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The Influence of Readers' Theater in Reading Fluency

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

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Curriculum and Instruction

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| ABSTRACT..... | 4 |
| CHAPTER1: INTRODUCTION..... | 5 |
| General Problem..... | 5 |
| Timeline..... | 5 |
| Logistical Information..... | 6 |
| Participants..... | 6 |
| Setting..... | 6 |
| Research Ethics..... | 6 |
| Definitions..... | 7 |
| CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE..... | 8 |
| Fluency Defined..... | 8 |
| Fluency as a Strand of Comprehension..... | 9 |
| Fluency Interventions..... | 10 |
| Repeated Reading..... | 10 |
| Speed Reading..... | 10 |
| Alternative Text/Readers' Theater..... | 11 |
| CHAPTER 3: DATA COLLECTION..... | 13 |
| Research Questions..... | 13 |
| Methods of Gather Data..... | 13 |
| Ethical Issues..... | 13 |
| CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND FINDINGS..... | 14 |
| Research Question 1..... | 14 |
| <i>Data Set 1</i> | 14 |
| <i>Data Set 2</i> | 15 |
| Research Question 2..... | 16 |
| Conclusion..... | 21 |
| CHAPTER 5: ACTION PLAN AND PLAN FOR SHARING..... | 22 |
| REFERENCES..... | 23 |
| Appendix A..... | 25 |

TABLES/FIGURES

| | |
|-----------------|----|
| TABLE 4.1 | 14 |
| TABLE 4.2 | 14 |
| TABLE 4.3 | 15 |
| TABLE 4.4 | 16 |
| TABLE 4.5 | 17 |
| TABLE 4.6 | 18 |
| TABLE 4.7 | 19 |
| TABLE 4.8 | 20 |

Abstract

This study involves incorporating Readers' Theater into a small group as a means of determining its effectiveness on a young reader and its influence on reading attitudes. I introduce the terms and conditions of this study as well as key definitions. Literature research on the topic of Readers' Theater and other reading interventions are discussed within this paper as well. At the end of this paper, I conclude my research and its effectiveness while presenting data and observations. Within this study it was determined that Readers' Theater had a positive impact on fluency but a mutual effect on ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development), Lexile Level, and reading attitudes.

Chapter 1:

Introduction

General Problem / Issue

Reading fluency is an essential factor for young readers, a bridge to the ultimate goal: comprehension. I taught 2nd grade last school year (2019-2020), and this class struggled significantly with fluency. I have followed this class into 3rd grade for the 2020-2021 school year.

In the 2019-2020 school year, approximately 56% of the entire class was below 2nd grade fluency benchmarks, according to the AIMSWEB fluency assessment. After the COVID-19 shut down of schools across Minnesota these students, who were already achieving below grade-level fluency scores, did not receive direct in-person interventions. Coming into 3rd grade, 55% (15/27) of the grade tested below 3rd grade benchmark in the AIMSWEB fluency assessment. Out of this percentage, as of January 2021, my class alone had 7 students that were under fluency benchmark out of 13 students total. Meaning that 54% of my class was below fluency benchmark.

As fluency is an essential part of reading progression and the bridge to comprehension, I enhanced small group instruction time with Readers' Theater interventions. By doing so, it was my hope to increase reading fluency in below level achieving 3rd grade students.

Timeline. I took test scores from the student's AIMSWEB scores prior, mid, and post-study (3 times) and monthly STAR tests beginning January 2020 (before the study began) and continued to monitor test scores through March of 2021. The research was conducted for an 8-week time frame from February 1, 2021 through March 26, 2021. The instruction was given 4 days a week, as students had Distance Learning days on Wednesdays and

Logistical Information:

Participants. The participants in this study were 3rd grade students. The ratio of the classroom setting is 13 students to 1 teacher. Within this class there were 4 girls and 9 boys. 5 out of the 13 students were receiving Title 1 services. I used my fluency goal-oriented reading group (6 students) as my experimental group. With this group, I replaced their curriculum guided reading books with Readers' Theater interventions. I used my "on-watch" for fluency, or next level students as my control group (4 students). This group did not receive additional Readers' Theater fluency interventions via small group instruction and continued to use the small group guided reading books or novel studies.

Setting. The setting of this study was within the norms of the general education classroom via small group reading instruction. This time was a non-interrupted time where students worked on different centers related to literacy, including the small group instruction. This time began with a large group-reading lesson, and then transitioned into the small group rotations. Each rotation was approximately 15 minutes long. When students were not with the teacher for small group instruction, they were participating in independent or partner tasks.

Research Ethics. Permission for this study was determined by the Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB Review Board. The Superintendent of the School District also reviewed the means of the study and determined approval. The students participating in this study were informed on their participation and what it entails, and parents signed a consent form that contains information on the study. Students were given the right to discontinue participation at any time, at minimal risk, and the information from the study will remain confidential. This study remained within the norms of the general education setting of the 3rd grade classroom and did not affect students' educational rights or grades if one were to choose not to participate.

Definitions

For the purpose of this study the following terms are defined: fluency and Readers' Theater

Fluency: Researchers have defined the term *fluency* in the literature world as providing and proving the skill of reading text accurately and at an adequate, appropriate speed. Wardani (2014) provides us with all elements involved in fluency, which include automaticity, expression, accuracy, pace, and phrasing. It is also thought that fluency should appear natural and "effortless", readers should be able to recognize text without having to decode words (Corcoran & Davis, 2005).

Readers' Theater: "Readers' Theater uses guidance, modeling and independent student practice while students rehearse a play, speech, poem, or other appropriate text" (Corcoran & Davis, 2005).

Chapter 2 Review of Literature

Many pieces of literature have been reviewed and reflect on debates of fluency definition, relations to other levels of reading, and interventions. Many scholarly authors and researchers have finely defined fluency and its importance in other reading areas.

Fluency Defined

Researchers have defined the term *fluency* in the literature world as providing and proving the skill of reading text accurately and at an adequate, appropriate speed. Wardani (2014), provides us with all elements involved in fluency which include automaticity, expression, accuracy, pace, and phrasing. It is also thought that fluency should appear natural and “effortless”, readers should be able to recognize text without having to decode words (Corcoran & Davis, 2005).

Moats (2004) also agrees that readers must present word precision and appropriate pacing to demonstrate fluency. Additionally, Moats argues that fluency entails more than just that; he addresses the fact that readers need to properly phrase the text they are reading in order to correctly portray the message of the said literature.

It is found that many schools measure student fluency by WCPM (Words Correct Per Minute). This formula is described by,

“(1) converting the number of seconds to a decimal by dividing the number of seconds by 60. (2) dividing the number of words read correctly by the total reading time in decimal form” (Moats, 2004, p. 78).

Educators should become familiar with reading benchmarks that are in place within their district and programs. Using these benchmarks' educators are able to determine fluency progression, and

percentiles in which each student falls within. From there, educators are also able to navigate through tier interventions for individual student needs.

Fluency as a Strand of Comprehension.

Multiple researchers have found that reading fluency strongly ties to comprehension. Kim, Park, and Wagner (2013) developed a research study to determine the relation of text reading fluency (literature with context) in kindergarteners and first grade students and comprehension. Ultimately, they found that text reading fluency, “acts as a ‘bridge’ between word reading and reading comprehension” (Kim, 2013). After one can recognize words (word fluency), they then fluently build text fluency, accurately pronouncing read words, expression, and pacing. In addition to fluency’s pacing, it is also well suggested that an important strand of fluency is providing proper decoding skill; the study found that comprehension was higher as decoding mistakes were lower (Bigozzi et al., 2017).

It is evident that if a student is able to fluently read a piece of literature, properly pacing, phrasing, and showing automaticity they are more likely to comprehend that text. Scarborough's “Rope” Model (2001) presents a graphic of how skills tie together to progress into higher levels of reading abilities. This model presents the fact that the student must master phonological awareness, decoding, and word recognition before carrying on to fluency. The fluency strand then connects to the skill of comprehending text (Scarborough, 2001).

If one is continuously focusing on decoding and pronouncing words properly, it leaves little room for the brain to focus on comprehending the text. As a lack of word recognition and phonemic awareness is present, fluency also lacks progression. When fluency is not progressed or is lacking comprehension is not significantly nurtured (Moats & Tolman, 2009).

In Chall's conceptual theory of Reading Development Stages, she suggests that learners should be at the *confirmation and fluency* stage when they reach 2nd and 3rd grade (Chall, 1983). This relates to Ehri's model of reading phases where he suggests that after the student has developed fluent reading within the preschool through 3rd grade years, they then move from "learning to read" to "reading to learn", or what I have come to know as *comprehension* (Ehri, 1995).

Fluency Interventions:

Many researchers have found fluency interventions that increase students' progression in fluent reading. When determining interventions for fluency, educators need to be aware of effectiveness in relation to the time they are given to provide certain interventions (Hawkins et al., 2015).

There is an abundance of interventions at the tips of educator's fingers, but the question is: is there enough time in our academic day to make these interventions successful? Although most educators strive to improve students learning outcomes in all aspects of their academics, time is a significant factor. We must find the most efficient interventions. Here is a brief review of reviewed research on fluency interventions.

Repeated Reading. In 2015 Hawkins et al. produced a study to identify the outcomes of *repeated reading* interventions and *listening-while-reading*. The goal of this research study was to find which method was most effective when it came to only allowing a short time for each intervention. They produced this study with participants of a fourth-grade class. The findings had shown that each method improved reading fluency, however *listening-while-reading* was found to be slightly more effective with limited time as a factor.

Speed Reading. Interventions aimed to increase fluency are not just for young readers. In 2014 Sri Wardani produced action research with high school English students using both

speed-reading interventions as well as integrating “at home reading” of provided texts (non-fiction options and news articles). These interventions were integrated just two times per school week for 45 minutes each. By adding the additional interventions, Wardani found that students' WPM (words per minute) increased as well as their confidence in their reading abilities.

Alternative Text/Readers Theater. Another additional intervention to improve reading fluency is to provide *alternative text* (Ruminski et al., 2016). There are many suggested alternative texts that teachers are familiar with including poetry, non-fiction, news articles, etc. But the main question is how do we interest students in these texts if it is not preferred? Educators need to make these texts engaging, find ways for the students to interact with them, perform them, read them in multiple ways, use technology options or partner-based reading (Ruminski et al., 2016).

An alternative text option used in action research by Corcoran and Davis (2005) was *Readers' Theater*. “Readers' Theater uses guidance, modeling and independent student practice while students rehearse a play, speech, poem, or other appropriate text” (Corcoran & Davis, 2005). This method implements other fluency interventions, such as repeated reading and listening-while-reading. In this action research, Corcoran and Davis spent 8 weeks total on the *readers' theater* intervention before assessing (3 sessions a week for 10-30 minutes each). After the 8 weeks, they found that students progressed significantly in fluency scores. Similarly, Young and Ransinski (2009) conducted a study within their 2nd grade classroom using Readers' Theater and nearly doubled “normal gains” for fluency scores.

In contrast, Moats (2004) argues that Readers' Theater is a *less effective practice* within reading fluency supports. In *Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling* (2004), in regards to readers' theater, Moats states that, “Children may memorize their parts without

reading, may not actually receive much reading practice or may not get the benefit of direct feedback about their own reading rate” (pg.91, 2004)

Readers' Theater has been shown to be a motivational means of learning for students (Mraz, 2013). Within this intervention, students often “perform” weekly once they have fluently mastered the given script, this assists students in necessary practice as well as assisting confidence in their reading (Worthy & Prater, 2002). Readers' Theater can also be used to teach standards within other subjects while implementing literacy, for example, a history lesson (Karabag, 2015). In a study to determine students' feeling toward learning via Readers' Theater, Karabag (2015) found that students enjoyed the participation of the entire class. Readers' Theater allows students to present listening and presenting skills in a way that engages the entire class in the lesson (Karabag, 2014). Therefore, this strategy teaches life skills as well as content specific targets. This reading supplement can be for all levels of readers within the classroom from struggling to above-grade-level (Young & Rasinski, 2009).

Conclusion.

With review of multiple intervention strategies to enhance reading fluency, it is evident that there is success within many strategies. Researchers have noted that repeated reading, speed-reading, and alternative texts can all be successful in enhancing fluency in young readers. Although there are debates on success with Readers' Theater and the many benefits aside from enhancing fluency, I will be producing an action research project within my classroom involving Readers' Theater to emphasize the debate on its success or lack of significance. As noted, the ultimate goal of fluency is for the reader to comprehend what is being read. Thus, fluency is an essential building block in a young readers academic journey.

Chapter 3

Data Collection

Research Questions.

Throughout this research study, as I implemented Readers' Theater as means to progress reading fluency, it was my goal to answer the following questions:

- What is the effect of small group Readers' Theater interventions on a young reader?
- How does Readers' Theater affect the attitudes towards reading within young readers?

Methods of Gathering Data.

For this action research I took AIMSWEB Plus scores at the beginning, middle and end of the study (3 times). I also took the most recent STAR Reading score prior to the research as well as monthly (2 times) scores within the research window. Data from these assessments were then entered and tracked within a table to determine student progression. The students were also provided a survey related to their attitudes toward reading. This was provided before and after the 8-week timeframe of the study. This was given to determine if fluency progression via Readers' Theater played a role in reading attitudes. Along with this data, I took field notes, noting students' attitude, attendance, and any classroom interruptions or schedule changes.

Ethical Issues

This study included minimal ethical issues. One issue that may have arose within the study is enviousness from peers who were not receiving the intervention. Students appear fond of Readers' Theater lessons. Some students may have felt that they were not receiving the "fun" lesson. It is also a possibility that the control group students could have benefited from this intervention, however, did not receive it until the study was completed and results are viewed.

Chapter 4 Results and Findings

Research Question 1

What is the effect of small group Readers' Theater interventions on a young reader?

Data set 1.

One of my main goals with Readers' Theater was to enhance reading fluency as many of my students have been below or on watch for fluency. Students were tested before, mid-study, and at the end of the study. Below are the results.

Table 4.1

Experimental Group AIMSWeb Plus Scores (Winter Benchmark 105, Spring Benchmark 119)

| Experimental Group AIMSWeb | | | |
|----------------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| | Point 1 | Point 2 | Point 3 |
| Student 1 | 80 | 98 | 87 |
| Student 2 | 95 | 113 | 108 |
| Student 3 | 85 | 111 | 88 |
| Student 4 | 88 | 110 | 84 |
| Student 5 | 78 | x | 95 |
| Student 6 | 85 | x | 100 |

Note. Students 5 and 6 were quarantined mid-study, leaving them unable to provide a data point.

Table 4.2

Control Group AIMSWeb Plus Scores (Winter Benchmark 105, Spring Benchmark 119)

| Control Group AIMSWeb | | | |
|-----------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| | Point 1 | Point 2 | Point 3 |
| Student 7 | 85 | 105 | 115 |
| Student 8 | 124 | 114 | 111 |
| Student 9 | 127 | x | 104 |
| Student 10 | 103 | 103 | 104 |

Note. Student 9 was quarantined mid-study, leaving this student unable to provide a data point.

The students receiving Readers' Theater interventions showed increase in their WPM (words per minute). All but one student showed improvement from their prior score, however, this student did show increase mid-study when the students appeared most enthused about the new intervention. Student 5 and 6 received 2 weeks of in class instruction and were not in school the rest of the study. These students did receive scrips and practiced at home via distance learning written instructions. These students still showed strong increase in their fluency. My 1/2 of my control group showed a significant decrease in fluency throughout this study. The other half increased or stayed level with their prior scored. Given this data, it is my conclusion that Readers' Theater does have a positive impact on young reader's fluency.

Data Set 2.

Before this study, I recorded my experimental (students 1-6) groups STAR Reading scores in a table, I then proceeded to test them mid-study as well as after the study was complete to see if this enhanced their reading strategies. This test determines their ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development), reading level, and their percentile ranking. The tables below show the students STAR Reading test results.

Table 4.3

Experimental Groups STAR Reading Scores (Winter Benchmark 360, Spring Benchmark is 392)

| STAR READING- Experimental Group | | | |
|----------------------------------|--------|--------|-------|
| | Before | Middle | After |
| Student 1 | 370 | 265 | 359 |
| Student 2 | 335 | 365 | 332 |
| Student 3 | 289 | 462 | 295 |
| Student 4 | 553 | 486 | 522 |
| Student 5 | 386 | x | x |
| Student 6 | 453 | x | x |

Note. Students 5 and 6 were quarantined mid-study and absent again post-study, leaving them unable to provide data points.

Table 4.4

Control Groups STAR Reading Scores (Winter Benchmark 360, Spring Benchmark is 392)

| STAR READING- Control Group | | | |
|-----------------------------|--------|--------|-------|
| | Before | Middle | After |
| Student 7 | 323 | 396 | 443 |
| Student 8 | 515 | 321 | 272 |
| Student 9 | 370 | x | 447 |
| Student 10 | 461 | 426 | 439 |

Note. Student 9 was quarantined mid-study, leaving them unable to provide a middle data point.

Throughout this study, 50% of my experimental students increased mid-study or post study from their original score. 50% of the control group also increased from their prior score. Given this data and my informal observations, Readers' Theater plays a support role in increasing a child's level of reading just the same as a reading passage, small group book, or choice book would if it were being discussed in a small group, guided setting.

Research Question 2

How does Readers' Theater affect the attitudes towards reading within young readers?

Before beginning this study, I gave my students a survey that was based on how they feel about reading. This survey was provided to my experimental and my control group. Below are the initial survey results followed by the post research results.

Table 4.5

Experimental Group's Initial Survey Results

| I like to read: | Student 1 | Student 2 | Student 3 | Student 4 | Student 5 | Student 6 |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| a. mostly fiction | | | | | | x |
| b. mostly non-fiction | | | | x | | |
| c. both equally | x | x | x | | x | |
| I enjoy talking about what I am reading with my friends: | | | | | | |
| a. yes | x | | x | | x | |
| b. no | | | | | | |
| c. sometimes | | x | | x | | x |
| I enjoy reading in my free time | | | | | | |
| a. yes | | x | | | | |
| b. no | | | x | | | |
| c. sometimes | x | | | x | x | x |
| I feel comfortable choosing books to read on my own: | | | | | | |
| a. yes | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| b. I prefer to have someone help me choose a book | | | | | | |
| I prefer to read | | | | | | |
| a. to myself | x | x | x | x | | x |
| b. with a partner or adult | | | | | x | |
| I usually understand what I read | | | | | | |
| a. the first time I read it | | | x | x | | x |
| b. when I reread it | x | x | | | x | |

Note. These answers are the original answers of the experimental group, prior to the study.

Table. 4.6

Experimental Group's Post Research Survey Results (Red indicates no change, green indicates change in prior attitude)

| I like to read: | Student 1 | Student 2 | Student 3 | Student 4 | Student 5 | Student 6 |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| a. mostly fiction | | | | | | |
| b. mostly non-fiction | | | | x | | |
| c. both equally | x | x | x | | | |
| I enjoy talking about what I am reading with my friends: | | | | | | |
| a. yes | | | | | | |
| b. no | | | x | | | |
| c. sometimes | x | x | | | | x |
| I enjoy reading in my free time | | | | | | |
| a. yes | | x | | | | |
| b. no | | | x | | | |
| c. sometimes | x | | | | | x |
| I feel comfortable choosing books to read on my own: | | | | | | |
| a. yes | x | x | x | x | | |
| b. I prefer to have someone help me choose a book | | | | | | |
| I prefer to read | | | | | | |
| a. to myself | x | x | x | | | |
| b. with a partner or adult | | | | | x | |
| I usually understand what I read | | | | | | |
| a. the first time I read it | | x | x | x | | |
| b. when I reread it | x | | | | | |

Note. These answers are the post answers, given after the study. Red indicates that the answer stayed the same. Green indicates that they changed their answer from the original response.

Table 4.7

Control Group's Initial Survey Results

| I like to read: | Student 7 | Student 8 | Student 9 | Student 10 |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| a. mostly fiction | | | x | |
| b. mostly non-fiction | | x | | |
| c. both equally | x | | | x |
| I enjoy talking about what I am reading with my friends: | | | | |
| a. yes | | x | | |
| b. no | | | | |
| c. sometimes | x | | x | x |
| I enjoy reading in my free time: | | | | |
| a. yes | | x | | x |
| b. no | x | | | |
| c. sometimes | | | x | |
| I feel comfortable choosing books to read on my own: | | | | |
| a. yes | x | x | x | x |
| b. I prefer to have someone help me choose a book | | | | |
| I prefer to read: | | | | |
| a. to myself | x | | x | x |
| b. with a partner or adult | | x | | |
| I usually understand what I read | | | | |
| a. the first time I read | | | | x |
| b. when I reread it | | x | x | |

Note. These answers are the original answers of the control group, prior to the study.

Table 4.8

Control Group's Post Research Survey Results (Red indicates no change, green indicates change in prior attitude)

| | Student 7 | Student 8 | Student 9 | Student 10 |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| I like to read: | | | | |
| a. mostly fiction | | | | |
| b. mostly non-fiction | | x | x | |
| c. both equally | x | | | x |
| I enjoy talking about what I am reading with my friends: | | | | |
| a. yes | x | x | | |
| b. no | | | | x |
| c. sometimes | | | x | |
| I enjoy reading in my free time: | | | | |
| a. yes | x | | | x |
| b. no | | | | |
| c. sometimes | | x | x | |
| I feel comfortable choosing books to read on my own: | | | | |
| a. yes | x | x | x | |
| b. I prefer to have someone help me choose a book | | | | |
| I prefer to read: | | | | |
| a. to myself | x | | x | x |
| b. with a partner or adult | | x | | |
| I usually understand what I read | | | | |
| a. the first time I read it | x | | | x |
| b. when I reread it | | x | x | |

Note. These answers are the post answers, given after the study. Red indicates that the answer stayed the same. Green indicates that they changed their answer from the original response.

It was my hypothesis that by incorporating different genres, ways to express oneself through reading, and all the things that Readers' Theater has to offer, that students may change their attitude toward reading. Based on this survey, Readers' Theater does not have a significant impact on student attitude toward reading. There were only 3 changed answers total in the group

that received Readers' Theater. One of these changes was positive in that the student now felt confident understanding what they read the first time, rather than rereading. One change was negative in that a student no longer enjoyed talking about what they are reading with a friend. The last change I feel was influenced by Readers' Theater, where the child indicated they now prefer to read with a partner or adult.

Similar attitudes changed for the students who were not receiving Readers' Theater interventions. One student indicated that they no longer enjoy talking about reading with their friends while another indicated that they now do. Another student switched from answering "yes" to enjoying reading in their free time to "sometimes". One other student now enjoys reading mostly non-fiction books as compared to previously preferring mostly fiction books.

Conclusion

This study offered a variety of learning opportunities for students. Readers' Theater provided students with genres they may not have chosen independently, repeated reading, self-expression, and peer interaction. In conclusion I do feel that Readers' Theater provides a positive effect on student's reading fluency. According to data, Readers' Theater has approximately the same influence on ZPD (zone of proximal development) and Lexile Level enhancement as other small group instructional strategies. Although students did appear to enjoy the intervention of Readers' Theater, this did not prove to have an effect on their internal reading attitudes.

Chapter 5

Action Plan and Plan for Sharing

For my plan of action for the remainder of this school year, it is my intention to incorporate Readers' Theater tri-weekly while integrating other reading supports to increase student attitudes and Lexile Levels. I hope to integrate a rotation, after doing research on comprehension interventions. I will incorporate a comprehension intervention one week, a study focusing on a specific reading strategy the following week and end the 3-week rotation with Readers' Theater. I will incorporate this rotation into all of my small groups but differentiate it based on level.

I plan to carry information and new learnings from this study into my PLC (Professional Learning Community) group. I will share the results of this study and present the data to them, providing evidence of effectiveness. I will discuss the pros to Readers' Theater as well as my informal observations of the attitudes towards this study. I also plan to share the literature research that I have compiled for coworkers to refer to for other options to increase reading fluency, as well as Reader's Theater.

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Appendix A

How I Feel About Reading

I like to read:

- A. mostly fiction
- B. mostly non-fiction
- C. both equally

I enjoy talking about what I am reading with my friends:

- A. yes
- B. no
- C. sometimes

I enjoy reading in my free time:

- A. yes
- B. No
- C. Sometimes

I feel comfortable choosing books to read on my own:

- A. yes
- B. I prefer to have someone help me choose a book

I prefer to read:

- A. to myself
- B. with a partner or adult

I usually understand what I read

- A. the first time I read it
- B. when I reread it