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Bridging the Gap: An Analysis of Elementary Literacy Instruction, and Proposed Solutions to Exponentiate Literacy Skills

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Bridging the Gap:
An Analysis of Elementary Literacy Instruction, and Proposed Solutions to Exponentiate
Literacy Skills

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for an Honors in

Elementary Education

By

Avery Gray

Under the Mentorship of *Dr. Sally Brown*

ABSTRACT

The reading achievement gap is generally identified as the increasing disparity between higher-level students and lower-level students within the same grade or school level. Student data presented in the form of secondary reading assessment scores were analyzed for the state of Georgia, as well as nationally, for student achievement regarding reading skills in public schools from grades 3-5. Interviews conducted with educational professionals were conducted to reveal anecdotal manifestations of what the presented data looks like in terms of student ability, and how the teaching practice has reacted to such manifestations. The evaluation of these consistencies and explanations given to provide causes for the data trends resulted in inconclusive results as to whether practical changes can be enacted to improve student literacy performance from within the school environment, or direct instruction. However, suggestions for practical applications to assist current student reading skills, as well as suggestions for future research, were developed in addition.

Keywords: reading achievement gap, pedagogy, literary ability, literacy instruction

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Introduction

Overview

Despite the improvements and research into pedagogy and language acquisition within the past few decades, there is still a growing gap between young students regarding communication and literacy abilities. The COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated these issues, as average reading scores fell from 2020 to 2022 (The National Assessment of Educational Progress, n.d). Lower-performing students saw even greater score decreases, widening the gap between student performance across the nation. While lower-level students have been shown to reach higher levels of learning with time (Gunning, 2022), this often involves specific intervention or remedial instruction at an individual or group level. Methods of whole group instruction that addresses these weaknesses, while still benefiting the variety of students present, are difficult to enact. There is a lack of alternative methods that could be implemented in whole class instruction to benefit the learning of all students, which would bridge the gap between higher-level learners and lower-level learners. This research seeks to examine what observed manifestations may explain the origins of these quantitative trends, and propose what can be done further to address these particular origins of facets of the reading achievement gap.

The reading achievement gap is generally identified as the increasing disparity between the most accomplished and least accomplished students within the same grade or school level (Gunning, 2022). Methods have been developed specifically to improve the learning of lower-level students, and these students tend to improve at a rate parallel to the rate of higher-level student learning (EAB, 2019). The current intervention methods applied have not been able to promote a lower-level student's learning to that of a higher-level student's learning. Both

Bridging the Gap

students may improve with current pedagogical methods and interventions, but a gap will exist between their abilities, and this is what is referred to as the reading achievement gap.

Definitions

This research utilizes a variety of terms for the purpose of describing its approach and applications. As stated above, the term “reading achievement gap” is used to refer to the expanding disparity between the highest performing students and the lowest performing students in terms of reading skills and displayed reading performance data on scored assessments. “Above proficient” refers to students that perform on the high achieving side of the reading achievement gap, defined as performing at or above grade level, while “below proficient” refers to students that perform on the low achieving side of the gap, defined as performing below the grade level. These proficiency terms are further outlined by the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), as well as the Georgia School Grade Report (The Governor's Office of Student Achievement, n.d.). “Student literacy learning” concerns how a student learns reading skills and comprehension, as well as ability within this subject. “Whole-class” and “Whole group” regards a method of instruction in which all students are being directed within the same lesson.

When a gap is identified within a student’s literacy capabilities, the current method of remediation primarily focuses on individual or small group instruction to address the specifics of the weaknesses. As such, a wide variety of skills can be seen in the reading level of students of the same age or grade (Elleman & Oslund, 2019). Many school districts lack the ability to provide individual reading remediation, and with the growing number of students requiring intervention (Sparks 2022), reading instruction needs to be analyzed to figure out what, if anything, can be enhanced to improve the rate of student literacy learning that is needed to further support student success.

Bridging the Gap

The reading achievement gap represents a flaw within the current public school system. This translates to an overall decrease in literacy skills throughout the general population. Fifty-four percent of American adults, aged 16 to 74 years old, have literary proficiency at a sixth-grade level (Barbara Bush Foundation, 2019). The current disparities between higher-level and lower-level learners within schools demonstrate a need for specific intervention, not just to improve the literacy of students, but to adjust the learning of a student entirely so that they may grow to achieve the same learning and development as higher-level learners. With the utilization of previous research, current data, and professional experience working with these learners, this study seeks to find what methods or theories can be successfully applied to exponentially increase student learning, as to lessen the existing reading achievement gap.

However, it is important to note that a strong factor of student success is reliant upon a student's environment and socioeconomic status (Berry, 2007). Disability, poverty, unstable family dynamics, and other external factors affect a student's ability to learn and succeed in school. Therefore, it should be noted that the proposed research does not intend to provide a solution to the academic struggles related to these external dynamics, as that cannot be fixed within the classroom alone. Rather, this research seeks to analyze current reading performance and instruction, and suggest possible academic origins of these skill gaps that contribute to the larger reading achievement gap.

Researcher Positionality

Furthermore, this research was created from the viewpoint of a white, cisgender female from a middle-class family, pursuing higher education. This background may affect the interpretations of the data collected. The hope for this research is to provide an addition to

Bridging the Gap

practical pedagogical theories, and encourage additional exploration of the reading achievement gap from a variety of perspectives.

Literature Review

When analyzing past research on the complexity of this topic, there are several elements that are important to understand in order to properly analyze possible solutions. Due to the severity of the impacts of the identified reading achievement gap, confirmed and potential causes have been identified and discussed regarding their current impact on students' literacy development.

Current Research Related to External Factors

Recent research provides a more detailed look at the reading achievement gap and identifies the complex factors and contributors to such a disparity. Merga's (2020) work identified external causes including "literacy skill gaps and English as an additional language status, absenteeism, home factors, student attitudes and engagement, school and systems factors, and learning difficulties and disabilities influencing learning" (p.391) to illustrate the multi-faceted nature of this problem and provide context to future inquiries on possible interventions. Multiple variables are also present regarding educational procedures and internal causes contributing to the reading achievement gap. Merga's research emphasizes how many issues a struggling reader may face are interconnected to a root cause, requiring individual and unique intervention. That is to say, two students may both struggle with writing, but have completely different causes attributed to that struggle. Little has been implemented within schools to identify these unique, root causes.

Berkowitz's (2021) work seeks to understand the potential causes of the reading achievement gap within literacy skills, particularly regarding external and socioeconomic factors and their relation to student achievement. He identifies literacy education as essential to not only

Bridging the Gap

closing the reading achievement gap, but in moving people out of lower socioeconomic positions. The research provided a multilevel analysis of the socioeconomic and classroom environment impact towards literacy within students. Berkowitz addresses the resource problem known to many schools catering to socially and economically disadvantaged populations, and suggests this lack of resources results in more time allocated to behavior management. While this has been well-documented in past research, Berkowitz's addition states that even high-performing students are at a disadvantage within an environment without proper resources or management. His research adds classroom environment and socioeconomic background as a complex contributor in the analysis of the reading achievement gap that does not only impact the individual student, but the learning of all students within the environment.

Current Research Regarding Social Theories of Instruction

The reading achievement gap present within the US Public school system, primarily within literacy, has been proven to be a complex, multi-faceted problem that requires intervention and analysis from multiple different angles. Thankfully, past research has identified certain procedures and theories that may help or limit the reading achievement gap in certain retrospectives. Hodge et al. (2016) elaborate on this, seeking to review current theories' success in promoting literacy acquisition procedures, making note that the complexity of literature typically requires multiple theories and strategies to be implemented for effective acquisition. Their findings include:

...social theories play a major role in guiding recent studies focusing on the connection between reading and writing. These theories (e.g. sociocultural and sociocognitive) share similar features by greatly relying on social interactions for teaching and learning...Through social activities, students were able to build their own knowledge,

Bridging the Gap

receive help from teachers and peers, and finally achieve their learning goals (Hodge et al., 2016, p.10).

While their research concludes that there is a gap between researchers and teachers as to the effectiveness and purpose of these implemented theories, they still manage to identify what theories have been able to be implemented in a way that benefits student literacy.

In efforts to close the reading achievement gap many schools and districts have implemented the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). These types of technology are often implemented with the intention of providing specialized, individual practice to the student in order to increase proficiency in target areas in order to supplement instruction or provide additional support and practice. This includes programs that allow for document sharing, real-time feedback, and collaborative discussion in online arenas. Genlott and Grönlund (2016) sought to test the implementation of ICT-enhanced collaboration regarding improving math and literacy skills against two control groups, one using a traditional method (no ICT), and one using technology individually (ITU) without integrated social interaction or formative feedback. Their findings resulted in a confirmation that the method utilizing ICT-enhanced collaboration did result in improved mathematics and literacy skills. However, their conclusion also highlighted the results from the control groups tested. The control group showed that the ITU instruction was not only ineffective, but harmful towards learning when not combined with collaboration, as “ICT (Information and communication technologies) use without integration in social learning activities is not effective but may in fact prove detrimental” (Genlott & Grönlund, 2016, p.79). Social learning is an important component in the overall acquisition of knowledge.

The effectiveness of social theories pertaining to literacy acquisition is further solidified through additional sources. González (2015) looks directly into efforts made to remedy the

Bridging the Gap

reading achievement gap. He describes an experimental intervention utilizing a variety of social based activities unique to the average school environment in order to facilitate learning. The increased literacy time provided, and integration of these social activities resulted in improved scores and teacher reports of improved attendance and engagement. González (2015) concludes, "A successful effort to bridge the reading achievement gap for disadvantaged students will require a concerted effort by multiple school agencies, nonprofits, foundations, and others to provide the academic support and extracurricular opportunities they need but otherwise won't get" (p.2). The perspective of the systematic components at work required to make progress in remediating the reading achievement gap provide a more thorough look into how potential solutions could be implemented.

Current Research Related to Academic Instruction

The reading achievement gap has been attributed to other educational gaps and detriments identified within student learning. Kähler et al. (2020) analyzed the development of early scientific reading achievement gaps at the kindergarten level. While their research was driven to investigate contributing factors towards scientific literacy, their findings established strong links to the general reading achievement gap. Like previous studies, Kähler et al. identified socioeconomic and linguistic disparities as main contributors to lower levels of scientific literacy. Their findings also illustrated that the common belief of students regaining these missed scientific literacy skills later on within school is faulty, and often these weaknesses are not resolved by general education. Kähler et al. emphasize the promotion of scientific literacy as early as possible, but given the continual elimination of science-based practices in favor of math or literacy, this research seeks to predict an even grander gap in literacy, both general and scientific, with these continual practices.

Gunning (2022) correctly identifies in his work that the gap between the lowest performing and highest performing students on equitable, international literacy assessments is one of the highest in the world. Gunning delves into the fundamental skills that lower performing students commonly lack upon assessment, and how these fundamental skills can be strengthened at their initial instruction to better prepare a strong literate population. Gunning's research provides techniques and methods designed to move students to higher reading levels, as well as addressing the findings of recent studies to better improve the pedagogical methods of language instruction and acquisition. While discussing improvements to fundamental language skill instruction, Gunning elaborates on the key role the development of phonics plays in language acquisition, and how a lack of a strong phonetic awareness could be a major contributor to the growing reading achievement gap.

Çakıroğlu's (2019) research goes on to connect the ideas of phonological awareness and other aspects of literacy development and how they relate in practice to children's language acquisition. Çakıroğlu examines common theories and practices as it pertains to instruction of language arts and the acquisition of said language. His research concludes that there can be no defined behavioral theory of acquisition, as language acquisition in children proves to be dependent on a variety of factors, including the application methods of said theories, furthering the idea of social interaction being a keystone in the development of language and literacy. These findings provide potential clues regarding the reading achievement gap in the USA, and the importance of practice and strengthening fundamental concepts within a language.

Summary

Bridging the Gap

The introduced research regarding literacy acquisition, methods to address literacy remediation, and the importance of foundational phonetics within language, all suggest that there exist practical and theoretical methods to strengthen language and literacy development. The presented research also tends to identify social practice and interaction, along with solid phonetic and literacy knowledge, as missing links that could provide keys to remediating literacy weaknesses and provide a stronger foundation for future language learning and instruction. The current research on literacy acquisition and development has also identified ineffective practices and procedures. From these presented findings, an analysis of their effect on student literacy learning should occur to best understand the implications for directing successful applications to a whole-class approach that benefits student learning ability. By increasing the quality of student learning in a whole-class setting, it is hoped that the reading achievement gap will lessen with enhanced student learning ability. This research seeks to add real-world context to the utilization of existing research, and how theorized practices directed towards literacy enhancement may be able to be applied to closing the reading achievement gap.

Methodology

The purpose of this research was to examine patterns in data for grades 3-5 and their development of reading skills, identify trends in data regarding student performance, and draw upon a variety of professional opinions to give greater context to the presented data and theoretical solutions. An explanatory sequential design (Almutairi, 2018) was used to carry out this study, as qualitative data collection and analysis was used to build upon the collected quantitative data. Quantitative data collection and analysis were conducted on previously recorded data without the need for human subjects. Qualitative data collection and analysis were conducted thematically (Byrne, 2021) to create a prediction framework providing possible implications for these learners within the case study conducted.

Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

The goal of quantitative data collection and analysis was to identify and analyze commonalities and discrepancies in regional student literacy performance. The first objective of this design is to provide a descriptive overview of trends in academic achievement for the state of Georgia (GOSA) in comparison to the larger United States report (NAEP) of reading scores at the fourth grade level to give context to the current positioning of Georgia's reading scores, and how they may reflect larger predictions to be applied towards the national level.

Data was collected from students in grades 3-5 enrolled in public schools within the southeast region of Georgia. District data was collected from the official Georgia School Grades Reports archives, and state-wide data was collected from the Georgia Milestones and Georgia End-of-Grade State assessments. These statewide assessments are deemed valid by the Georgia Department of Education (Georgia Department of Education, 2023). Ten random school districts out of the 181 districts that make up The Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) were

Bridging the Gap

randomly selected and observed through their Georgia School Grade Report Reading scores to understand student performance in reading skills in grades 3-5. Comparative analysis (Bolbakov et al., 2020) included comparing the individual district performance scores of 2022 to those reported from the same districts in 2019. Analysis also included the comparison of these scores to those presented in the national data retrieved from the NAEP, in terms of past performance and predicted score trends to give reference to the developed prediction framework. Comparative analysis of the ten school districts selected consisted of reviewing common trends of growth and decline of student proficiency status within the individual district over periods of time, as examined by the Georgia School Grade Report archives. These trends were then compared to similar trends observed nationally, by comparing them to the trends in fourth-grade reading scores over periods of time as reported by the NAEP. These comparisons were used to create the prediction framework that, should the data continue the observed trends, reading score averages will continue to decrease.

Qualitative data collection and analysis

The goal of qualitative data collection and analysis was to demonstrate the connection between the real-world manifestations of the quantitative trends in reading scores, as well as the collection of various professional interpretations to give context to the presence of these trends, possible origins of commonalities observed, and possible solutions that can be implemented on a practical level to assist with student reading development. A case study design (Ellet, 2018) was utilized to collect varying responses from participants of a single school site. Responses were gathered from five education professionals, including general education teachers, reading interventionists, teachers based in inclusion classrooms, and academic coaches, all at the upper

Bridging the Gap

elementary level. The interviews were semi-structured, consisting of the same general and data-specific questions (see appendix).

Participants

Five educational professionals agreed to be interviewed for the case study: Participant T, Participant Z, Participant H, Participant R, and Participant F. All participants interviewed have worked in public schools in Georgia for over five years, with at least five years of experience in grades 3-5. All participants currently hold positions that allow them to work with students in grade 3, grade 4, and/or grade 5. All participants hold a valid teaching certificate and are licensed in the state of Georgia. All participants currently work at the same school site. All intended participants held experience and certification in fields relating to childhood education, literacy and reading, and other related specialties. The interviews were semi-structured, consisting of a combination of general questions and questions developed from a quantitative analysis of the previously collected data. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and conducted professionally and respectfully. Participants were given free consent without coercion to participate. Participants were made aware of their right to refuse to participate, and did not have to give a reason for refusal. Participants were not penalized for refusal. Risk to participants included mild mental discomfort at the nature of questions, as well as the normal risks concerning data privacy related to the virtual recording of the interviews.

Participant T is an elementary school teacher. Their current classroom consists of general education learners, and a large percentage of ESOL students (English Speakers of Other Languages). They have worked in the industry for over twenty years, and have worked primarily with general education and ESOL elementary students for the past couple of years. They have

Bridging the Gap

extensive training in reading intervention programs, as well as interventions targeted towards ESOL students.

Participant Z is an elementary teacher with over fifteen years of experience. They have worked with a variety of elementary grades in the past, and work with a variety of skill levels within their current upper-elementary grade classroom. They are certified to instruct both remedial students, as well as gifted students.

Participant H is an elementary educator who currently specializes in their school's gifted education program (GEP). They are certified to work with gifted students, and currently provide extended and enhanced instruction to gifted students in grades K-3. They also work with other academic coaches and curriculum directors to help develop appropriate and engaging curriculum to be utilized by their school.

Participant R is a current elementary educator who instructs an upper-elementary grade inclusion classroom. Their class follows a model of including students at the grade level that receive SPED (special education) services with other general education students. Their experience lies mostly in fifth grade curriculum and instruction, but have recently transitioned to a different upper-elementary grade. They are certified to teach students that require SPED services and/or accommodations.

Participant F currently serves as an academic coach and reading interventionist at the elementary level. Participant F holds classroom experience instructing a variety of grade levels, and also provides current reading support for remedial skills, as well as for GEP students, for grades K-2. Currently, Participant F organizes and designs the curriculum used by the elementary educators in their school, including the upper elementary grades.

Table 1

Bridging the Gap

Participant Demographics

Participant Moniker	Race	Gender	Current Position
Participant T	NA	Female	Upper Elementary Gen. Ed/ESOL
Participant Z	White	Female	Upper Elementary Gen. Ed.
Participant H	White	Female	Elementary GEP
Participant R	African American	Male	Upper Elementary Inclusion/SPED
Participant F	African American	Female	Elementary Academic Coordinator

The individual interpretations and anecdotes provided through qualitative data collection were examined and coded to identify any commonalities among participant responses regarding specific questions or topics presented. The data collected from participants was coded manually using emerging and constant-comparative methods (Almutairi, 2018) to identify common themes. Codes were designed through grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2017) to track responses related to the general achievement gap that exists in reading skills for elementary students, student achievement and performance, possible solutions towards closing the reading

Bridging the Gap

achievement gap, reading skills and strategies, current reading instructional techniques, and responses related to external influences (ex. the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, socioeconomic factors, district decisions), as they pertain relevance towards the goal of this research. Additional responses related to the concept of “foundational” reading skills, such as fluency and phonics, were also selected, as these terms were consistently mentioned throughout the collection of qualitative data in reference with reading skills. The additional reference of student achievement relating to the term “expectations”, as well as the additional code of “technology” were tracked, due to their commonality among participant responses. Thematic analysis (Byrne, 2021) was then utilized to create a prediction framework to suggest the ongoing effect of the potential origins and reinforcements identified as common thematic contributors toward the reading achievement gap.

Findings

Overview

When considering the data from the state of Georgia as it reflects the greater nation, a decline in fourth-grade reading scores nationwide can be observed (NAEP). Scores have dropped by three points since 2019, now resembling levels from 1992. The average score is just 9 points above the "basic" proficiency threshold of 208 set by NAEP (NAEP, n.d). Georgia's reading scores closely mirror the national average, currently at 216 (NAEP), slightly below the national average. While proficient and advanced levels have remained stable, more Georgia students are now below the basic level. National Data reveals fourth-grade reading average scores across the nation are not trending in a positive direction (NAEP Report Card: Reading). Not only have scores decreased by three points compared to the collected 2019 data, but now resemble those seen in 1992, despite twenty years of progress. The average of fourth-grade reading scores was only 9 points above the necessary minimum score of 208 to constitute the "basic" proficiency level as set by the National Assessment Governing Board (NAEP).

The state of Georgia has followed closely to the national reading average score, both in score increases and decreases, and now stands at a score of 216 (NAEP), a point below the national reading average for grade 4. A familiar pattern can be seen from the Georgia Milestones Assessment System (GMAS) public report as well. Scores have increased in some aspects, such as third and fourth grade reading scores at or above proficient reading level grew from 2022-2023. However, the GMAS overview reveals grades 3,4, and 5 have all decreased in reading and in English Language Arts GMAS scores from 2019-2023, and this pattern indicates a possible trend towards further score decreases. This contextual data is necessary to consider in order to

Bridging the Gap

Jefferson	69.8%	71.67%	79.3%	76.62%	-2.67%	3.50%
City						

Fayette	67.2%	62.07%	79.8%	72.97%	-7.63%	-8.56%
County						

Atlanta	42.1%	36.46%	50.3%	42.14%	-13.40%	-16.22%
Public						
Schools						

Bremen	74.7%	73.46%	78.6%	75.6%	-1.67%	-3.82%
City						

Lincoln	52.6%	52.05%	57.9%	51.28%	-1.04%	-11.43%
County						

Worth	48.9%	41.78%	54.5%	56.32%	-14.56%	3.34%
County						

Randolph	41.3%	13.64%	36.8%	14.29%	-66.97%	-61.17%
County						

Jones	52.5%	41.69%	58.1%	54.4%	-20.59%	-6.37%
County						

Bridging the Gap

Clarke	37.2%	34.68%	47.5%	40.53%	-6.77%	-14.67%
County						
Pickens	42.2%	42.62%	46.8%	37.41%	1.00%	-20.06%
County						

The Georgia's Office of Student Achievement reports the average decrease in district reading scores at the third grade level to be -9.48% from 2019 to 2022, and an average of -12.05% at the fifth grade level (GOSA). These scores were calculated based on students performing at or above the basic proficiency level, determined by Lexile level midpoint of the individual grade by the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE, 2018). Out of the districts surveyed, GOSA records indicate that none increased in score significantly, above 1%, and 90% of districts surveyed decreased in score at 1% or more when examining the scores reported at the third grade level from 2019 to 2022, as seen in Table 1. When looking at the fifth grade reports from 2019 to 2022, 80% of districts examined saw a decrease of 1% or greater, though 20% saw an increase of 1% or greater in fifth grade scores. However, both grade levels hold similar values when calculating the average percent change for these ten districts, with an average change of -13.43% at the third grade level, and -13.55% at the fifth grade level from 2019-2022. Both of these statistics supersede the reported state average, as mentioned above to be -9.48% at the third grade level, and -12.05% at the fifth grade level (GOSA).

Qualitative Findings

Emergent and constant-comparative analysis resulted in identifying commonalities observed throughout the collected transcripts, as well as topics that relate toward elementary

Bridging the Gap

student academic progress, and possible solutions that could contribute to the goal of this research. Throughout use of these codes and development of axes, three themes emerged through analysis. The theme of expectations and predictions of student achievement was formulated to discuss the contribution of misaligned theoretical, professional, and practical instruction and how it may be creating or contributing towards the reading achievement gap through lack of consistent foundational understandings or developmentally appropriate practices. The theme of foundational reading was developed after thematic analysis of codes related to foundational reading skills, or reading skills needed in order to fluently comprehend and utilize written text, frequented participant responses. Finally, the theme of external influences was developed to track responses related to the theme of external factors influencing education, such as socioeconomic factors and world events.

Expectations and Predictions of Student Achievement

The concept of student achievement is determined in the state of Georgia by the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE), and further interpreted by individual school districts and academic coordinators. In order for instruction to be effective, aligned instruction and assessment is deemed best-practice within education (Carnegie Mellon University, n.d.). Thematic analysis of participant responses revealed misalignment or miscommunication of these expectations or predictions may be a possible origin and/or contributor to the reading achievement gap within the state of Georgia.

Participant statements involving codes related to student performance and achievement, internal and external expectations of academic performance and achievement, developmental rate of skills, and other facets related to the expectations and predictions of student achievement were well documented throughout participant interviews. Many participants interviewed were

Bridging the Gap

able to state their own professional opinions of what is expected from students at varying levels, such as Participant T stating,

“I feel like students, when they hit third grade, that reading fluency should already be in place. I feel like when we get to third grade we should be focused on using more of the comprehension side...Phonics should be well established so that when they're in third grade, the phonics we use now is upper level, and so all those lower level skills should already automatically apply” (Participant T, personal communication, 2024). This statement, along with others, was based on what is expected of students in Georgia at the third grade level, and the skills required to meet the standards as set by The Georgia Department of Education.

However, through participant testimony, there is a disconnect between what is expected of student ability and performance by the district and state, versus what teachers and academic professionals feel is developmentally appropriate for students. Participant T also discussed their own disconnect between the standards delivered, and the decided amount of time and frequency with which to teach them:

I feel like each week we're going to a new standard and then we're going backwards in two to three weeks and we're hitting the standard up again and then we go forward again we come back. I really feel like we should spend slightly more on a standard versus a week and not even technically a full week because you have some days where you're trying to assess students. You have [days] where you're only introducing the concept...Maybe you're spending three days a week only 10 or 15 minutes on a quick lesson...I feel like we don't have enough time to implement true vocabulary, true read aloud[s], true shared reading, in the way that it should [be] (Participant T, personal communication, 2024).

Bridging the Gap

This statement, along with others, was based on what is expected of students in Georgia at the third grade level, and the skills required to meet the standards as set by The Georgia Department of Education.

Participant Z also expressed dissatisfaction with the reliability and application of state standards:

I think the expectations [of state standards] are too high. I think some of the vocabulary and content are not age appropriate, especially in third grade. I think the standards [are] too high...I think they try to break it down a little too much and sometimes you can get confused in the simplicity of it all. I think it's very important to be able to read a book, discuss the book, discuss what you don't understand, what you can't read in vocabulary, and how to fix that (Participant Z, personal communication, 2024).

The concept of Georgia state standards was well discussed among participants, with most participants holding to the idea that they are not easy to achieve, and are often difficult to properly teach at a developmentally appropriate level to all students.

Even participants that felt as if the standards were capable of being taught in a developmentally appropriate way stated problems with implementation, such as Participant H stating, “No, I think [the standards are] appropriate. I just don't think that we as a district are where we need to be to meet them” (Participant H, personal communication, 2024). This attention to an existing disconnect between objective state standards, district resources and implementation, and practical instruction to meet student needs, all allude to a possible correlation between this disconnect and the growing reading achievement gap within the state of Georgia. Participant R offered his opinion on how this misalignment feeds into skill deficits as a student progresses:

Bridging the Gap

“[The standards] build on each other... to go back to my previous experience in fifth grade you know the skills that students are learning now in third grade are what they're building towards in fifth grade. I believe that the expectations are only unreasonable if they are not given the opportunity to...address those foundational skills that are needed. If they miss one of the stepping stones, absolutely, and that is one of the key pieces of closing [the] achievement gap. You have to be able to address on one hand grade level standards and competencies but then at the same time...improve those foundational um instructional needs that the students have. So currently I feel the expectations are right where they need to be. I just think that there should be a space for that time to close the gap, time to remediate and allow for those students to work at their...independent level [so] they can build on those foundational skills” (Participant R, personal communication, 2024).

All participants interviewed cited some sort of misalignment between state, district, professional, and/or practical expectations of student ability, and this lack of consistency may be a contributor to the larger issue of the reading achievement gap.

Foundational Reading

One of the largest themes documented through participant interviews was the concept of skills and progress related to reading. While the idea of reading skills and progress are essential to this research, as well as education as a whole, participant responses trended towards the inclusion of discussing “foundational” reading skills. This term was used broadly by some participants, to refer towards the skills and knowledge a student has to acquire prior to developing the ability to read fluently and accurately, such as an understanding of syntax and phonology. Some participants gave a formal definition of what they meant when discussing the

Bridging the Gap

concept of foundational skills, such as Participant F stating, “We call those [foundational skills] the Five Pillars, where we know that a reader can't stand if they don't have everything in place in order for them to be successful” (Participant F, personal communication, 2024). All participants interviewed attributed gaps in student reading skills and knowledge to gaps in these base level concepts, instead of more advanced or abstract comprehension skills expected later on in a student’s education.

Phonics was a commonly discussed foundational skill, and largely cited by participants as one of the most common reading skill deficits they see in students, despite phonological awareness being considered one of the first skills needed to properly learn how to read comprehensively (Shanahan, 2005). The concept of phonics and phonological awareness was discussed directly and succinctly by some participants, such as Participant H simply stating “All the effective [reading programs] have a component of phonics” (Participant H, personal communication, 2024) Others provided anecdotes or other forms of support to elaborate on their opinion of the importance of phonics, and their observed decrease of phonological awareness within students.

Participant T stated the following about phonics, “The students that don't have a phonics foundation, if it's not embedded properly... if they haven't mastered what they should master when they get here and they're still spelling you know words wrong “of” [spelled] “UF”, and you know “was” you know [spelled] “WS” or “WZ”. It's because they didn't have what they needed then...” (Participant T, personal communication, 2024), including how they attributed this lack of skill progression to a lack of original skill acquisition. This perspective was shared by Participant Z, who also shared concerns about phonological awareness and how it related to student reading skill progression:

Bridging the Gap

There seems to be less phonemic awareness [in students]...In fluency children seem to have a little more challenge in sounding out words or even sight word recognition in some of their reading. Even when you want them to think about the context or look at the illustrations sometimes, it seems to be not as developed as it was maybe 10 years ago (Participant Z, personal communication, 2024).

The presence of this perspective supports the prediction that a lack in development of foundational reading skills may be an origin of/contributor to the reading achievement gap.

Participant R shared their observations regarding a lack of phonological awareness as well, in addition to explaining how instructing students in new and ongoing reading skills will not improve a phonological awareness deficit, and may in fact prove detrimental to a student's ability to acquire additional reading skills:

I have found that in third grade...phonological processing is the largest deficit that I see among my students. If they cannot accurately retrieve and identify and use the accurate sounds needed within a given word, they can't then spell it accurately to then be able to use it in context, to then be able to find the meaning from, as it relates to Upper Elementary (Participant R, personal communication, 2024).

This focus on presented deficits of phonological awareness proving to be a barrier of grade-level instruction for these professionals indicates a larger problem. As expressed by the participants, a lack of prerequisite foundational reading skills, such as phonics, cannot be remediated alone through instruction of additional skills. Furthermore, this apparently growing deficit in phonological awareness among students may be the cause of a chain reaction in reading skill development. Without a solid foundation of reading skills, the ongoing progress of a student's

Bridging the Gap

education may be negatively impacted, both in reading skills and in academic knowledge acquisition as a whole.

External Influences

The impact of external influences on academic performance, including reading skill acquisition, has long been documented, such as seen in the work of Gonzalez (2015), Berkowitz (2021), and Merga (2019). For this research, the theme of external influences was based on participant responses related to socioeconomic status, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, social and cultural influence, Special Education needs, etc. Most educators, including all participants, are aware of the impact of external influences on a student's education and skill acquisition ability. However, certain specifications were quoted by participants that may not be as widely considered as impactful on a student's education, yet are appearing to affect a student's reading education.

Participant Z shared their observations on how societal attitudes about reading in general have an impact on their students, and on children in general:

Well there are certainly children within my classroom that [have] a large reading gap, where some are two grade levels above reading level. I would say that that is due to exposure at home mostly, and the importance of reading at home. And I see other children who are two or actually three grade levels below reading skill...I would say I'm not sure that reading is a priority at home or has a high importance at home (Participant Z, personal communication, 2024).

Participant Z goes on to recommend parents begin reading to their children as early as possible to solidify the importance and impact of reading skills, and to combat the lack of attention to reading skills present within the norm culture (Participant Z, personal communication, 2024).

Bridging the Gap

Participant F also referred to a lack of understanding the utility and importance of reading skills as a growing problem in society as a whole, stating that certain modes of instruction presenting necessary information in an easy to understand format in fact weakens the very reading and comprehension skills that need to be strengthened (Participant F, personal communication, 2024):

We're in this digital technology age now, where kids have at their fingertips access to what they need. One common thing, even right now, kids don't want to even type anymore. They have audio features, so they'll press the mic and they'll just say what they want and it'll go. So It'll be interesting to see how...things like this will continue to transform and impact education...They are beneficial, and they make things more efficient and faster, that means that there is a lack thereof [of skill]. I think about how many people really memorize telephone numbers... I think it's the same we're seeing that in linguistics, and how many times do you really have to identify parts of a sentence and really truly understand it? That connects to why we struggle with writing. I really truly believe that it's because kids don't really understand language and how it even comes together... (Participant F, personal communication, 2024).

Participant H claimed something similar, stating how they want to see a push for the use of mediums in instruction that students will require familiarity with to grow their understanding and exist within society, such as a class set of books to read from instead of all students reading from a screen (Participant H, personal communication, 2024).

The implication of technology and its suspected consequences has been discussed by research such as Genlott and Grönlund (2016), as has effects of other notable external factors. Yet, participant interviews allow for a direct look towards specific outcomes generated or

Bridging the Gap

exacerbated by these influences. Participant T is able to attribute both technology and the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 towards the abilities presented in their classroom, but questions the assumptions that student reading skill deficits were solely created by these external factors, and will progress as normal without. “The last set of kids we're seeing now will be our last covid kids coming through, and I know that it was very difficult for them to have phonics over zoom and then they had some partial schooling...but I think part of it is that it's almost like it's exacerbated a pre-existing issue” (Participant T, personal communication, 2024). All participants were able to reference the unavoidable impact of external factors, but also raise concern that little is being done to address long-term impacts of these external factors, such as possible solutions being ignored in favor of short-term remedial programs, or relaxing qualifications in assumption that time alone will shorten achievement gaps. Thanks to the observed quantitative trends and the qualitative information given by participants, the lack of attention towards improving these external influences on a student's reading achievement may pose a large contributor towards the reading achievement gap.

Qualitative and Quantitative Connections

The testimonials of the participants reflect an understanding of today's current reading achievement gap among upper elementary students within the state of Georgia, as well as within the larger nation. The participants discuss the increase of skill deficits among their students, potentially aligning with the observed percent growth for the ten districts selected, which resulted in an average -13.43% change in third grade students reading at or above the grade level Lexile midpoint, and -13.55% change in fifth grade students reading at or above the grade level Lexile midpoint. Participants have also commented on the lack of external support regarding the impact of external factors on student achievement, revealing another possible variable towards

Bridging the Gap

the nation's and state's reading score. Despite the various components of education examined and restructured throughout the past decade, including that examined in this research, student achievement has stagnated.

Discussion

Through gathered data, the participants of this research have referenced aspects of previous literature both directly, and indirectly, within their testimonies. The past research referenced in this study noted, in general, that a solid foundational understanding of reading and phonetic skills may act as missing links to potentially expedite the remediation of the reading achievement gap (i.e., Çakıroğlu, 2019; Gunning 2022). Four out of five participants directly refer to phonemic reading skills, either through attesting to its importance, or citing phonemic awareness as a skill deficit seen among students. Three out of five participants directly refer to the concept of foundational reading skills, primarily to attest the critical need of such, or to describe a skill deficit observed in their students. This reflects what is seen in past literature, such as Gunning's (2022) identification of weakened fundamental skills that are present within lower performing students. These participant references mirror the increasing commonality of these terms used as key elements among pedagogical research regarding reading instruction.

Five out of five research participants referred to student reading skills, directly or indirectly, as a large contributor towards the reading gap, further attesting that these skill deficits are what tend to drive specific forms of reading instruction in order to remediate as needed. This follows the trend identified in review of previous literature, such as that of Berkowitz (2021) and Merga (2020), in which the deficits presented are so varied, that even research-based remedial techniques are not effective. The variety of reading skill deficits, as attested by the research participants, mainly lie in the lack of initial foundational skill development, creating knowledge

Bridging the Gap

gaps that prevent the build of additional knowledge, even with remedial services. Kähler et al. (2020) attested to this, claiming that these missed gaps were not resolved by general education alone. These comparisons may lead to the conclusion that should these gaps develop, initial instruction must be repeated before even attempting to build additional knowledge upon these foundations.

Furthermore, two out of five participants brought up the effect of Information and Communication Technologies on reading instruction directly. Both participants reference these technologies as potentially creating a disconnect for students regarding how they perceive the various components of literacy that are needed to work together, which could later contribute to deficits in orthography and reading comprehension. Both participants allude to the presence of these technologies utilized for direct reading instruction, at all levels from remedial to gifted, doesn't reinforce the reasons for needing to read in practical applications, such as reading directions for something or reading to comprehend something new. Teach comments reflected the themes present within the research of Genlott and Grönlund (2016), who found that the use of ICT-enhanced curriculum may plateau, and even create deficits in student understanding, if not paired with socially collaborative instruction.

All five participants reference external factors in their testimonials. For this research, the concept of external factors include the impacting variables on students' academic development that exist outside the sphere of the students' school instruction. This is primarily used in the context of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, socioeconomic statuses, culturally and linguistically diverse learners, and broader district and state impact on curriculum and instructional design. External factors have long been known to impact a student's understanding and skill development. This is reflected in the research of Berkowitz (2021), Merga (2020), Kähler et al.

Bridging the Gap

(2020), Hodge et al. (2016), and González (2015), as all mention existing external factors that must be addressed by an external power in order to truly advance the understanding and skill acquisition of students. Participant testimonials allow further elaboration on this, describing how instances in achievement gaps created or exacerbated by these external factors alone are not given proper recognition within the educational sphere. Many participants mentioned instances of student achievement gaps caused by external factors that are expected to be fixed by general education remedial services, despite the external nature of these gaps. The testimonials of these participants regarding external factors, as well as the discussed research concluding that general education cannot remediate these gaps alone, signify the potential for the reading achievement gap to only increase if the efforts to address it are confined to the school environment.

Conclusion

Through analyzing the presented quantitative data, decreasing scores regarding elementary school student's reading proficiency were identified to be part of a larger state-wide, and national trend of decreasing reading performance scores as determined by the National Assessment Educational Panel and Georgia Department of Education (GOSA). Qualitative data analysis revealed commonalities between interviewed educational professionals, leading to the formulation of the themes regarding expectations and predictions of student achievement, foundational reading, and external influences to be possible origins or contributing factors towards these decreasing scores. These qualitative findings reflect what has been discussed in current literature, including the unavoidable effects of external factors on a student's education, and the importance of proper social and practical appreciation for reading skills. While the results of this study are inconclusive, it is the hope that this study may clarify the current state of

Bridging the Gap

the reading achievement gap within the state of Georgia, and possibly assist in the elimination of said gap in the future.

Recommendations for Practical Applications

While the direct results of this study were inconclusive on how to adjust components of theoretical instruction to address a variety of skill deficits, this research did allow for the identification of certain practical techniques that may assist with remediating certain components of the reading achievement gap based on the opinions and recommendations of educational professionals. Both the reviewed literature and participant testimonials raise the concept of social integration as a key component in developing initial skills and connecting direct instruction to existing schema in order to build comprehension skills and stronger literacy understanding. Research such as Çakıroğlu's (2019), González's (2015), that of Hodge, Feng, Kuo, & McTigue (2016), and Genlott and Grönlund (2016), proves that social interaction, through techniques such as modeling, oral practice, and peer exposure, plays a key role in allowing students to connect the foundational aspects of reading learned in order to apply it effectively towards higher level comprehension and writing skills. Participant testimonials reflect this, citing interpersonal techniques such as in-person read alouds, parental modeling, peer-group practice, and the incorporation of reading skills into various academic disciplines and outside hobbies as techniques that have proven effective in helping their students develop foundational reading skills and improve upon existing knowledge.

The importance of direct, explicit instruction of foundational concepts and skills has also been cited by participants as a key technique in providing remedial support at the upper elementary level, where these initial skills are needed in order to progress on-pace. While initial instruction of these skills may follow a variety of methodologies, when it comes to remediating

Bridging the Gap

the variety of foundational skill gaps, without support to address external factors, educational professionals attest to the necessity of explicit instruction of these skill deficits before a student can be expected to build the knowledge required of them at the upper elementary levels.

It is the hope of this research that while direct results may be inconclusive, emerging and developed professionals may be able to reference instructional techniques and connected literature within this study in order to enhance their own instruction to better serve student reading skill development.

Recommendations for Further Study

This research utilizes data retrieved from and that reflects reading performance and broader academic trends of public elementary schools within the state of Georgia, and compares it to broader, national data. It is important to note that due to the small sample size and limitations of a short-term study, this research only reflects a moment of time in a small corner of the world. However, it is hoped that this study may serve to support similar investigations reflected in elementary reading development throughout the United States. It is recommended that additional research, ideally in the form of a long-term, national study, is undertaken to seek greater understanding of how whole-group models can be modified to serve learners with differing areas of instructional need.

Furthermore, this study presents the unintended results of how expecting the disparities caused by external factors to only be addressed within the general education curriculum does not serve to enhance student understanding, but conversely may be contributing to the plateau and emerging decline of student performance. This may potentially be due to the lack of external support in the form of policy change, standard adjustment, food and medical assistance, and other components that cannot be remediated through the public school environment alone.

Bridging the Gap

Should the presence of these reading skill deficits and achievement gaps continue, the individual remedial model will not be able to sustain itself within the public school system. It is hoped that future research will elaborate on the effectiveness of possible interventions, such as instructing students in curriculum based off skill instead of age or grade, the development and implementation of early literacy programs, re-designing educational standards to account for these foundational skill gaps, and other proposed solutions towards closing the reading achievement gap within elementary students across the United States.

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Appendix

Research Questions for Interview Participants

Are you familiar with the concept of the reading achievement gap within the United States?

- a) What is your current understanding of the reading achievement gap?
- b) Have you seen evidence of this reading achievement gap? If so, please describe.

What reading programs or systems have you seen implemented that improve student literacy learning?

- a) What, if any, programs have you seen implemented that do not appear to improve student literacy learning?
- b) What trends have you noticed between effective and ineffective reading programs?

What would you say is expected of student literacy skills in grades 3-5 by the district?

- a) What is your opinion of these expectations?

What literary and linguistic concepts have you seen students struggle with the most?

- a) Is this a difficulty specific to the grade level or age group?
- b) If yes, why do you think this particular concept is challenging for this particular grade level/age group to master?
- c) If not, in what other instances have you seen students struggle with learning this skill?

From your perspective, can the literary gap truly be closed, and what would need to be done to achieve this?

How do you think literacy and language instruction can be improved for the whole-class model?

What would you like to tell me about that I haven't asked about?

