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Using Small Group Reading Instruction to Improve Reading Fluency in First Grade

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Using Small Group Reading Instruction to Improve
Reading Fluency in First Grade

A Project Presented to
The Graduate Faculty of
Minnesota State University Moorhead

By

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	4
Chapter 1.....	5
General Problem/Issue.....	5
Subjects and Setting.....	7
Chapter 2.....	9
Definition of Terms.....	9
Fluency Strategies.....	9
Differentiation and Small Group Instruction.....	11
Hypothesis Statement.....	12
Chapter 3.....	13
Research Questions.....	13
Research Plan.....	13
Chapter 4.....	17
Research Question 1.....	17
Research Question 2.....	20
Conclusion.....	21
Chapter 5.....	23
References.....	25

List of Tables

Table 4.1 AimswebPlus Original Fluency Scores.....17

Table 4.2 Group A Fluency Scores (With Direct Fluency Instruction).....18

Table 4.3 Group B Fluency Scores (Without Direct Instruction).....21

Abstract

This paper explores the effect of teaching evidence-based fluency strategies in a small group setting to improve first grade students' reading fluency. Students for this study were chosen based on an aimswebPlus fluency assessment. Students that scored below grade level in the area of reading fluency were chosen to participate. Four of these students were put into a small reading group. They received targeted fluency instruction twenty minutes a day, four days a week for five weeks. The fluency instruction they receive included practice with reading high frequency words, poetry practice, repeated readings, decoding practice and read alouds. The remaining four students did not receive direction fluency instruction during their small reading group time. I worked with these students on general reading instruction fifteen minutes a day, four days a week for five weeks. My results show that the students that received direct fluency instruction made more growth in reading fluency than the students that did not receive direct fluency instruction. These results show that targeted small group reading instruction leads to growth in the area of reading fluency for first grade students.

Chapter One

Introduction

General Problem/Issue

Within elementary classrooms, teachers may have difficulty getting students interested in reading and helping students meet their reading goals. Difficulty with learning to read can often be a direct correlation to a child's dislike of reading. Many teachers believe in offering incentives, such as rewards to get students interested in reading. However, according to Small (2009), this can actually create a negative result. Small states that "giving extrinsic rewards sends the message that the task or behavior is not, in and of itself, interesting and valuable, rather it says that the task must be unpleasant, since a reward is required to do it and that reading is perceived as a means to an end rather than its own reward" (2009, p. 28). Instead, we can help instill a love for reading by helping students be proficient readers. If children have difficulty reading, it will not be enjoyable for them. In order to make each child a successful reader, we must determine the needs of that child. It is essential that general education teachers are able to identify students with reading difficulties who may need additional support and targeted reading interventions, as well as to provide quality instruction to those students in order to make reading gains, and ultimately, proficient readers.

This study is a focus on the effects of small group reading instruction, using research-based teaching strategies, to improve reading fluency. According to Swain, Leader-Janssen, & Conley, there are many components that make a child an effective reader, including skills in phonological awareness, decoding, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency (2017). Lacking in one of these areas could cause reading to become laborious (Swain, Leader-Janssen, & Conley 2017). Students with difficulties in one or more of those areas will also have a harder time

meeting grade level goals for reading. Fluency instruction has also been identified as the most neglected skill in reading instruction (Oakes, Mathur, & Lynne 2010). Swain, Leader-Janssen, and Conley (2017) also state “fluency is an important contributing factor to overall reading success and must be a component that is addressed during reading instruction” (p. 105). While fluency directly correlates to reading comprehension, about 40% of fourth grade students in the United States do not have sufficient reading fluency skills (Begeny, Levy, & Field, 2018). According to Begeny, Yeager, Martinez (2012), evidence “suggests that many individuals who struggle early on continue to demonstrate poor literacy skills after the elementary grades and into adulthood” (p. 59). Therefore, it is vital that educators are providing students with the tools and instruction needed to become a successful reader.

Reading fluency is a crucial component to becoming a successful reader because it supports the ability to comprehend text that students are reading. If students cannot make meaning out of the text that they read, they will not be proficient readers. According to Jefferson, Grant, & Sander (2017), a fluent reader “possesses word analysis skills and levels of automaticity that facilitate reading comprehension” (p. 98). A lack of reading fluency skills can lead to reading difficulties for students and slow down their reading progress. Many students that struggle with reading fluency result in reading below grade level.

The purpose of this study was to identify the effectiveness of targeted small group reading instruction to increase the fluency of first grade students not meeting the fluency goals set by the school district. Specifically, evidence-based fluency strategies were implemented into small group instruction based on the needs of the students participating in the study. These strategies included repeated readings, sight word practice, shared reading, poetry and read alouds.

Subjects and Settings

Description of subjects. Participants in this study were selected from my 2018-2019 class of first grade students in Moorhead, Minnesota. The class was made up of 21 first grade students. Many students would leave throughout the day for other services, such as ELL, literacy, math, social skills/regulation, and counseling groups. Of the students in this class, there are two students identified as Limited English Proficiency and eight students who have received literacy intervention in Kindergarten. There were also three students receiving behavior interventions and one student who have an IEP and receives special education services. Of the eight students that participated in the study, two students were ELL students. These students both have limited access to literature at home, as well as an English-speaking adult to practice reading skills with.

Selection criteria. The students participating in this study were selected at the beginning of the school year, September 2018. The number of participants chosen was based on the number of students who scored below the fluency rate goal this fall on their aimswebPlus assessment. The small reading groups that implemented the targeted fluency instruction were created based on student aimswebPlus fluency scores and text level scores. I had two groups as a focus for this study. Group one consisted of students who scored below the fluency rate goal and will be considered at risk or at slight risk. These students were given instruction that includes more targeted fluency instructions and strategies, such as repeated readings, shared reading, poetry, sight word practice, and reading aloud. Group two consisted of students who also did not meet the fluency rate goal. These students received the typical guided reading instruction that is given to first graders at their reading level. I completed one minute timed readings with each group weekly to determine if growth was being made in the area of fluency. I compared the two

groups to determine if the group that received significant fluency support made more progress than the group receiving the typical guided reading instruction.

Description of setting. This study took place in a first grade classroom in Moorhead, MN. There are approximately 700 kids that attend this school. There is an average of six sections per grade level. The average class size is 25 students. The students that attend this school come from a range of ethnic backgrounds, socio-economic statuses, and needs. This school is one of four elementary schools in a Midwestern community. The student body of this district is composed of students who are 1.8% Asian, 4.7% American Indian, 8.4% African-American, 8.5% Hispanic, and 76.6% Caucasian non-Hispanic. The percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch is 39.5%. This elementary school believes in positive reinforcement and puts a focus on teaching 21st century skills through the 4 C's, which are communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity.

Informed consent. Before I began my study, permission was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at Minnesota State University. I also followed my districts IRB procedure to obtain permission from Moorhead Public School district to complete this study. I reached out to my building principals for permission, which was granted.

The students involved in this study were protected through the permission forms signed by their parents or legal guardians. I made sure that the guardians understood the purpose of this study, as well as the risks and benefits. The guardians were also informed that they may withdraw their child from the research at any time if they choose. Finally, I protected the student's identities by using numbers to identify students instead of their names.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

Teachers help students become effective readers when they implement researched based strategies into their instruction. All children have different academic needs and learning styles. What works for one child may not be an effective strategy for another. Fluency is an important skill because it is what drives comprehension and aids students in making meaning of text. Fluency is not reading text quickly, as many people believe. Kuhn (2005) says that “fluent reading consists of more than simply reading words accurately and automatically; it also incorporates those elements that make for an expressive and meaningful rendering of a text” (p. 128). It is essential that educators differentiate for their students and adopt a tool belt of effective strategies to implement during small group instruction.

Definition of Terms

For purposes of this study, the following terms are defined:

Differentiation: “responsive instruction designed to meet unique individual student needs” Watts-Taffe, Laster, Broach, Marinak, McDonald Connor, & Walker-Dalhouse (2012).

Fluency: “reading with speed, accuracy, and prosody (reading expression)” Ardoin, Morena, Foster, & Binder (2013).

Small group instruction: “targeted reading interventions in a small group setting” Weiss, S.L. (2013).

Fluency Strategies

There are several strategies used within classrooms to improve student reading fluency. When applying these strategies to small group reading lessons, student fluency rates will usually increase (Jones, Wickstrom, Noltemeyer, Brown, Schuka, Therrien (2009). Evidence-based

fluency strategies include practice with decoding words and word automaticity, repeated readings, reading while listening, read alouds, and shared readings. There have been several studies done on the effectiveness of these strategies.

According to Swain, Leader-Janssen, & Conley, “decoding strategies lead to automatic word recognition, therefore the greater the automaticity in word recognition, the freer the mind is to focus on meaning, making fluency the bridge from word recognition to comprehension” (2017, p. 105). Students who have attained several decoding strategies and strengthened that skill will be able to identify words more quickly and with less effort. When describing the importance of decoding skills, Hudson, Isakson, and Richman say that if students can decode with automaticity, then their comprehension skills and other high-order aspects of reading will be able to function at the same time (2011). Thus, students who are able to decode words will be more fluent readers. It is necessary that students develop decoding skills to a level of automaticity. “Automaticity is a necessary component of skill, and higher-level aspects of skill cannot be acquired until lower-level aspects have become automatized” (Hudson, Isakson, Richman, Lane, & Arriaza-Allen, 2011, p. 15).

Repeated readings and reading while listening are also common fluency strategies. One study showed that there was no significant difference between the two strategies, but that both proved to improve reading fluency (Swain, Leader-Janssen, & Conley, 2017). According to Begeny, Krouse, Ross, & Mitchell (2009), repeated reading “involves having a student re-read a short passage 2 or more times, sometimes reading the passage until a suitable reading fluency level” (p. 212). While repeated readings have been proven to increase reading fluency, it is important that educators also provide students with clear directions and feedback during reading (Ardoin, Morena, Foster, & Binder, 2013). This makes repeated readings most effective as a

fluency strategy. Students who have difficulty reading text or who have more significantly low fluency scores may benefit from listening while reading. Listening while reading involves hearing a text read aloud and following along with the print version. “When they are able to hear the words and phrases, these children pick up on the speed and prosody (intonation) appropriate to the reading task and are able to accurately identify more words” Friedland, Gilman, Johnson, & Demeke, 2017, p. 83). Audiobooks serve as a positive model for readers (Friedland, Gilman, Johnson, & Demeke, 2017).

Another way to provide a student with a model of appropriate reading fluency is to implement read alouds and shared reading into classrooms. It is most effective to begin with a read aloud to model the text, then to complete a shared reading on that same familiar text. “The teacher’s expressive, skilled rendering of the text serves as a model of fluent reading for students, allowing them to hear what their own reading should ultimately sound like” (Kuhn, Rasinski, & Zimmerman, 2014, p. 74). When reading aloud to students, they are also given the opportunity to see and follow along with words in the text without having to try and decode them (2014). When it comes to implementing a shared reading with students, “it is important that the teacher monitors the children during all the components of the instruction to ensure they are actively engaged in the oral reading of the text” (Kuhn, Rasinski, & Zimmerman, 2014, p. 74).

Differentiation and Small Group Instruction

When it comes to offering additional support and intervention to struggling students, it may be effective to provide differentiated instruction within a small group of students with similar needs and skills. Fountas and Pinnell (2013) state that teachers have adopted guided reading into their classrooms because it allows them to effectively teach to the wide range of learners and needs in classrooms. Larger class sizes and diverse needs of students cause for

whole group instruction to lack in effectiveness to teach necessary skills to students. Begeny, Krouse, Ross, & Mitchell discuss how when it comes to fluency interventions, “small-group interventions are practical and often more time efficient than individualized interventions aimed to address this problem” (2009, p. 212). When beginning to plan for small groups, teachers may use flexible grouping to determine which students receive small group instruction together. Flexible grouping allows the educator to create temporary groups based on needs, interests and skill level. According to Kuhn, the combination of flexible grouping and targeted fluency instruction can target the learners who are experiencing difficulty making the transition from purposeful decoding to reading fluently (2004). Flexible grouping is effective because students make progress at different rates. It is important that students are consistently challenged, and not spending time practicing skills they’ve already mastered. By using flexible grouping, students will always be receiving appropriate and quality instruction that fits their current needs and skill level.

Hypothesis Statement

Reading fluency is an important skill for students to have in order to make meaning out of text. It was hypothesized that first grade students (Group A) will show improvement in fluency scores and words read per minute through targeted fluency strategies during small group reading instruction. This quality instruction will aid students in improving and practicing fluency strategies along with a small group of peers with similar learning needs. I hypothesized that those students that do not receive targeted fluency instruction would still show improvements in reading fluency. I did believe, however, that this group of students (Group B) would not show as much growth in their reading fluency as the students receiving targeted fluency instruction (Group A).

Chapter Three

Methodology

Research Questions

As a first grade teacher, I have students come to school with all different levels of reading proficiency, specifically in the area of reading fluency. Students tend to make growth in their fluency throughout the school year through whole group fluency instruction. They also practice fluency naturally when they are reading aloud with a partner or rereading texts in our small reading groups. Throughout my experiences in teaching reading and the research I've conducted, I've wondered what the difference in fluency achievement and improvement would be if I increased time with students in small groups to focus on teaching fluency strategies.

Based on my experiences and curiosity, I have come up with the following research questions:

1. How will teaching evidence-based fluency strategies in a small group setting improve students reading fluency?
2. What improvements, if any, will students who do not receive targeted fluency instruction make in their reading fluency scores?

Research Plan

Methods and rationale. I began this study in September 2018 with my first grade students. All first grade students were screened for fluency in September using aimswebPlus. This program was selected by the Moorhead Pubic Schools district for use after extensive research on different programs and the success of the program during its first year of implementation (2017-2018 school year). The program provides teachers with graphs so that to clearly see student growth and areas of further need. This program is trusted by many schools to

collect literacy data on students. My district uses it to screen students at the beginning of the school year, and help select students for literacy interventions.

I collected and used these fluency scores from the aimswebPlus assessment to identify students who did not meet the fluency goal range of 36-79 words per minute. This range is the national norm for students in the fall of first grade. These students are flagged as slightly below average, or below average based on their scores. Students who did not meet the fluency goal were considered as participants for this study. I used aimswebPlus fluency scores, along with student text level scores, to determine the participants of this study. Students that come into first grade at or below grade level in reading, which is reading at a text level four, and are flagged as below grade level on their fluency scores were considered as participants. Ultimately I chose eight students to participate in this study.

Throughout this study, students were progressed monitored using aimswebPlus. I completed a timed reading with each student in the participating two groups once a week. I used these probes to monitor student progress in fluency. I then observed if the strategies implemented in our guided reading groups successfully improved student fluency scores. As I observed progress being made, I adjusted the strategies taught and my instruction to better fit a student or group. I spent more time on decoding practice and mastering high frequency words, I also incorporated student read aloud during independent reading time and our class read aloud time.

Schedule. Every first grade student within my district was assessed in the first three weeks of the school year by the literacy sweep team. They assessed all students using aimswebPlus for oral reading fluency (ORF). After the assessments were completed, I looked at the data to identify students who are at risk in the area of oral reading fluency. These are

students that did not meet the fall goal of 36-79 words per minute. Once I had placed these students into reading groups, I began my study. For one of the groups, I focused on teaching targeted fluency strategies. These strategies included implementing teacher and student read alouds, decoding practice, repeated readings, integrating poems into reading selections, and high frequency word practice. These fluency strategies were taught along with the typical guided reading lesson. I needed to plan a little more time to meet with this group. A typical guided reading lesson in my classroom lasts 15 minutes. Wilson (2011) says that fluency lessons should be brief, only 5-7 minutes long. Therefore, I planned 20-minute blocks to meet with my first group of students. For the second group of at risk students, I taught the typical guided reading lessons and met with these students for 15 minutes per session. These students received fluency instruction through whole group reading instruction, reading aloud with other students, and repeated readings in our small reading groups. I met with each of these groups four times throughout the week. Once a week, I would perform a one-minute timed reading to assess their fluency and collect data on their words read per minute. I continued this process for a total of five weeks. In the final week, I determined student growth in oral reading fluency and compared the two groups of students' progress.

Ethical issues. Throughout the process of this study, I did not anticipate that any major ethical issues would arise. However, I knew it would be possible that students might feel anxious or stressed during the timed reading assessments. In the past, I have observed some students feeling rushed or worried that they are not reading fast enough. Some students may also have test anxiety and develop an uneasy feeling during the assessments each week. That could possibly have affected the student's scores. Stress and anxiety could also come from frustration. The students assessed were those that are at risk and below grade level in reading. They may

have felt frustration if struggling to master a concept or read the passages. This could cause possible behaviors to arise during small group instruction.

Anticipated response. If any of the ethical issues addressed above were to have happened to arise during the duration of this study, I would have dealt with them promptly and in an appropriate manner. For students who may have experience test anxiety and stress, I would give ample breaks. I would also use positive reinforcement to encourage them to proceed and boost confidence. It may have also been helpful for these students to watch another student be assessed, or to be assessed in a different location, away from peers. If possible behaviors were to arise due to frustration or lack of confidence, I would have handled the situation according to our school behavior plan. This student may have been asked to spend some time in the cool down corner and I would have needed to reteach rules. Building confidence is important for these students as well. I did this through positive reinforcement and one-on-one assessments with students. Throughout this study, there were no signs of stress during assessments. There were also no behaviors issues that occurred during instruction or assessing.

Chapter 4

Results and Findings

Research Question 1

How will teaching evidence-based fluency strategies in a small group setting improve students reading fluency?

I began this study by determining which students in my 2018-2019 first grade class to include in my research. I wanted to include students that had low fluency scores and needed improvement in the area of reading fluency. I chose students based on their aimswebPlus scores that were taken at the end of September. I chose eight of my twenty students to participate in the study. Each of these students showed below grade level reading fluency scores in their aimswebPlus assessments, and scored a 4 or below for their text level reading assessment. To be considered at grade level in reading fluency, students must be able to read 36 words per minute. The students' scores are listed in table 4.1 below:

Table 4.1.

AimswebPlus Original Fluency Scores

Student	WPM on aimswebPlus assessment	Text Level Score
1	10	2
2	10	2
3	5	0
4	0	1
5	6	2
6	8	0
7	3	1
8	6	2

I split the eight students that would participate in the study into two small reading groups. Group A consisted of students 3, 4, 6, and 7. Group B consisted of students 1, 2, 5, and 8. Group A received targeted fluency instruction during small group reading sessions. Group B received the typical guided reading lessons each week that is embedded with some fluency practice. Group A would receive fluency practice each session. I met with both groups four times per week.

Group A received targeted fluency strategies to improve their reading fluency skills four times per week. These strategies included reading aloud, decoding practice, poetry, rereading, and a large focus on mastering high frequency words.

Each student that received targeted fluency strategies during small group reading instruction improved their original fluency scores through timed readings on aimswebPlus assessments. Student 7 improved the most with 17 more words per minute than their original score of 3 words per minute. The average improvement for Group A was a growth of 14.25 words per minute from their original fluency scores. The fluency scores for Group A can be found in table 4.2 below.

Table 4.2.

Group A Fluency Scores (With Direct Fluency Instruction)

Student	First aimswebPlus fluency score (WPM)	Final aimswebPlus fluency score (WPM)
3	5	15
4	0	12
6	8	26

7

3

20

These results were as I expected them to be before beginning this study. The research I had done and included in my literature review led me to my hypothesis that first grade students (Group A) will show improvement in fluency scores and words read per minute through targeted fluency strategies during small group reading instruction. One fluency strategy that Group A used in each reading group session was practicing high frequency words. “Automaticity is a necessary component of skill, and higher-level aspects of skill cannot be acquired until lower-level aspects have become automatized” (Hudson, Isakson, Richman, Lane, & Arriaza-Allen, 2011, p. 15). Knowing high frequency words helped students attain automaticity in their reading. High frequency words are words that are used most often in text, but often times cannot be sounded out. Knowing these high frequency words helped students improve their words read per minute, and limit their errors when reading. Students in group A practiced high frequency words through flash cards, a game called “sight word memory”, rereading text filled with high frequency words, and through reading and identifying high frequency words in poetry.

Another fluency strategy that Group A practiced in each small group reading session was decoding, specifically with CVC (consonant, vowel, consonant) words. This group practiced sound and letter manipulation and substitution. This greatly improved reading fluency, as they were able to decode CVC words in the reading passages easily, such as the CVC word “pet”.

When preparing for my study, I planned to assess students using aimswebPlus once weekly, on Fridays. The aimswebPlus program only lets teachers assess once per week. There was one week that my district didn’t have school on Friday, and the assessments had to wait until Monday. Thus, from that point on, I had to complete assessments on Mondays. There were a

few days that students were absent on the day of assessing, so they're "weekly" assessments varied depending on the last day of the week that I had assessed. I don't believe that this affected scores, but it did make it more difficult to keep track of weekly progress and schedule assessments.

AimswbwebPlus was an adequate tool to be used for this study. It was simple to use and the program was easy to navigate. Results were easily readable and formulated quickly. One issue that occurred during the study was two updates that made the program unusable for two of the days of the study. Due to this update, some students could not be assessed and had to wait two days to be assessed. I don't believe that the disruption of the update interfered with the results of this study.

Research Question 2

What improvements, if any, will students who do not receive targeted fluency instruction make in their reading fluency scores?

Students in Group B did not receive targeted fluency instruction during their small reading group time, however, these students still made improvements on their fluency scores. Each student in Group B improved his or her words read per minute on the aimswbwebPlus assessment. While the students in Group B did all make improvements, the range of improvement was smaller. The final fluency scores for both groups were comparable. Group B no longer showed all students with higher fluency scores than Group A. Some students from Group A showed higher fluency scores than students in Group B. The average improvement for Group B was a growth of 9 words per minute from the original fluency scores. Therefore, students in Group A made more growth on their reading fluency scores through aimswbwebPlus.

Table 4.3

Group B Fluency Scores (Without Direct Instruction)

Student	First aimswebPlus fluency score (WPM)	Final aimswebPlus fluency score (WPM)
1	10	19
2	10	21
5	6	15
8	6	13

The results for Group B are what I expected them to be. I had hypothesized that the students that do not receive targeted fluency instruction would still show improvements in reading fluency. I believed, however, that this group of students (Group B) would not show as much growth in their reading fluency as the students receiving targeted fluency instruction (Group A).

The difficulties described above that I had experienced using aimswebPlus with Group A also apply to Group B. However, as stated above, I do not believe that the difficulties with the assessment program affected my results. Despite the difficulties with the aimswebPlus program I believe it was an adequate tool to use in this study. I assessed both Group A and Group B weekly using the assessment tool to determine fluency progress. With this program, I was able to clearly see and understand the progress made between the two groups, and determine that more progress was made in reading fluency with Group A.

Conclusion

The results of this study show that direct instruction in fluency will help to improve reading fluency scores for students at risk in the area of reading fluency. While the group that

did not receive targeted fluency instruction (Group B) still made progress in reading fluency, the growth made was less than Group A who did receive targeted fluency instruction. Therefore, direct instruction and practice in fluency during small group reading instruction will improve reading fluency scores more than reading instruction without direct fluency instruction.

Chapter 5

Action Plan

My research shows that by using targeted fluency interventions in small reading groups, student fluency rates will improve. Through the completion of this study, I have learned, practiced, and can now implement research based fluency strategies with my students during small group instruction. I have learned many different ways to help teach fluency to students, including reading poetry, decoding practice, repeated readings, high frequency word practice and reading aloud. This is an area of literacy that I had not emphasized in my teaching before this study. Going forward, I plan to implement these fluency strategies regularly with all small reading groups that I teach to increase growth in reading fluency throughout the school year.

As for the students that participated in this study, I plan to continue progress monitoring them throughout the rest of the school year. I am interested to see the progress that they will make with continued fluency interventions. Each of the eight students that were selected for this study are below grade level in the area of fluency. Continuing fluency instruction during small reading groups should help students reach the grade level fluency goals.

Plan for Sharing

I have worked closely with my school's literacy team throughout this study. They have been helpful in teaching me how to use the aimswebPlus program and have been interested in my results. I plan to share my results with the literacy team. I also plan to share my results with the other first grade teachers at my school during our PLC (Professional Learning Community) meeting. We have these meetings weekly, and always set aside time to discuss successes in our classroom. I will share the results, as well as the fluency strategies that were used in this study. I anticipate that other first grade teachers will be excited about the results, and interested in

learning about the different strategies used to incorporate during their own small reading group instruction.

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