Analysis of Basketball Player’s Learning

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Abstract

The following pages include a detailed analysis of the progress made by a ten/eleven-year-old fifth grade boy at Fluvanna Middle School in Palmyra, VA. The student underwent extensive literacy tutoring in the areas of fluency, word study, word identification, comprehension, and writing over the course of three months in 2018. Throughout the paper, the student is referred to by his pseudonym, Basketball Player. Though challenges arose when it was discovered that Basketball Player did not know all the sounds vowels make; the difference between long and short vowels; what nouns and verbs are; or how to use them to write a complete sentence, and while dispositional challenges also appeared unexpectedly midway through the tutoring experience, he was able to persevere and show considerable improvement in many areas of literacy. Basketball Player’s words correct per minute (WCPM) rate increased significantly and his Fountas and Pinnell instructional reading level improved by three levels, from level O to level R. Basketball Player’s progress proves that, with proper attention and instruction, this struggling student of literacy is capable of significant growth.

Analysis of Basketball Player’s Learning

The student whose growth in literacy is analyzed in the pages that follow is a male fifth grader at Fluvanna Middle School in Palmyra, Virginia. For purposes of confidentiality, he will be referred to by a pseudonym he chose himself at the beginning of our tutoring sessions together: Basketball Player. Basketball Player was tutored from August through November of 2018 in 30-45 minute sessions. Areas of focus included fluency, word study, word identification, comprehension, and writing. Basketball Player’s growth is explained hereafter in detail with data from pre-assessments, explanations of tutoring strategies and activities, and post-assessment data.

**Student Background**

Basketball Player is a pleasant, well-mannered student who turned eleven years old towards the end of our tutoring sessions together. His cumulative folder indicates that he is identified as both Caucasian and Black as well as an at-risk student. It is also noted that Basketball Player suffers from both asthma and panic attacks, but neither were observed during tutoring sessions. Basketball player is diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and has a 504 plan in place that includes such required accommodations as allowed movement during instruction and frequent breaks. Basketball Player lives at home with his mother, father, and younger sister. He has a significantly older half-sister (who he was pleased to share gave birth to a little girl during our time together, making him an uncle) as well as a brother who passed away sometime prior to Basketball Player entering fifth grade. His family is the most important thing in his life, and his mother in particular is notably involved in his academic success. His mother works for Region 10 in the mental health sector and his father also works for Fluvanna County. Basketball Player is recognized by his peers as having an excellent sense of humor and his biggest interests are his family, shoes, and sports (mainly basketball and football).

**Word Features Assessment**

When Basketball Player was originally assessed on reading words with particular features in isolation, it was shown that on a 4th grade word list, he missed 3 words (2 with special phonogram patterns and 1 with special word endings). On a 5th grade word list, he missed 4 words (1 with phonogram patterns and 3 with word endings). On a 6th grade list, he missed 11 words (4 with prefixes and 7 with word endings). And finally, on a 7th and 8th grade word list, he missed 19 words (9 with word endings, 5 with prefixes, 3 with Greek/Latin roots, and 1 with both a word ending and a prefix). All word lists contained 30 words, and the 3rd grade word list data is not included since he mastered it with 100% accuracy.

Usually, word features relate most strongly to word study goals, but interestingly, for Basketball Player, this data relates more to his fluency. When reading aloud, Basketball Player frequently struggles with paying attention to either every word in a sentence or every part of every word. It is interesting that, on these pre-assessments, he misread 20 words with word endings and 10 words with prefixes. During fluency practice over the past few months, we have worked extensively on improving accuracy while reading aloud. During each of our more than twelve sessions of practicing fluency, I have put emphasis on reading each and every word part aloud. I also reminded him that, even if he knows the word parts are there, he still must enunciate clearly enough that listeners are able to hear each part of a word when he reads it. I put particular influence on his pronunciation of the endings of words, since it is common for him to leave off final S sounds as well as the final -ed. This worked marginally well, but what really helped him improve with this was when I added automaticity as a secondary fluency focus and asked him to compete with himself to try to break his record for the most words read correctly in one minute. Over a span of 11 readings of the same text, he was able to go from reading 83 words correctly per minute (WCPM) to reading 122 WCPM!

Basketball Player’s post-assessment data shows that, after reading the same 120 words as before, he only misread 14 words with special word endings and 5 words with prefixes. 9 of the words with word endings and 4 of those with prefixes were on the 7th/8th grade word list! His overall scores went up on each list, too. He read 30/30 words correctly on the 4th grade list, 27/30 correctly on the fifth grade list, 25/30 on the 6th grade list, and 17/30 on the 7th/8th grade list. This data is displayed in the graph below and proves that my fluency instruction was quite impactful for him.

**Diagnostic Spelling Assessment**

I gave the Diagnostic Spelling Assessment (DSA) to Basketball Player 3 times over the course of our tutoring sessions together—once as a pre-assessment, once as a progress monitoring tool, and once as a post-assessment. I administered the Letter Name, Within Word, and Syllable Juncture assessments each time. On the Letter Name pre-assessment, Basketball Player mastered features A through E. His feature score was 5/5 for features A, B, C, and E and it was 4/5 for feature D. On the Within Word pre-assessment, Basketball Player mastered features F through I but needed improvement on feature J. His feature score was 5/4 for features F, G, and I; 4/5 for feature H; and 3/5 for feature J. Basketball Player mastered none of the Syllable Juncture features. His feature score was 3/5 for feature N, 2/5 for L, and 1/5 for K, M, and O. Overall, he spelled 21/25 words on the Letter Name assessment, 20/25 on the Within Word assessment, and 4/25 on Syllable Juncture. While this did not affect many of his feature scores, something notable about his spellings of words was that he arbitrarily included the letter E at the ends of many words—even those with short vowel sounds.

It is also worth noting that Basketball Player seemed to have experienced word study in a logical order for some time prior to working with me; he mastered all features A through I and had not mastered any features from J, forward. As such, I began word study instruction with word sorts related to feature J, or abstract vowel patterns.

While studying abstract vowel patterns it became quickly apparent that Basketball Player had no idea what the difference between short and long vowels were or even what sounds vowels make. It was very difficult to teach the “abstract” concept of abstract vowel patterns without being able to make connections to short and long vowel sounds. Therefore, after discussion with my professor, I decided it was in my tutee’s best interest to take a significant step back and study vowel sounds. Our next sort was a sound sort of long vs. short vowel sounds, but did not focus on spellings of vowel sounds. Therefore, in following sorts, in addition to abstract vowel patterns I also included a column with spellings of long vowel sounds in order to continue exposure.

Progress monitoring data showed some growth and some regression. Basketball Player spelled all the features correctly in every word on the Letter Name assessment, improving his feature score by one point. His overall feature score dropped by one point from 22 to 21 on the Within Word assessment, but his feature J score improved from 3 to 4, which shows indication that instruction has been beneficial. His overall feature score dropped by one point from 8 to 7 on the Syllable Juncture assessment, which is logical considering he received no instruction there. What the data does not show is that Basketball Player went from adding arbitrary E’s to the ends of words 5 times on the combined pre-assessments to only **twice** on the progress monitoring assessments, which shows significant growth due to my instruction on long vs. short vowels!

Post-assessment data showed some regression rather than improvements. I feel that a lack of motivation and a concern with finishing the assessments quickly, despite my urging to slow down and take his time, played a role in this. Basketball Player mastered the Letter Name assessment (and therefore features A-E) with 100% accuracy. However, compared to pre-assessment data, his feature scores on the Within Word assessment took slight hits; for feature F, his score dropped by one point to 4/5. His feature I score dropped by two points to 3/5, and his feature J score stagnated at 3/5 (and dropped by one point compared to progress monitoring data). His overall feature score on the Syllable Juncture assessment actually improved by 1 point from 8/25 to 9/25 compared to pre-assessment data. While his feature K score dropped from 1/5 to 0/5, his feature M score improved by 2 points from 1/5 to 3/5, which was exciting in context of my long vs. short vowel instruction because feature M deals with long vowel patterns in the stressed syllable! On all three assessments combined, he added 3 arbitrary final E’s, which was one more than he added during progress monitoring, but still 2 fewer than were present on pre-assessment data.

While he did not meet my goal of mastering features J, K, and L or the goal of moving into Syllable Juncture instruction, he did master feature J *and* make significant improvements. Additionally, if we had gotten another lesson in, I believe he would have made it to Syllable Juncture. Below is a graph of the data described above.

**High Frequency Words Assessment**

Basketball Player mastered, with 100% accuracy, the 24-, 50-, and 100-word High Frequency Words assessments during pre-assessment sessions. On the 200-word assessment, he misread 2 words: “wait” and “several.” He said “what” instead of “wait” and “survival” instead of “several.”

In order to help him master the two words, I gave him 4 sentence strips. Each typed sentence had either the word “wait,” the word “several,” or both words in it. I had him read each sentence. He mastered every word in each sentence, including “wait” and “several,” on the first try without having the sentences read to him first. Next I pointed to the two words in isolation and asked him to read them to me. He did so correctly. I ended high frequency word instruction there.

On the post-assessment, I administered only the 200-word High Frequency Words assessment. This time, Basketball Player scored 199/200. He mastered both the words “wait” and “several,” but read “hid” as “hide.” When he asked how many words he missed at the completion of the assessment, I pointed to the word “hid” and asked him to read it. He read it correctly, and when I informed him he read it as “hide,” he argued with me that he had said “hid” the first time. Regardless, he whether he knew the word or not, he did not read it correctly in isolation on his first try, so his score was, nonetheless, 199/200. Below is a graph of this data.

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**Reading Records**

Reading records were a very difficult challenge both to administer and interpret throughout the entire tutoring experience. From day one, it seems that the only times we were ever interrupted was during a reading record assessment. Additionally, Basketball Player’s scores have not always seemed to follow a logical progression through the levels of books.

I began pre-assessments with a nonfiction level Q text. His score indicated that it was a hard text for him, but I did not believe it because almost all of his errors were omissions of words, phrases, and final S sounds. Therefore, I gave another level Q reading record, this time a fiction text since fiction is typically easier for most students. His accuracy score decreased from 90% to 88% and his comprehension score decreased from 7/12 to 4/12. However, there was a lot of drilling into the wall of a nearby classroom happening during this reading record, which was quite distracting. If he had not omitted two full lines of text, his accuracy score would have been 95%, or instructional. That said, once the level P and level O reading records were administered, it was discovered that his accuracy score on both was not much better than the level Q text—he scored 91% on both. His comprehension score of 7 was better on the level P text than his score of 4 on the level O text, but that may have been due to his inability to get over how much he hates snakes, as the title of the book was *Snake Myths*. In an attempt to find his independent reading level, I skipped level N and went straight to level M. His accuracy score was 98% and comprehension was 6.

On each reading record pre-assessment, his WCPM rate did not fluctuate too drastically, and definitely not very logically. On the hardest level text—the nonfiction level Q text—Basketball Player’s WCPM rate was 76. It dropped to 62 on the fiction level Q text and then to 59 on the level P text. Then it went back up to 62 on the level O text and only reached 64 on the easiest text—level M. His fluency score was consistent at a 2/3 throughout the entirety of the reading records. He continuously reads with some expression related to the meaning and punctuation, to borrow wording from the assessment document. To borrow the document’s wording again, while he reads in large, meaningful phrases and word groups often, which would indicate a score of 3, his rate is an area for improvement as well as appropriate stress and pausing.

One thing I observed about Basketball Player’s comprehension is that he is typically very good at face-value recall, and his memory tends to be nearly word for word. However, he tended to struggle with interpreting the text or thinking beyond was is written on the pages. In particular, the author’s message was difficult for him to pinpoint. As such, I began instruction with determining importance of a fiction level O book, which I had determined as his highest instructional level per a discussion with my professor, who helped me puzzle through the challenging pre-assessment data. Determining importance is usually taught using nonfiction texts, but I believe fiction was a better starting point for a student who was struggling with determining author’s message. We focused on determining importance extensively throughout tutoring, first with the fiction text, then with a level O nonfiction text.

During progress monitoring, I gave a nonfiction level P reading record. On this assessment, Basketball Player’s accuracy score was 96% and his comprehension score was 5. Even more impressive, his WCPM score was 85. His fluency score remained a 2 for all the reasons aforementioned in regards to pre-assessment data.

After progress monitoring it was determined that he was ready to move to level P, so we practiced summarizing with a narrative nonfiction text next. I made this choice because I knew Basketball Player was tiring of determining important vs. interesting information, and summarizing aligned nicely with the book I chose that was sports-related. I chose the book in an effort to increase his dipping motivation. That intention was unsuccessful as he did not end up liking that the book focused on baseball. However, I was very limited in my options of level P books that had anything to do with sports at all, so it had been the best I was able to come up with despite extensive searching. Next, I was finally able to find a level P-equivalent book related to basketball called *March Madness*. Despite the fact that we had done so extensively already, after discussing the text with my professor, I decided to focus on determining importance again since I still was unimpressed by his efforts to glean the author’s message and main points from a story. Because the leveling conversion chart I used for *March Madness* is not perfect, I was concerned that the text may be inaccessible for him. However, my professor mentioned that more difficult books become easier for students when their interest is piqued and they have extensive background knowledge on the topic at hand, so I gave it a try, and was pleasantly impressed.

Basketball Player’s oddly progressing data was again present on his post-assessments. I began by administering the same level P and level Q texts as before. On the level P text, his accuracy score improved by one percentage point: 92%. His comprehension improved by one point as well, from 7 to 8. Interestingly, his level Q text accuracy score, which theoretically should have been lower than his level P score, improved by 7 percentage points: 97%. His comprehension of that book remained consistent with a score of 7. I did not expect to be able to make it to a level R text, but went ahead and administered that assessment. He had never read this book before to my knowledge. I was thrilled to see that his accuracy score was 96%, only one point lower than the level Q text that he had read once before! His comprehension of this text progressed logically; his score was 6, which is just one point lower than his score on the easier level Q text. His reading rate was directly related to his accuracy rate; it was lowest on the text for which his accuracy rate was lowest and vice versa. On level P, his WCMP rate was 60; his WCPM on the level Q text was 88, and for the level R text was 74. Finally, due to pausing, self-corrections, and expression, his fluency score remained stagnant at a 2 on each reading record post-assessment.

I am frustrated that I did not get to administer a level S reading record to Basketball Player to determine if level R truly is his highest instructional level. I had no clue we would make it as far as level R on his post-assessments and only had time to administer three reading records at the end of the semester. Regardless, however, his reading record post-assessments show tremendous growth. I believe wholeheartedly that my fluency instruction played the biggest role in his reading improvement. His accuracy has shot through the roof since discussing how it is not important to read automatically if one can’t read accurately. Additionally, I believe his development of the determining importance skill will continue to help him build his comprehension skills as time goes on, especially since we progressed from using an analogy to making pasta to determine importance (draining out the interesting details {water} so all that’s left is the important ones {pasta}) to simply constructing a T-chart without the analogy. He has mastered the ability to do this independently. Below are several graphs of Basketball Player’s reading record assessment data described above.

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**Writing Assessment**

While administering pre-assessments, I had Basketball Player write about what he read for one book of each level I assessed (M, O, P, and Q). His writing score was 10/12 on the level M text, 3/12 on level O, 9/12 on level P (the only fiction text) and 9/12 on level Q. Writing instruction was probably our weakest area of tutoring on both our parts. When I realized that Basketball Player did not know what nouns and verbs were or how to use them to write complete sentences, I knew my goal of having him write solely in complete sentences by the end of November was a bit too lofty. Instead, I decided to focus more on his *comprehension* through writing since he sometimes relied too heavily on referring back to the book to remember what he read, particularly when it came to choosing details from the books to identify as important or interesting.

During tutoring we have practiced writing in multiple ways. Sometimes I had him create T-charts of information gleaned from his reading and other times I had him respond to the text in paragraph format. I promised him he would only have to write for one of the reading record post-assessments, and he chose to write about the nonfiction level Q text. I scored his writing sample as a 7. He misspelled some grade level appropriate words, did not write entirely in complete sentences, and only demonstrated limited comprehension of the text through his writing. He wrote 32 words during the pre-assessment when given five minutes to write, but when given seven minutes to write during the post-assessment, he only managed to crank out 38 words.

**Future Implications**

Basketball Player proved throughout the past few months that he is capable of significant growth with the right instruction. He is still not on target as a student of literacy, but he has made great strides in getting himself there. In the future and in order to continue to grow on the same trajectory he is currently on, he would benefit particularly from more practice with fluency and word study. At home, his family can facilitate this through encouraging him to read aloud often and to try to beat his own personal bests in regards to WCPM. Having family members ask him questions about the books he reads that go beyond what is printed on the text will improve his comprehension. At school he should continue to be asked to practice reading comprehension strategies like making connections, predictions, and inferences to build up his ability to identify the author’s message. Basketball Player’s teachers should fine-tune his abilities with feature J in terms of word study and then move on Syllable Juncture sorts, beginning with feature K. Basketball Player is already reading many multisyllabic words and will be able to progress quickly and easily through the next stages of word study with the proper instruction. Basketball Player needs the most help with writing. He would benefit from writing workshops with intensive coaching from peers and his teacher. Basketball Player would benefit most from mini-lessons focusing on conventions of writing, particularly complete sentence construction.

**Affect**

When we first started working together, Basketball Player was eager to attend our tutoring sessions and seemed to enjoy the time we spent together. It was easy to see when he was frustrated and did not want to do something, but he never complained and seemed to take the task of helping me learn how to be a teacher very seriously. His sense of humor brought a positive atmosphere to our sessions and he worked very diligently.

Midway through this tutoring experience, Basketball Player experienced a drastic drop in motivation. He stopped smiling when we met, always seemed annoyed with both me and the lessons, and hardly spoke. Eliciting answers to questions or any participation at all was like pulling teeth. Half of our tutoring sessions took place on the floor in the hallway outside of my cooperating teacher’s (CT’s) classroom—a very public place. After much discussion with my fellow pre-service teachers, my CT, my parents who work in education, and my professors, we ended up settling on the idea that he may have been suffering from teasing from peers about having to work with me more often than any of the other students. I started to make a concentrated effort to be much more discreet in our interactions, using written notes and nonverbal cues to communicate meeting times to him during class rather than talking to him, and asking resource teachers to use their rooms for tutoring every time I saw that they were not already in use. I also started capitalizing on Basketball Player’s competitive side by attempting to make every single aspect of tutoring as competitive as I could possibly figure out how to make it. I managed to pull him somewhat out of his motivational slump so that we could finish out our time together on a decent note.

On his affective pre-assessment, Basketball Player generally indicated that he was not the biggest fan of reading. He responded to prompts by indicating that he did not like to read aloud, listen to others read aloud, or listen to books on tape. He also responded that he did not like to read. He stated that the hardest thing to do for him when reading was to stay focused and that the thing he does best as a reader is reading “not chapter books.” He felt he was good at choosing books he likes, and that his favorite books are sports books and humorous books. On the post-assessment, Basketball Player answered almost identically to the pre-assessment. One improvement was that he said he likes to read sometimes instead of saying that he does not like to read. He also changed his answers about difficult and easy aspects of reading. He said that the hardest thing about reading is reading smoothly, which, based on previous conversations, I interpret as him referencing fluency in general, not just prosody. Originally, he said the thing he did best at reading was “nothing.” I told him that answer was unacceptable and to choose something he does well. He changed his answer to “everything.” I told him he needed to be more specific and choose the thing related to reading that he does better than everything else; then I started listing some acceptable answers for him to choose from. He finally landed on “reading in my head.” While there was not much improvement in terms of affect as a result of this tutoring experience, I was pleased that his lack of motivation did not prevent him from displaying some overall growth.

**Conclusion**

In summary, a ***significant*** drop in affect over the course of the tutoring experience slowed down the tutoring process substantially and impeded his ability to grow as much as I would have liked. Nevertheless, his improvement in several areas of literacy was notable. Basketball Player grew least significantly in the area of writing and most significantly in the areas of oral accuracy rates (progressing from level O instructional level to level R!) and word feature spellings (particularly long vs. short vowel patterns and eliminating some arbitrarily placed final E’s). I am proud of his dedication and perseverance as well as my own when challenges arose.

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