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Improved reading: a matter for discussion



Professor Sweeny's research indicates that reading conferences between students and teachers improve comprehension. Photo by Lauren McFalls.

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One-on-one instructional reading conferences between students and teachers improve comprehension and fluency among children of all reading levels, according to an ongoing research study conducted by Sheelah Sweeny, an assistant professor of **education** at Northeastern University.

"We found that individual instruction gave students the opportunity to engage with literature in a way that moved beyond the mechanics of reading," said Sweeny, a former elementary school teacher whose research focuses on cross-cultural literacy.

Struggling readers, as well as high-ability readers, experienced more growth than those in control classrooms with reading instruction typically found in schools, she said.

Her study, entitled, "The Schoolwide Enrichment Model in Reading," is part of a larger quantitative analysis on reading comprehension and fluency, which is backed by a \$5 million grant from the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Program.

Between September of 2007 and February of 2008, Sweeny visited 30 elementary school classrooms in Maryland, North Carolina, Florida, Minnesota and Ohio.

Each school agreed to participate in a three-phased reading program. Third-, fourth-, and fifth-graders were introduced to new books; required to read independently and take part in short daily conferences with their teachers; and encouraged to complete independent projects connected to the reading.

For her part, Sweeny observed the individual reading conferences, focusing her analysis on the 10 teachers who best implemented the three-phased program. She found that teachers held at least six different types of conferences, depending on the needs of the student.

"Celebration" conferences, for example, were held for children who recently finished a book, whereas "repair" conferences were held for students who had a particular difficulty with the reading.

Teachers typically began a conference by establishing a positive rapport with the child by making small talk, a strategy that "makes kids feel valued in the classroom community," said Sweeny.

They dedicated the core portion of the discussion to monitoring the child's reading comprehension by asking questions about the text. Teachers often suggested reading strategies for improvement, such as making inferences and predictions and determining the meaning of particularly challenging vocabulary.

The final stage of a conference generally focused on giving students positive feedback and setting goals, such as finishing a chapter by the following day, or reading a more challenging book.

"The problem with struggling readers is that they feel like they can't do it," said Sweeny, who added that children with below-average reading skills by the end of third grade tend to remain poor readers for the rest of their lives. "We have to empower teachers so they can help each child reach his highest potential."

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