Early Adolescents' Perceptions of their Engagement and Comprehension Using Reader's Theater

By
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Abstract

Reader’s Theater has been proven effective in boosting engagement and fostering comprehension. However, most Reader’s Theater studies reveal the benefits of using Reader’s Theater with younger grades in elementary settings and/or for using with below-level readers. Additionally, while there is substantial research supporting how Reader’s Theater strengthens fluency, there is less tied to direct comprehension development. This action research explored the impact of Reader’s Theater (a type of performance reading) on the perceptions of reading comprehension and engagement of third to eighth graders with a small group of mostly homogenous middle-class participants. The research was conducted in a home during a week-long vacation from school in six 90-minute sessions of Reader’s Theater. Multiple scripts were utilized with each being read two or more times. The researcher created and conducted a post-reading survey to capture students’ perceptions of their gains in comprehension. He also developed and administered a customized engagement instrument. Qualitative and quantitative data were assembled using both surveys. Results indicate that students’ perceptions of their engagement and comprehension were positively impacted.
Before working in higher education, I was employed for seventeen years as a K-12 educator. This included teaching first grade, second grade, third grade, and middle school. I also taught all levels of K-12 reading intervention/remediation courses over several summers. Like most teachers, I attempted to meet grade level targets while differentiating instruction for specific learners.

My experiences have given me many insights about reading instruction at different grades. For example, most first grade teachers work diligently to developing phonemic awareness with students. Second grade teachers are typically continuing more advanced phonics instruction but also adding more and more comprehension (especially literal comprehension) lessons. Third grade teachers often add greater inferencing instruction. At the same time, second and third grade are the primary years when children begin to develop prosody as readers. In the upper elementary grades, and especially in middle school and high school, learners are required to use their reading skills to extract meaning from print not only during reading lessons, but also in other courses where they read for content (i.e. reading a textbook during social studies class). In addition to teaching specific grade level targets, teachers work hard to provide individualized lessons. Often, for example, English language learners would receive additional phonics instruction.

During my career, there was an increase in pressure put on teacher and student performance. Much of this was tied into what was considered measurable results from standardized testing, including recording and reporting of reading scores. I am not the only one who noticed this. “Teachers have never been under more pressure. Pressure to perform. Pressure to cover the curriculum. Pressure to meet standards. Pressure to ensure high scores on standardized tests” (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007, p. 13). The biggest pressure I felt was to increase
students’ reading speed on assessments that did not include follow-up comprehension questions or any consideration of prosody. I was concerned that the possible over-focus on reading speed alone came because it was and is easy to measure. In addition, without consideration of prosody, my concern was that it could lead to less than desirable comprehension results. Fortunately, research supported my instincts. “Our data lend support to the notion that assessments of fluency without concurrent assessments of thoughtful comprehension are potentially misleading and damaging” (Applegate, Applegate, & Modla, 2009, p. 520). My district did not change its assessments despite my objections, unfortunately. I was faced with a dilemma. Do I close my door and teach what I know is best for kids, as some of my colleagues advised? Or, do I abandon what I have learned, embracing the fluency assessments, as some of the district leadership advised?

Meanwhile, I would send students who were below level readers to the Title I teacher and other staff. Often, learners who had to leave the classroom would groan because they felt that the “boxed program of the day” they were using with the intervention specialists were dull and/or irrelevant. However, within my primary instruction, I exposed students to a rich array of high-quality literature. I utilized booktalks, literature circles, reciprocal teaching, guided reading, and other motivating strategies that prioritized comprehension. In some cases, these techniques also provided many social interactions.

During a brainstorming collaboration session with a new intervention specialist in 2010, we decided to try to use Reader’s Theater with the children who were being pulled out of the classroom. We agreed that students needed opportunities for rereading, as had been provided with the boxed programs. However, we felt like an authentic purpose (in our case, to perform for each other and for an outside audience) would make the experience more meaningful. We
measured our students’ fluency rates by giving one-minute grade level timed readings before and after passage reading. We also allowed opportunity for discussion afterwards, though that was not required by the district. Our pupils’ reading rates went up faster than ever before. Suddenly, I had a new problem on my hands. The students who were being pulled out of the class were no longer the ones groaning. In fact, they counted down the minutes until their intervention time. It was the rest of the children, often the at-level and above-level readers who were lamenting.

I drew several conclusions, some at that time and some later, as I continued to expand my use of Reader’s Theater.

1. Using Reader’s Theater was effective for increasing student engagement while also helping to achieve measurable fluency outcomes on one-minute timed assessments. Our outcomes had, in fact, matched our goals. I was also having more fun teaching, which was not lost on the class.

2. All students and reading levels could benefit from a variety of scripts and Reader’s Theater experiences.

3. I realized that I could use Reader’s Theater as a strong intervention that was differentiated and did not require learners to be isolated or pulled-out of the classroom. Instead of having the students go to a separate room with the interventionist, the specialist would come and join me in co-teaching the class.

4. Students began to reframe what they considered to be a “good reader.” They no longer identified a good reader as someone who simply read fast. Instead, they observed that good readers had expression and could interpret the plot as demonstrated by specific actions.
5. This conclusion was the most profound: my readers’ comprehension scores, as measured by using district assessments, began to increase at a faster rate than ever before.

I was not completely surprised about my students improving their comprehension. I knew that fluency—a term that I will define closer later in this paper—is a building block to comprehension (Armbruster et al., 2001). What surprised me the most, though, was that the two had appeared to happen simultaneously. My plan had been to frontload as much fluency as I could and then emphasize comprehension later in other units. Now I felt like I could do both in one lesson plan. This led me to become more curious about Reader’s Theater.

I also had peace of mind because I have always felt that best practices that work for our struggling readers are often underutilized with our other readers (older readers, stronger readers, etc.). I no longer had to choose; I could follow best practices that were based on research and justify to my supervisor how it would help meet district assessment goals. Since this epiphany, though, my own children have become early adolescents and I have begun working in higher education, where I work with teacher candidates. As a result, I have tried to expand upon my past findings to continue to keep Reader’s Theater relevant to my current roles as father and teacher educator. Thus, the purpose of the current study is to expand the most common usage of Reader’s Theater, utilizing it with older readers who have “mastered” the building blocks of reading (i.e. students who are already considered fluent readers), with growth in comprehension as the linchpin.

This research will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. How will early adolescent students (aged eight to thirteen) perceive their engagement in Reader’s Theater compared to reading on their own and/or using a regular book format?
2. How will early adolescent readers perceive their own comprehension, especially inferencing skills, when using Reader’s Theater?

**Literature Review**

**The Relationship Between Fluency, Comprehension, and Prosody**

There are many definitions of reading fluency found in the literature (Applegate, Applegate, & Modla, 2009). Nonetheless, the most common usage omits prosody and expression, emphasizing accuracy, automatic word recognition, and speed. Rasinski (2003) includes the concept of expression in the definition of fluency. For this study, the term “expression” will be used interchangeably for prosody.

**Fluency as a building block for comprehension.** When decoding and other aspects of reading are more automatic, the reader can devote a maximal amount of attention to the deeper levels of reading—comprehension (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004). This relates to the theory of automaticity in reading which states that attention that is given to decoding cannot be used for comprehension (Schrauben, 2010). Nonetheless, even with a strong foundation of reading skills in place, there is no guarantee that older students will become strong readers (Applegate, Applegate, & Modla, 2009).

**The role of prosody.** Specific research on how prosody is necessary as part of comprehension development is limited (Applegate, Applegate, & Modla, 2009). Since many experts consider reading comprehension the overarching goal of reading instruction, the significant value that prosody has in comprehension should be utilized (Schrauben, 2010). Prosody may be the hidden agent that ensures that otherwise fluent readers are truly comprehending well. Some other researchers reported links between prosody and comprehension (Miller & Schwanenflugel, 2006). At the same time, others have failed to prove the relationship
(Schatzschneider et al., 2004). Still, fluency and comprehension may have a much more complex association than is popularly thought and Schwanenflugel et al. (2006) suggest that the two skills do, in fact, develop simultaneously.

Before a reader can develop strong comprehension, he or she must develop reading accuracy, automaticity, and prosody (Applegate, Applegate, & Modla, 2009; Nichols, Rupley & Raskinsk, 2009; Young & Rasinski, 2009). In fact, strategies concentrating on timed fluency and the recognition of sight words are ineffective if students are not given the opportunity to explore the meaning of the words in the text (Applegate, Applegate, & Modla, 2009). Recently, researchers found that prosody appears to facilitate the construction of meaning in written language (Veenendaal, Groen, & Verhoeven, 2014).

**Comprehension and the Early Adolescent Reader**

Students who are nine to fifteen years old are known as fluent, comprehending readers. The goal of this stage is to increase the capacity to apply an understanding of the varied uses of words. Readers become “strategic readers” who can, among other things, draw inferences. Therefore, to meet the needs of this age group, instruction should be focused on authentic reading experiences to help construct meaning.

**Constructivism.** Constructivists believe that learners make sense of their world by connecting their knowledge and experiences to new content (McLaughlin, 2002). These connections allow for new and refined meanings. This occurs in every aspect of life, including with reading comprehension. Over twenty-five years ago there was a shift away from traditional approaches (which includes lectures and direct instruction) toward a constructivist approach to learning (Goldenberg, 1992). In this approach, students refer to experiences to use language and discussions to construct understanding and meaning (Schreiber & Valle, 2013). Constructivism
deems learning to be a social experience. The importance of social experiences in reading will be a continual theme in this study, including in exploring the value of social interactions for facilitating engagement.

**Need for Engagement and Motivation**

The specific terms *engagement* and *motivation*, along with *reading interest* and a few others, while sometimes used interchangeably, more often have different and separate interpretations. There can be value in separating them into separate concepts, yet—for this research—I am considering them collectively and dependent upon each other.

**Engagement and motivation.** Reading motivation is a strong predictor of students’ capability in reading comprehension (Farstrup et al., 2002). Thus, like fluency, I consider it to be another “building block” for comprehension. One of the chief recommendations of the U.S. Department of Education publication, *Successfully Delivering Scientifically Based Comprehension Instruction to K-3 Students*, was to establish engaging contexts to foster reading comprehension (Shanahan et al., 2010).

Engagement skills, such as social participation, imitation, and performance, as well as responding emotionally to text are crucial indicators and conditions for fostering comprehension at all ages (Phinney & Ward, 2016). Further, research indicates that students become less and less engaged as they progress through school and, thus, engagement is a very decisive factor in reading instruction (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). This affects growth in many areas of reading which contribute to a decrease in time spent practicing reading skills. The tasks teachers assign to students are extremely important in influencing a student’s reading motivation (Gambrell, 2011). In fact, the daily tasks teachers do with their class, not the type of reading program, are the most reliable indicators of student’s motivation (Tuner & Paris, 1995).
**Social motivation.** Building off constructivist principles, the idea of social motivation is significant. Because Reader’s Theater is a cooperative and social activity, it is a worthwhile task to consider the research. For example, social motivation can both lead to an increased time reading as well as overall reading achievement (Biancarosa, & Snow, 2004). The more that children perform literacy activities in social contexts, the more they are engaged, and hence the students have a greater opportunity for growth. Kids are more motivated to read when they have chances to interact with others (Gambrell, 2011).

**Reader’s Theater**

Reader’s Theater is a staged reading of a scripted story by two or more readers for the purpose of entertaining and/or informing others. It provides an opportunity to play a character, thus lending itself to greater empathy for that person. It differs from traditional plays in that the readers can read directly from the script without a need to memorize lines (Moran, 2006). Reader’s Theater stimulates the imagination and is easy to put in a language arts curriculum (Fredericks, 2001). It is also a way to aid comprehension while being an authentic way to stimulate enthusiasm for text. Reader’s Theater also facilitates critical thinking, cooperation, and fun. It is a good way to break up sometimes redundant practice and techniques. We know that students must be put in circumstances where they get to reread a passage silently or aloud many times. Many methods are used to infuse repeated readings into curriculum. Reader’s Theater is documented as one effective way to help students become fluent readers (Corcoran & Davis, 2005; Griffith & Rasinski, 2004).

**Reader’s Theater and engagement.** Second and third grade children were more interested and confident in reading after using Reader’s Theater (Corocan & Davis, 2015). In fact, 90% of the participants in their study indicated they would like to do Reader’s Theater each
week. Another inquiry on Reader’s Theater produced similar results, with a “deepened interest” in reading be observed (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004). They also point out that they saw an increase in expressiveness that carried over during Guided Reading.

Not only is it challenging to motivate middle school learners, but it is additionally difficult to do so with expository text (Bullion-Mears, McCauley & McWhorter, 2007): Performing text is a technique that builds on the social and energetic nature of middle school students and helps them create detailed and vibrant mental pictures that enhance comprehension. Performing expository text engages students with the material they are studying as they actively communicate and collaborate with their peers in the preparation and practicing of text. Even reluctant readers and shy introverts find it almost impossible to be uninvolved in a classroom that is working with performing text. (p. 47)

**Reader’s Theater and comprehension.** Students must rely on the oral expression to demonstrate comprehension during Reader’s Theater (Corocan & Davis, 2005; Young & Rasinski, 2009). Martinez, Roser, & Strecker (1999) found that students in a Reader’s Theater group made greater progress on an informal reading inventory measuring comprehension and fluency than a non-Reader’s Theater comparison group. Reader’s Theater provides students an authentic purpose to practice reading. Bullion-Mears, McCauley & McWhorter (2007) explain that:

> Performing text is a vehicle to give those informational words the wings needed to be understood, seen, and felt. Choral reading, rap, reader's theater, and simulations can help replace the moans and groans of the middle school reader and the ‘Miss, do we have to read our textbook today?’ with excitement and interest.” (p. 47)
Methods

The purpose of this action research was to determine how successfully Reader’s Theater would work, particularly with older pupils. The two primary areas of inquiry were engagement and comprehension as it concerns early adolescents.

Setting

The researcher’s home, located in a small midwestern city, was provided for the instruction and investigation. The study took place over three four-hour segments in late March, 2019.

Participants

Four families of children who had previously had rich community theater experience participated in this study. The participants ages ranged from eight to thirteen. In total, seven children participated. This consisted of one third-grade student, two fifth-grade students, and four eighth-grade students. Each of the participants considered themselves “good readers.” Similarly, parents identified their own children as “above grade level” readers. All seven children were Caucasian and from middle-class families. One child, identified as having educational autism, had a 504 plan at school in which she can receive accommodations if needed. Table 1 shows which participant attended on which day.
Table 1

*Dates Participants Attended*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Day 1</th>
<th>Day 2</th>
<th>Day 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Materials**

I used sixteen scripts with the children during the study (Appendix A). Participants read five or more scripts each day, with one script chosen by the researcher as the focus story of the day for survey and data collection purposes. Students picked two stories to perform to their parents and each other.

I collected a multitude of scripts from library books and internet sites that I found to be appropriate for middle school students. On most occasions, participants read scripts in groups of five. When scripts required more than five participants, my wife and/or I joined in as narrators.
Sometimes participants had multiple roles. Several scripts also were done in smaller groups each day, in which two groups were formed, dividing into “youngers” and “olders.”

**Procedures**

After obtaining parental consent, I communicated with parents via email, phone, and Facebook to find common times to conduct the sessions and collect data. Each day involved three hours of Reader’s Theater activities. A separate half hour was devoted to giving the group members a break while the researcher collected data individually from students. Each participant completed one engagement survey (Survey 1) and one comprehension survey (Survey 2) each day. Students, with parents present and with time for clarifications, signed a written consent prior to any formal activities on the first day we met.

Older students worked on a computer independently while younger children and I worked together to submit their survey answers. The same questions were asked each day but applied to a different story. Thus, two students completed Survey 1—which focused on engagement—three times, once for each day they attended. Likewise, two students completed three surveys for the comprehension survey, known as Survey 2 (Appendix C). There was some small overlap in the type of data assembled from the surveys. For example, the engagement instrument asked a few questions about comprehension. Accordingly, two students did three pairs of surveys, four students submitted two pairs, one student submitted one pair. As a result, fifteen total sets of surveys were completed. The surveys, which asked nineteen questions together, gathered some objective information. For example, one survey asked the students to rate their interest in the story from one to five. However, the surveys relied more heavily on participants’ subjective perceptions for the data collected. An example of this is where the students were asked to explain
how Reader’s Theater helped them to make an inference. Observations of student engagement during the study were also collected.

**Findings and Results**

Since engagement has been identified as crucial to successful comprehension, I required students to complete Survey 1 before Survey 2. This is because Survey 1 had more questions that related to engagement while Survey 2 had more questions that related to comprehension. Findings and results for comprehension questions that were also on the first survey appear in Table 2. Survey 2 findings, results, and discussion follow. The section concludes by addressing the open-ended questions from each survey.

**Engagement**

I wrote the first six questions in this survey as selected response questions with the goal of yielding quantitative data.

**Comparing Reader’s Theater to non-Reader’s Theater formats.** The first two questions (Table 2, Figures 1 and 2) demonstrate that students found the materials more interesting when presented in a Reader’s Theater format. The first question probed about not using Reader’s Theater while the second question tied the Reader’s Theater component in. Using a Likert scale, I assigned a value of five for “extremely interesting,” four for “very interesting,” three for “moderately interesting,” two for “slightly interesting,” and one for “not interesting at all,” allowed for quantitative analysis. On a scale of one to five, the mean of 2.40 for question one falls in the range of “slightly interesting” to “moderately interesting.” In contrast, the mean of 3.73 for question is classified as “moderately interesting” to “very interesting.” In conclusion, by over one full point, students deemed the Reader’s Theater format to be more interesting and/or engaging.
Table 2

*Value-based Comparison to Determine Interest (Non- Reader’s Theater vs. Reader’s Theater)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Value assigned</th>
<th>Respondents for question one</th>
<th>Question one</th>
<th>Respondents for question two</th>
<th>Question two</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not interesting at all</td>
<td>X1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slightly Interesting</td>
<td>X2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately interesting</td>
<td>X3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very interesting</td>
<td>X4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremely Interesting</td>
<td>X5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total value</td>
<td></td>
<td>36</td>
<td></td>
<td>56</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean = 2.40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mean = 3.73</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1.* Bar graph for question one (Survey 1): How interesting do you think this story would have been if it was presented in a regular format? That is, if it was not in a Reader’s Theater script format.
Figure 2. Bar graph for question two (Survey 1): How interesting do you think the story was because of the way you were able to read it, interact with it, etc. because it was in a Reader’s Theater script format?

Features of Reader’s Theater. Questions three through six isolated specific features of Reader’s Theater and how those features may have contributed to their engagement. Students selected one of the following three responses: “absolutely,” “somewhat,” and “no/no difference.”

Question three emphasized empathy. Nine students stated they felt “absolutely” more empathetic while another five participants favored “somewhat” more empathetic, with only one student that chose “no difference.” This was for the empathy they perceived themselves to have for the character they played because of the Reader’s Theater format. Thus, there was a correlation between performers developing greater empathy towards characters and engaging in Reader’s Theater (see Figure 3).
Figure 3. Bar graph for question three (Survey 1): Did you feel that you were more connected and/or empathetic to the character that you played because you had that character? In other words, would you have been less apt to see that character's perspective if you had read about this character in a regular book format?

Meanwhile, question four (see Figure 4) addressed one of the fundamental themes discussed earlier in the literature review: the idea of social motivation. Twelve responses were selected for the highest category while three chose the middle category “somewhat”. This suggests that performers found Reader’s Theater to be highly motivating due to the social opportunities involved.
Figure 4. Bar graph for question four (Survey 1): Most reading is done by oneself. Reader’s Theater, though, allows for group interaction. Did you feel as though this story was more fun and interesting to read with others than if you had to read by yourself?

Question five addressed movement. Ten students picked “absolutely” while none responded “no.” Five children selected “somewhat.” Figure 5 represents this, providing evidence that performers find movement as a key factor in increasing their engagement in Reader’s Theater.
Figure 5. Bar graph for question five (Survey 1): Most times we read, we are seated. Reader’s Theater, however, allows you to move some. Did you feel as though this story was more fun and interesting to read than a typical story because you were allowed to move while reading it?

Engagement and comprehension. The transition from prompts on engagement to those of comprehension occurs between questions six and seven on the first survey. Question 6 states: “Most reading at your age is done silently. Reader’s Theater, on the other hand, is meant to be read aloud. Do you feel that this made the story more fun and interesting than if you had to read entirely silently?” This is clearly aimed at engagement. However, question 7 states: “Reader’s Theater allows for rereading where readers can work on pronouncing words, reading fluently, developing character voices and expressions, etc. Do you feel that these types of opportunities also improved your comprehension because you had several times to read it, with the first time being a chance to figure out some unfamiliar or less familiar sounds or words?” This is clearly aimed at the students’ perceptions about their comprehension.

Pairing them together allows for a side-by-side analysis of the two goals of this action research. Nine responses indicated “absolutely” while none responded “no” on both survey
items. The remaining five responses preferred “somewhat” as their choice. Question 6 (Figure 6) associates with reading aloud while question 7 (Figure 7) investigates rereading. Meanwhile, question 6 is asking about readers’ perceptions of their engagement while question 7 is asking about students’ perceptions of their comprehension. In both cases, performers responded that these features of Reader’ Theater were beneficial. In other words, the results of the two questions paired together demonstrate an increase in both engagement and comprehension for early adolescents. Comprehension will be explored further in the next sub-section, beginning with a handful of prompts remaining on the first survey, as well as seven questions from the comprehension survey (Survey 2).

![Bar Graph](image)

*Figure 6.* Bar graph for question six (Survey 1): Most reading at your age is done silently.

Reader’s Theater, on the other hand, is meant to be aloud. Do you feel that this made the story more fun and interesting than if you had to read entirely silently?
Figure 7. Bar graph for question seven (Survey 1): Reader’s Theater allows for rereading where readers can work on pronouncing words, reading fluently, developing character voices and expression, etc. Do you feel that these types of opportunities also improved your comprehension because you had several times to read it, with the first time being a chance to figure out some unfamiliar or less familiar sounds or words?

Comprehension

Several questions on the first survey ask about comprehension. The findings and discussion will resume by examining the next three prompts and the responses submitted on the first survey. Next, moving onto Survey 2, results from seven prompts will be shared.

Survey 1. Figure 8 conveys that all fifteen responses showed students were more confident readers when they had a chance to reread. Students then had to answer the second part of the question based answering yes to the first part. There was a consensus that their confidence contributed positively to their comprehension, too.
Figure 8. Bar graph for question eight (Survey 1): Did you feel that you were more confident in your reading since you were able to reread? And, did that confidence help you understand the story better?

Question nine follows up on the idea of rereading asked in questions seven and eight. As shown on Figure 9, eight participants favored “definitely,” five students selected “maybe,” and one student picked “no.” This directed participants to assess whether Reader’s Theater gave them a better opportunity to understand a story’s elements and details better than if they had been required to reread a text not using Reader’s Theater. The performers showed strong beliefs that Reader’s Theater enhanced their ability to comprehend text.
Figure 9. Bar graph for question nine (Survey 1): Do you feel that you would be more able to understand this story’s elements and details better using Reader’s Theater versus just rereading a story (but not doing Reader’s Theater)?

Question 10 asked about inferencing skills. Figure 10 clearly illustrates that most participants perceived that Reader’s Theater “definitely” effectively helped them “read between the lines” and “notice subtle clues” better. More findings and discussion about inferencing skills will be presented when analyzing results from Survey 2.

Figure 10. Bar graph for question ten (Survey 1): Do you feel that you were able to pick up on subtle clues and hidden pieces of the story (some of the "between the lines" parts) better because you used Reader’s Theater? In other words, did you pick up on some new things that you did not notice or think about after you read it another time?
Survey 2. The second survey elicited eight responses focusing on their perceptions related to their gains in comprehension. A few of these questions covered literal and evaluative comprehension. The main goal of Survey 2, though, prioritized inferential comprehension. While all comprehension is obviously important, I was hoping to gain the greatest insights and impact related to inferencing skills. Thus, most prompts asked students to explain inferences they made while being involved in Reader’s Theater. Two questions (one and seven) provide quantitative results. The other six questions involved short-answer questions that provided important qualitative findings. Like with the engagement instrument (Survey 1), there was one focus story each day that students referred to for the sake of answering the survey prompts.

Literal comprehension. The first question was a simple way for the researcher to track literal comprehension. Individually, children had two recall questions about the story’s plot, and they were asked to recall one small (and possibly easy to overlook) detail from the story. As a result, three literal comprehension questions were asked of each participant for each time Survey 2 was submitted. This allowed for 45 total answers (three times 15 submissions). Eighth graders attained 26 out of 27 (96%), while the younger participants scored 14 out of 18 (77%). In all, participants correctly answered 40 out of 45 questions correctly (88%). It is likely that the students did well on this because of the rereading. One student noted that she “totally missed that the first time she read it.” Figure 11 shows this data represented by individual student results.
**Figure 11.** Bar graph for question one (Survey 2): How did you do on the three literal comprehension questions that were asked?

**Inferential comprehension.** Four prompts (questions two through six) on Survey 2 elicited open-ended responses about inferencing. Each response was analyzed, looking for patterns and specific language from students. Compelling evidence in participants’ responses indicate connections to Reader’s Theater contributing to their abilities to make meaningful inferences. This is evident immediately in prompt two, which directed: “Please describe the problem in the story. Besides the parts that were fully explained (literally), what clues did you find that allowed you to INFER more about the problem?”

Students described the problem well. In fact, all fifteen responses conveyed acceptable explanations of the main problem in the story. Still, this may have been a poorly written question. The second part of the prompt asked students “besides the parts that were fully explained (literally), what clues did you find that allowed you to infer more about the problem?” This may have overwhelmed students and/or been confusing. This part, which asks the student to
state clues that allowed them to infer the problem, was not always reflected in the students’ answers. Nonetheless, readers frequently noted a character’s expression and how that helped them construct meaning. It was also evident that children gained understanding from how each other expressed their character. A good example where a student found a clue was when he cited that a character purposefully hesitated to move during the performance, thus intentionally portraying how the character was showing he was confused.

Question three also aimed at determining the reader’s ability to make inferences, centered on how the readers changed their expressions. Students were asked to identify one place where they changed their expression because of an inference they had made. Fourteen of the fifteen responses specifically articulated a clear example of this. For example, one student wrote: “One place where I changed my expression was when I realized the problem was starting to brew. I changed it because I wanted the characters to notice something was happening.” On two occasions, performers acknowledged that they had to change their expression because they gained new insights into the story. A student wrote; “The first time was confusing for the actors to capture the right tone because they did not completely understand the story. However, the second time they were able to understand the story much better and develop their characters and tone.” Another student submitted the following: “I was Louis and I was confused (by what was going on in the story) and so he sounded confused. That (kind of) worked though. I realized that maybe he wasn’t confused so I made his voice more confident when we performed it.”

The fourth question required the students to identify an occasion where they made a gesture or action because of an inference they made. In some cases, it is difficult to attribute which actions resulted from inferring versus actions that were written in the text, even after careful rereading of the scripts. I found one comment, though, that strongly showed inferencing.
The student stated that “I think I smiled more showing that I had helped solve the problem.” At no point did the script tell the character to smile nor did the script state that the problem was solved. Thus, the student had to use inferencing to derive meaning. Students demonstrated appropriate gestures and actions based upon their reading. Performers displayed awareness of how their actions allowed the audience to infer. For example, one student wrote: “I also trembled to show that I was scared.” Another performer noted that he/she “followed the other character’s lead and actions.”

The fifth question asked participants to identify a time they felt a member of their group had made an incorrect inference. Answers ranged from “nobody did anything incorrectly” to “I thought (the character) would have acted more concerned.” One student noted that a character used a Western voice, even though no evidence in the story supported doing so. Another student said that they felt the character used a meaner tone than was intended. Children also commented about themselves. For example, one student wrote: “the first time I read it, I thought Scrooge was still angry. I stayed grumpy but then reread it and found out that I missed some clues that showed that he was coming out of his grumpy side and being nice.” Several other students pointed this same error out. In general, participants showed good evidence of being able to infer and express how others, as well as themselves, may have inferred properly or improperly.

Question six was the final one tied to inferencing skills. This prompt asked students to identify “hidden” clues in the story that helped them gain empathy for the character they played. Students struggled to articulate their inferences. Nonetheless it was clear they made text-to-self connections (when the reader identifies something in the text that reminds them of something that has happened to them) likely explaining why they often reported feeling empathy and/or understanding for the character they played. One participant expressed having greater empathy
for their character because they had experienced a similar problem once. In all, thirteen of the fifteen responses communicated ideas like ‘I felt ____ for,’” “I felt like I was that character,” or “I was more intrigued by the character because I played his/her role.”

**Evaluative comprehension.** The last two questions elicited data related to evaluative comprehension (comprehension that allows the students to make judgements about the story, such as the quality of the writing). For these questions, the students rated the story. Figure 10 shows that readers generally liked the stories, with a mean of 3.73 on a scale from one to five. There was a positive relationship on how students perceived the scripts specifically due to the format as Reader’s Theater on Survey 1. This question did not yield data for this research. For research purposes, though, this question was intended to set up the next prompt (open-ended) rather than to divulge data for the primary research questions. Participants were acutely aware of the purpose of the research and consistently chose to direct responses towards Reader’s Theater strategies and features more than the materials or content of the stories. Responses will be shared in the next sub-section.

![Figure 10](image.png)  
*Figure 10. Question seven, Survey 2: How would you rate this story from 1-5 (5 being the best)?*
Open-ended questions. The final prompt on both surveys were open-ended. Two types of answers emerged from the last prompt on Survey 2: “What, if anything, would have made this story more interesting?” The first theme related to how students may have liked to expand our Reader’s Theater into more of an actual play. Answers that reflected this included “I wish we had more props” and “I would have liked to have more movement.” The most common theme for the answers, nevertheless, correlated to specific comments about how the performers liked the Reader’s Theater format. One student wrote: “I wish that we could have read the entire story, not just one scene. If it was just a regular book, I would have rated it much lower. Humans bring it alive. It was cool that it was a social way to learn. With books, I only see my view. With others, I can see how they interpret characters and scenes.” Another pupil wrote: “I would not have liked the story if I would have had to read it on my own. But, it was more fun to read with a friend, be silly, and act it out. Reader’s Theater made it more interesting and funny.”

The findings for the final question from Survey 1 provided perhaps the best way to conclude. Participants were asked: “What are your thoughts? What did you enjoy about Reader’s Theater? How did this help you learn?”

As with every other question, fifteen statements were submitted in total from the seven students. I found several themes, some of which mirrored those in the most recent prompt discussed. The most common statements centered around the concept of how Reader’s Theater allowed individuals to visualize a story. This was an unanticipated but positive finding. The second most common theme related to how students enjoyed working and learning with others. At least two responses focused on using expression while another two responses emphasized how movement helped students stay motivated. There were unexpected student responses that compared or contrasted their Reader’s Theater experience to more formal play productions. In
some cases, individuals preferred this format (for example, one student liked that no memorization was required). In other instances, individuals cited features of a more formal play that they preferred (such as having props or having more opportunities for movement).

Discussion

In the current study, findings showed that the students who participated found Reader’s Theater to be valuable. Both of my research questions were addressed in so much as many students identified many engaging features and reported perceived gains in comprehension. Specifically, participants highlighted:

1. Greater preference of Reader’s Theater format over regular book formats.
2. Increased empathy for the character they portrayed.
3. More interest in the story due to social interactions, ability to move, and ability to read story aloud.
4. Enhanced confidence in their reading skills.
5. Improved perceptions of their abilities to comprehend, with many examples of inferencing described.

Building on the research from Buillion-Mears, McCaulley, & McWhorter (2007), I have found that Reader’s Theater worked very well with seven early adolescent readers, keeping their engagement high even while forfeiting their vacation time. In addition, readers demonstrated inferencing skills time and time again. I believe that this shows that Reader’s Theater can be utilized in many situations, perhaps more than it has been with on-level readers, above-level readers, older readers, etc.
Limitations

Several limitations stand-out in this action research. First, the data reflects a small, mostly homogenous group of children who are already strong readers. Second, much of the data collected is based upon student’s self-analysis and their perceptions—which does not reflect actual achievement. Next, some of the prompts asked were challenging and/or confusing for students to respond to. There are also occasions where it was not completely clear if the student made their conclusion based upon literal or inferential evidence from the story. Accordingly, these responses were not cited in the findings and results. Other limitations—because I am no longer teaching in a K-12 setting—include the setting and time parameters of the investigation, which had to work around various schedules, including mine, as well as for children outside of school time. Additional limitations include: having different participants attend different days, using many grade levels in one study, missing one pupil due to illness, and conducting the research during a time when participants may have wanted to do other things (for example, go to Florida).

Nevertheless, these limitations did not impede me from collecting a great deal of data. The data collected, on the other hand, was from only seven participants, most who completed the surveys at least twice. It is likely, but not known, that the results collected from their second or third set of surveys mimicked those submitted on the first. Conversely, students may have responded differently from one set of surveys to another depending upon the unique experiences of the specific story, experiences that day, and increased exposure to Reader’s Theater.

Despite some limitations, the data overwhelmingly met the goals of this research, providing many insights for future practice and possible scholarly inquiry. For example,
participants expressed many well-written examples of how they used inferencing to make meaning.

**Future Directions**

I felt proud that the children enjoyed reading at such a high rate, especially since they gave up many hours of their vacations to participate. Since the ultimate goal of reading is to make meaning, I am especially satisfied with the findings and results noted with comprehension. Ultimately, this action research provided compelling evidence that Reader’s Theater can achieve the same outcomes for early adolescent learner’s as it did with my third-grade pupils. Moreover, it validated my experiences using Reader’s Theater with all learners:

1. According to student surveys, using Reader’s Theater was effective for increasing engagement.
2. Students’ perceived that their comprehension improved.
3. Strong readers could also benefit from a variety of scripts and Reader’s Theater experiences.
4. I enjoyed working with the students, which I believe the children appreciated.

There were some unanswered questions, though. I explored but still have not unlocked some of the mystery around the role that prosody plays in developing comprehension. More targeted research in which this is isolated may be necessary. Although this was an area of inquiry for me, it was not one of the primary areas of research I aimed at finding in this action research.

I am confident that I could use Reader’s Theater in multiple ways. For example, as an employee in a teacher preparation program, I believe that undergraduates and adult learners would benefit from this approach. It is a strategy, along with others, that I will encourage our education pupils to use when they teach children of all ages. In fact, I would enjoy the challenge
of conducting similar research using the same goals of boosting engagement and comprehension with a group of adults who are involved in Reader’s Theater.

Beyond my own applications, I am still left yearning for more research on the role of prosody and more studies on the impact of Reader’s Theater with children who are past third grade. I want to continue to build upon my knowledge and experience, following various reading inquiries. My greatest hope is that the reading researchers and practitioners, classroom teachers, administrators, and policymakers understand that good reading is not solely about speed. I do not believe in putting pressure on students and teachers. However, I recognize the stakes are high. If pressure must be put on our learners, I hope that it is at least placed in appropriate areas and administered carefully, understanding that engagement is a principal factor in achieving important outcomes. I want policymakers to know that reading speed is only one consideration. Prosody, comprehension, and—mostly importantly—overall engagement must be factored in. I believe my research only adds to the abundance of research that already exists, and more that is needed, to support this approach.
References


Appendix A

Scripts that were used in this study came from the following resources. Those items in bold were used as featured stories, which were used in conjunction with the surveys. The books were not available to be checked back out and thus, the researcher is not certain which story relates to which book.


Fredericks, A. *Stories on stage: Children’s plays for reader’s theater, with 15 play scripts from 15 authors*. Shephard Publications (2005).

The following scripts came from the books listed above:

*Millions of Cats*

*The Kid from the Commercial*

*Don’t Kiss Sleeping Beauty, She’s Got Really Bad Breath*

*Little Red Riding Hood Punches the Wolf Character Right in the Kisser*

*Once Upon a... (younger only)*

*Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf Have a Friendly Conversation*

*(Finally)*

*Treasure Island*

*The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*

*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

*A Christmas Carol (olders only)*
Scripts that were used in this study also came from the following websites:

Imethlordunicorn. *Harry Potter—The true story*. Retrieved from


Shep, Aaron. *Three sideways stories from Wayside School*. Retrieved from

http://www.aaronshep.com/rt/RTE32.html (First story used for the survey).

Shep, Aaron. *The legend of Slappy Hooper*. Retrieved from

http://www.aaronshep.com/rt/RTE02.html


http://www.aaronshep.com/rt/RTE03.html
Appendix B

Survey 1

1. How interesting do you think this story would have been if it was presented in a regular format? That is, if it was not in a Reader's Theater script format.
   - Extremely interesting
   - Very interesting
   - Moderately interesting
   - Slightly interesting
   - Not interesting at all

2. How interesting do you think the story was because of the way you were able to read it, interact with it, etc. because it was in a Reader's Theater script format?
   - Extremely interesting
   - Very interesting
   - Moderately interesting
   - Slightly interesting
   - Not interesting at all

3. Did you feel that you were more connected and/or empathetic to the character that you played because you had that character? In other words, would you have been less apt to see that character's perspective if you had read about this character in a regular book format?
   - Absolutely yes!
   - Somewhat
   - No difference

4. Most reading is done by oneself. Reader's Theater, though, allows for group interaction. Did you feel as though this story was more fun and interesting to read with others than if you had to read by yourself?
   - Absolutely!
   - Somewhat
   - No

5. Most times we read, we are seated. Reader's Theater, however, allows you to move some. Did you feel as though this story was more fun and interesting to read than a typical story because you were allowed to move while reading it?
   - Absolutely
   - Somewhat
   - No
6. Most reading at your age is done silently. Reader's Theater, on the other hand, is meant to be read aloud. Do you feel that this made the story more fun and interesting than if you had to read entirely silently?

- Absolutely
- Somewhat
- No

7. Reader's Theater allows for rereading where readers can work on pronouncing words, reading fluently, developing character voices and expression, etc. Do you feel that these types of opportunities also improved your comprehension because you had several times to read it, with the first time being a chance to figure out some unfamiliar or less familiar sounds or words?

- Absolutely
- Somewhat
- No

8. Did you feel that you were more confident in your reading since you were able to reread? And, did that confidence help you understand the story better?

- Yes, yes
- Yes, no
- No, second part does not apply then

9. Do you feel that you would be more able to understand this story's elements and details better than if you had read a regular story the same number of times, but to yourself with a Reader's Theater group?

- Definitely
- Maybe
- No

10. Do you feel that you were able to pick up on subtle clues and hidden pieces of the story (some of the "between the lines" parts) better because you used Reader's Theater? In other words, did you pick up on some new things that you did not notice or think about after you read it another time?

- Definitely
- Maybe
- No

11. What are your thoughts? What did you enjoy about Reader's Theater? How did this help you learn?
Appendix C
Survey 2

1. How did you do on the three literal comprehension questions that were asked?
   - Got all three correct.
   - Got two correct.
   - Got one correct.
   - I did not get any correct.

2. Please describe the problem in this story. Besides the parts that were fully explained (literally), what clues did you find that allowed you to infer more about the problem?

3. Identify one place where you changed your expression because of an inference you made. Why did you do that?

4. Identify an occasion where you used a gesture or an action because of an inference you made. Explain why you chose that.

5. Please explain one example where you feel that one of the members of your group made an incorrect inference based upon how he or she used an improper gesture, action, or way of expressing him/herself.

6. Identify an occasion where you felt that you gained greater empathy or understanding of the character's emotion because of hidden (implied) clues in the story about your character.

7. How would you rate this story from one-five (five being the best)?
   - one
   - two
   - three
   - four
   - five

8. What, if anything, would have made this story more interesting?