" work as a result of this project. The decision to participate or not **will not** affect your child's grade. I plan to share the results of this project with other educators through presentations and publications to help educators think about how they can improve reading instruction in their own classrooms. I will use pseudonyms to protect your child's identity. The name of our school, your child, or any other identifying information **will not** be used in my final report. Please know that participation (agreeing to allow me to include your child's data) is entirely voluntary and your child may withdraw from the study at any point without penalty.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at school at 828-682-2202 or email me at [kdgurley@yanceync.net](mailto:kdgurley@yanceync.net). You may also contact my supervising professor at ECU, Dr. Elizabeth Swaggerty, at [swaggertye@ecu.edu](mailto:swaggertye@ecu.edu), 252.328.4970. If you have questions about your child's rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the Office of Research Integrity & Compliance (ORIC) at 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may call the Director of the OHRI, at 252-744-1971.

Please indicate your preference on the next page and return the form by \_\_\_\_\_.  
Please keep this page for your reference.

Your Partner in Education,

Ms. Karen Gurley  
EC Language Arts Teacher  
Cane River Middle School  
MAEd. READ Graduate Student  
East Carolina University

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**As the parent or guardian of \_\_\_\_\_, I grant permission for Ms. Karen Gurley to record my child (audio and video recordings) in order to gather fluency data through student self-assessment and teacher assessment (to be completed by Mrs. Brinkley Fox). I also grant Ms. Karen Gurley permission use my child's data in the educational research project described above regarding fluency instruction. I voluntarily consent to Ms. Karen Gurley using data gathered about my child in her study. I fully understand that the data will not affect my child's grade and will be kept completely confidential.**

**Signature of Parent/Guardian: \_\_\_\_\_**

**Date \_\_\_\_\_**

**-OR-**

*As the parent or guardian of \_\_\_\_\_, I do not grant permission for my child's data to be included in the study.*

*Parent/Guardian: \_\_\_\_\_*

## Appendix F

## IRB Approved Student Assent Form

Study ID:UMCIRB 15-002087 Date Approved: 12/8/2015 Expiration Date: 12/7/2016

**IRB Study #**

**Title of Study:** Investigating the Impact of Reader's Theater on the Prosody Scores of Middle School Students with Disabilities

**Person in charge of study:** Karen Gurley

**Where they work:** Cane River Middle School

**Other people who work on the study:** Brinkley Fox

**Study contact phone number:** 828-682-2202

**Study contact E-mail address:** [kdgurley@yanceync.net](mailto:kdgurley@yanceync.net)

**Student Assent Form**

*To be read by investigator to students who have turned in parent consent forms.*

You are sitting here because your parent/guardian provided permission for you to participate in a study related to reading fluency instruction. Now, I am wondering if *you* want to help me learn about how you can improve your reading.

As part of our reading instruction, you will participate in an intervention that involves Reader's Theater, an activity that will involve repeated read-aloud practice and performance. You will do this beginning in January of 2016 after the holiday break for 6 weeks during our language arts hour. Mrs. Fox will listen to you read out loud two times—once before and once after the 6 weeks of instruction. She will use a rubric to score your fluency, and I will collect those scores so that I can track your progress from beginning to end. I will make audio (voice) and video (image) recordings of you during this time as well.

You will listen the audio recordings of your own reading so that you can give yourself a fluency score using a rubric. We will use the video recordings in two ways. First, you will be able to watch video of your Reader's Theater performances to see what you did well and what you need to improve. Second, Mrs. Fox will use the recordings to give you another fluency score at the beginning and end of our 6 weeks of Reader's Theater.

All of these scores will be used in my research study to track your progress over the course of the Reader's Theater intervention. Only you, your classmates, Mrs. Fox, and I will be able to see the video recordings. Only you, Mrs. Fox, and I will be able to listen to your voice recordings. They will be kept locked up on my password-protected iPad at all other times.

If you decide to take part in the research study, you can help me learn about what you think and what you've learned about reading by letting me use your scores from these assessments and assignments.

Your decision to take part or not take part in the study won't impact your grades at all. This project won't require any "extra work" for you.

Results of the project will be shared with other teachers so they can get better at teaching reading. I won't use your real name when I talk about the results of the project.

If, after we begin the project, you change your mind and decide you don't want to take part, you can tell me and I will not use your data but you will still take part in the instruction.

I think this project will be fun and might help you be a better reader. If you have any questions, please ask me.

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Since your parents have already agreed to let you participate, I just need your permission to participate now. If you agree, please tell me "yes" and sign your name below.

Thank you!

\_\_\_\_\_  
Sign your name here if you want to be in the study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print your name here if you want to be in the study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Assent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date