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The Effects of Book Workshops on Emergent Reading Skills in Montessori Early Childhood

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

The purpose of this action research study was to increase preliteracy skills, confidence, and interest in reading in a Montessori early childhood environment through a reading workshop model. Given the pressure on teachers to create stronger readers at younger ages, this work discusses developmentally appropriate language tasks for children ages three- to six-years-old using the Montessori method and emergent literacy theory frameworks. Research suggests children who exhibit confidence and interest in reading develop strong preliteracy skills. These factors predict capable and active readers. For six weeks, a Montessori early childhood classroom of 14 students and three adult guides participated in daily 30-minute reading workshops. These workshops included a short explicit language lesson lasting under 10 minutes, followed by an extended free reading time. The development of preliteracy skills, student confidence in skills, and interest in reading were tracked through formative assessments, observation, student-teacher conferencing, and student self-assessments. After the intervention, an increase in preliteracy skills, interest, and confidence were noted. The students requested to continue reading workshops due to high interest. Further work is needed to analyze the development of reading skills through the reading workshop intervention.

Keywords: Montessori, early childhood, reading, preliteracy, reading workshop

There is no universal approach to teaching reading in the early childhood years. Best practices in this area can be contentious among educators. A significant amount of pressure is put on early childhood teachers to begin reading instruction early and to create stronger readers sooner. Research in this area can also be divided, and often does not include work on reading in early childhood years but focuses on the elementary ages (Allington, 2002; Wolf, 2006). Neuroscience is advancing research on child brain development and what parts of the brain are needed to develop fluent reading skills (Frey & Fisher, 2010). Educators can use this new research to develop further best practices for teaching reading prior to the elementary years.

In the Montessori classroom, guides are conscious not to push a child to learn a skill too soon. A child shows they are ready for new material through increased interest and curiosity (Montessori, 1965, 1966). The work of the adult in the Montessori environment is to prepare the child for the work when they are developmentally ready to acquire that skill. For instance, before learning to write, a child works to strengthen their hand and increase dexterity through a sequence of practical life lessons designed to this end. In addition, the pincer grasp is developed through the use of knobbed cylinders and puzzle pieces. Next, the child learns to control the lightness of touch and control of the pencil with an advanced stenciling work called metal insets. When the child shows an interest in writing by creating lines on a page or intensely watching others, and the physical structures have been developed properly, the child will be able to learn the skill of writing letters with ease. This same practice includes preparation for reading in the early childhood environment.

Montessori guides and early childhood educators still wonder how much direct reading instruction is developmentally appropriate for children aged three to six years (Allington, 2002; Shilt, 2009; Wolf, 2009). It is imperative to note if the didactic materials created for the

Montessori early childhood classroom prepare the child well enough to complete work in an elementary environment or if the curriculum needs to be supplemented.

As an early childhood guide, working with children ages three to six, I have worked with families each year who are concerned their child cannot yet read fluently. These parents perceive their child as behind if they are not reading by their second year in early childhood, typically aged four years. Some have had older children who have excelled in reading or read an article pushing some amazing method of teaching a child to read at three years. I feel a considerable amount of pressure from these families to produce results. However, as I sit on the floor with these children and work on myriad subjects and materials, I know it is not best practice to force an emerging skill. These skills are delicate, fragile. If coerced, the child could lose all interest in reading or feel a lack of confidence in their skills because they are being asked to perform in a way they truly cannot.

Lower elementary guides, in my experience, working with students ages six through nine, have requested more rigorous reading instruction and more reading fluency by the end of the kindergarten year in order to allow students to be able to complete more work in their first lower elementary year. These guides promote summer reading programs and tutors to further children's reading skills before entering lower elementary. While I agree that this instruction could be beneficial in supplementing the Montessori curriculum, I wonder how many families and guides see this as a panacea for reading readiness. I am again concerned about pushing a child to rapidly acquire an emerging skill, as this method does not meet Montessori's standard.

As a trained primary guide, I understand best practices are to support the child where they are in the curriculum. Dr. Montessori (1995) advised guides to "offer the child the help he needs, and be at his service so that he does not walk alone" (p. 115). This does not mean to allow the

child full freedom in activity but to meet the child where they are individually in the curriculum and build their skills in an appropriate manner for them. This idea of following the child takes into account differing learning styles and delays, allowing the guide to create individualized learning plans. Within my classroom of 14 learners in an early childhood setting, some students excel in reading skills, able to read and comprehend chapter books during the kindergarten year; others still struggle with decoding words and experience a lack of confidence in their skills. Students who show very little interest in reading words or books can still have phonemic awareness and are capable of encoding words. In any case, I rely on the Montessori method and materials prepared for the early childhood environment. There are no explicit lessons in *Dr. Montessori's Own Handbook* (1988) designed explicitly to instruct children to read. The child acquires vocabulary through nomenclature work, a practice of naming the pieces of a given topic, and an environment rich in spoken language. Language lessons are mainly for writing instruction as a means to reading; this is referred to as the writing road to reading, or writing before reading (Montessori, 1965, 1966, 1988, 1995).

With my students in mind, I set out to explore the Montessori materials and method to follow the writing road to reading in the context of a modern, English-speaking, early childhood classroom. I investigated current literature, research, and neuroscience to discover developmentally appropriate work for a developing brain from an emergent literacy framework. I analyzed whether or not this framework matched that of the Montessori method. Finally, I set out to examine the impact of a reading workshop model on early childhood reading fluency, as this intervention aligned with Montessori philosophy and supported emergent reader skills. I conducted an action research study with 14 early childhood students in a private Montessori

school in the Southeast. This study aimed to increase students' preliteracy and reading skills without deviating from the Montessori method.

Theoretical Framework

The basis of this research rests on Dr. Montessori's writing before reading method of language instruction. Montessori (1966) noted that children were apt to learn to write and become intensely focused on creating words through encoding with the movable alphabet much earlier than they were interested in, or capable of, decoding text. These children treasured books and had a sophisticated understanding of the concepts in them based on listening, analyzing, and experiences with the texts (Montessori, 1966). The emergent reading theory further supports the writing path to reading and Montessori's early literacy materials. Emergent reading and the Montessori method are seen by educators to support deficiencies. Children are seen to gain reading skills more efficiently when introduced to emergent reading activities earlier in their development and more frequently (Vogler-Elias, 2013).

Emergent reading skills include those literacies acquired before conventional reading and writing abilities. Most researchers define the appropriate age range of emergent reading skills from birth to five years old (Vogler-Elias, 2013). This matches Montessori's (1995) defined sensitive period for language development from birth to six years of age. Emergent literacy behaviors include shared book reading experiences, understanding the parts of a book, letter recognition, attempting to write, sequencing pictures, and wordplay such as rhyming (Vogler-Elias, 2013). Many emergent reading activities activate the multiple brain regions needed to develop reading fluency (Vogler-Elias, 2013). Neuroscientific research shows that early exposure to print and the reading concepts found in emergent literacy theory strengthens reading acquisition (Frey & Fisher, 2010).

This is the best framework for developing stronger reading skills before the elementary years. Both the Montessori method and emergent reading theory focus on sensory and movement-based learning strategies to engage the child in learning through many avenues. Emergent reading and the Montessori method work to first strengthen phonemic awareness, letter recognition, and encoding before decoding. Both models of language teaching focus on interdisciplinary language usage and increasing vocabulary verbally first, followed by writing, and then reading. Through utilizing both Montessori and emergent reading frameworks, a robust and sensory-based preliteracy program can be established to best support brain development, increase early reading skills, and grow interest in reading in the classroom.

Review of Literature

Montessori Early Language and Literacy

In her writings, Montessori describes reading as a spontaneous and easily attained skill if properly prepared through phonemic awareness and writing work (1966, 1988). The Montessori environment for three- to six-year-old children is furnished with many didactic materials specifically designed for the instruction of writing letters. One specific aim of these materials is to build control of movement and dexterity in the hand and associated writing musculature. Montessori observed that if you build the strength of the muscles as you develop the preliteracy skills, then writing and reading will come more naturally and effortlessly to the child (1965, p. 173). Early childhood classrooms are equipped with a number of practical life exercises created to build this control of the hand as well as a general practice of intentional movement. Students may work to transfer water from one container to another using a baster; squeezing the baster strengthens the hand and forearm as direct preparation for writing. Another specifically designed

control exercise is the metal insets, where students trace a shape in a metal frame, fostering the development of pencil grip, lightness of touch, and control of pencil movement.

The other aim of these early language materials is to develop letter formation and phonemic awareness. A student in their first year of a Montessori early childhood environment will work with sandpaper letters. These are a series of sensory-based letter formation lessons that assist in developing symbol to sound connections. Through watching and feeling, the child learns to recognize the symbol, how to form it properly, as well as the sound with which it is typically associated. Many movement-based and memory games can be performed with this material to solidify the child's understanding of each letter and phoneme. Using sandpaper letters to guide a child through beginning reader skills is supported by emergent literacy theory of phonemic awareness and letter recognition (Frey & Fisher, 2010; Giles & Tunks, 2015; Shilt, 2009).

The sandpaper letters are preparatory work prior to working with the movable alphabet, a set of cutout letters the child can manipulate to build words and engage in authorship. The child works first to encode words using the phonetic awareness developed previously through work with sound games and sandpaper letters (Montessori, 1966). Word building can be self-generated or guided with objects or pictures. This allows the child to self-express in a new way, to create physical words. This is the direct preparation for reading in the Montessori early childhood classroom, and it is this which Montessori is referencing when she discusses the writing road to reading, the act of encoding language before learning to decode the language (1966).

Montessori described the transition from word building to an interest in different fonts and types of writing. She explicitly states that the children did not have an interest in reading books at this time; this interest came suddenly and seemingly much later in their development.

Before reading, Montessori explains, these children could build and write their own words with precision (1966, p. 134).

This writing road to reading method is supported by current neuroscience research. In 2018, Lervag et al. found that the brain structures used for decoding and comprehending language were strongly reliant on the working memory as it stores sequenced information. The working memory is also responsible for storing the lexicon. A child with a smaller lexicon and weaker working memory skills will not be as strong at decoding and comprehending the written word (Lervag et al., 2018). Frey and Fisher (2010) note that the brain is more strongly developed as a listening and speaking brain, as humans have been utilizing these communication skills for much longer in our evolutionary timeline. Reading and writing tasks came much later in our development as a species. Frey and Fisher (2010) explain reading requires a restructuring of the brain to interconnect and rework three different areas: the occipital region which recognizes objects must be rebuilt to distinguish written letters and words, Broca's area, used for language processing, must be activated, and Wernicke's area, focused on language comprehension, must be developed. The writing road to reading develops each area of these brain regions separately, then very intentionally together. Any disruptions to this loop of brain functions can cause issues with the acquisition of reading skills (Frey & Fisher, 2010).

Language Sequence

In her work, *The Secret of Childhood*, Montessori (1966) describes a moment in one of the first early childhood classrooms when a child spontaneously began reading. In this anecdote, the child is learning to read in Italian, a highly phonetic language (Montessori, 1966). The Montessori language sequence is designed for phonetic languages. Researchers studying reading acquisition skills across languages concluded that English is more challenging than more

phonetic languages like Montessori's native Italian. English readers are seen to begin reading later and progress more slowly through decoding abilities than Norwegian and Spanish-speaking counterparts (Caravolas et al., 2013). This study highlighted students from kindergarten through second grade; English language learners did not begin increasing decoding skills until after the kindergarten year (Caravolas et al., 2013). Most English language learners in the study reached reading fluency by the second-grade year (Caravolas et al., 2013). This study brings into question if it is appropriate to compare English learning events to Montessori's language acquisition examples.

Modern English-speaking early childhood guides report a struggle with following Montessori's language sequence in their own classroom environments. One major issue that seems to be shared among primary educators is the lack of self-correction in didactic materials causing the guide to be more involved in the child's language work (Shilt, 2009). Modern programs in the English language have a different set of developmental milestones compared to Montessori's work in the early 1900s in Italy. In turn, Montessori teachers turn to ways to supplement curriculum to speed up students' literacy development. Studies show, "deviations reflected teachers grappling with seemingly competing principles of Montessori's approach and teachers contending with outside pressures to assure that children acquired key literacy skills" (Shilt, 2009, p. 8). These deviations are in the form of supplemental materials, which may lessen the validity of the Montessori approach to reading (Lillard & Heise, 2016). These guides state that the reason for additional materials in the language area is because of stress to produce reading students (Shilt, 2009).

Montessori expert Aline Wolf (2006) addresses a weakening of literacy skills in lower elementary classrooms. She states that early childhood reading skills are on the decline from

previous years in her teaching experience (Wolf, 2006). As many students are not independent readers of texts when they enter lower elementary, Wolf (2006) notes a growing need for more emergent reading support at this program level. These guides are trained to support developing fluency skills and foster a love of reading for information and diversion in current readers. Wolf (2006) claims that lower elementary trained guides are not prepared to work with non-reading students; they lack the proper training in emergent literacy skills. Some lower elementary guides turn to the structure of basal readers, mass-produced literature anthologies in which all students read the same book at the same time and work together on the same skills. Yet this does not appropriately differentiate for students based on their own ability levels, encourage students to follow their own interests in text, or encourage teachers to return to foundational Montessori materials to teach literacy skills. This implies that they are not educated in the Montessori early childhood reading materials or strategies for teaching early reading skills enough to support an emergent or struggling reader. Wolf (2006) recommends the inclusion of Montessori materials designed for emergent readers, such as the movable alphabet and sandpaper letters, in lower elementary environments and training in these materials in Montessori teacher education programs.

Lower elementary guides are encouraged to meet the needs of the individual child wherever they happen to be in the curriculum. In order to fulfill this, guides will need more training through professional development, personalized research, and action research (Wolf, 2006). Educational scholar Richard Allington (2002) explains, "Enhanced reading proficiency rests largely on the capacity of classroom teachers to provide expert, exemplary reading instruction that cannot be packaged or regurgitated from a script because it is responsive to children's needs" (p. 740). The student-teacher engagement is the driving force in learning to

read, not the curriculum or materials; a guide is responsive to the child's individual needs in a way that better supports reading acquisition (Allington, 2002).

Developing literacy skills and fostering an affinity for reading can be achieved through teaching approaches that are responsive to the needs of the students in the environment, beginning in early childhood and continuing through lower elementary and beyond. Wolf (2006) highlights that free choice in reading material and personal buy-in are essential factors in encouraging interest in reading. Creating in a child an interest in reading will, in turn, support reading skills as the child will want to read a text that was personally selected. Guides should also approach reading instruction with an intention to model reading skills and interest as opposed to direct instruction and assessment (Allington, 2002; Wolf, 2006). Children naturally imitate others in their environment through mirror neurons, supporting the idea that children will develop a desire to read through watching others and thus, observation of adult readers is an essential factor in reading success (Fisher & Frey, 2010). A child's reading fluency may be lower than reading comprehension or listening skills; in order to engage all emerging skills, the reading and non-reading child must be read to by adults (Allington, 2002; Wolf, 2006). Guides who offer a mix of guided reading, independent reading, and reading material see more significant increases in reading abilities over time (Wolf, 2006).

Emergent reading skills are necessary to introduce during the early childhood years. The most effective guides introduce literacy skills in an interdisciplinary way, making reading and writing a normal part of each curricular area (Soundy, 2003; Wolf, 2006). Literacy education should be integrated naturally and meaningfully for each child. A single form of literacy acquisition will not support strong readers across the board (Giles & Tunks, 2014). Literacy in an early childhood environment will have a range of meanings for each age level. This includes

skills as rudimentary as the orientation of a book, left-to-right word order, and inferring meaning from pictures to skills as complicated as diagraming sentences, writing stories, and reading chapter books (Barron & Ely, 1995). Each of these skill levels needs to be nourished and viewed from a developmentally appropriate angle (Cockerille, 2014).

Reading Workshops

Reading workshop models in the Montessori classroom can offer this organic and interdisciplinary approach to preliteracy and reading instruction. Studies such as Cockerille's "Reading Workshop in the Montessori Classroom" (2014) supported preliteracy skills like the orientation of a book, left-to-right word order, control of page-turning, and picture sequencing, as well as offering ample opportunity for reading students to practice. Reading workshop models in Montessori classrooms are seen to increase reading comprehension, fluency, and confidence (Cockerille, 2014). Students are validated by participation and seen as useful in the group discussions. Students develop a growth mindset in reading skills by watching each other build reading abilities each day (Barron & Ely, 1994).

These reading workshops include a short, 10-minute or under, explicit reading lesson followed by at least 20 minutes of free-choice reading activities. This model was found effective across ages (Cockerille, 2014). For younger, pre-reading children, this may include a paired book event in which the children inspect and discuss the pictures, encouraged by guides to sequence the story based on the images. Students may be listening to an older child read a book, solidifying fluency skills for the reader, and fostering a situation for listening comprehension for the others.

Reading workshops support students who can read by offering explicit lessons to introduce specific reading skills and strategies as well as providing an extended time specific to

reading (Cockerille, 2014). Allowing an entire early childhood classroom to participate in this

model would mean some students would not be reading books, only handling them. Barron and

Ely (1994) studied the benefits of "doing books" at the early childhood level. Peers discussing

books at any level is beneficial to reading skills. This also fosters turn-taking, listening,

pragmatism, and conversational flow (Cockerille, 2014). The Montessori method aligns with this

idea, understanding that all children can participate in a social network and learn language best

through meaningful interactions (Montessori, 1966). Barron and Ely (1994) note that students in

classrooms with daily choice in reading materials beyond beginning phonics readers were able to

comprehend the material, make inferences about letter sounds and relations, and state opinions

about the text more often than students who did not have these opportunities. They were also

able to rely on peers for reading support when a guide was not available, implying these students

are more self-directed and persistent in their own learning (Barron & Ely, 1994). This is ideal for

an authentic Montessori environment, and I was curious to see what impact it may have on my

students' reading abilities.

Methodology

This study set out to examine the effects a daily reading workshop would have on reading

interest and skill development in a Montessori early childhood environment. I conducted this

study at a private Montessori school in a metropolitan area of the Southeast. The school had a

total population of 75 students ranging from 18 months to 14 years. I teach in an early childhood

classroom with 14 students, ranging in age from three to six years old, and two assistant teachers.

I have been an American Montessori Society (AMS) certified Early Childhood guide since 2018,

but I have been working and training at the same school and in the same classroom since 2016.

In our school, lower elementary through middle school students, in grades first through eighth, maintain a daily free reading practice called Drop Everything and Read (DEAR). During DEAR, an extended length of time, about half an hour, is dedicated to individual free reading. Early childhood classrooms did not traditionally practice DEAR. I felt adding a reading workshop to the early childhood environment would support the school culture of DEAR in a developmentally appropriate way.

I directed this book workshop intervention as the lead guide with two adult assistants. The study involved 14 early childhood students; seven students were girls and seven boys. Of the 14 students and three guides, four students and one guide spoke a language other than English in the home or as their native language. The structure of a Montessori classroom is in three-year cycles. Students are typically categorized by age level as first-, second-, or third-year students. Four of these students were first-year students, ages three years and two months to four years; four were second-year students, ages four years and one month to five years; and six students were third-year students, or kindergarteners, who ranged from five years and one month to six years. All students exhibited typical language development before the study except for one first-year student who exhibited an expressive language delay.

Families were offered the opportunity to withdraw their child(ren) from the study through a letter and parent consent form before any data was collected from the students; all families approved of this research (see Appendix A). Prior to beginning the reading workshops in my early childhood environment, I measured phonemic awareness and pre-reading skills through formative assessments typically used in a Montessori early childhood environment during individual language lessons and recorded on an assessment chart (see Appendix B). Students also participated in a short, under 10-minute, one-on-one conference with me to discuss reading

experiences outside the classroom, preliteracy understanding, and attitudes toward reading before the intervention (see Appendix C). Students were asked to describe a favorite book and encouraged to sequence the plot. Conferences also focused on enjoyment of reading; students were asked if they liked reading, what types of books they preferred to read, whether they liked reading at home or school, alone or with an adult. Student confidence and growth mindset were assessed as well with questions centering on whether they could or would learn to read and what skills they needed to improve as well as how they might be able to improve these skills. Student responses were rated, and each student was grouped as either a reader or pre-reader as well as confident or non-confident.

I then implemented a 30-minute daily reading workshop for six weeks in which students received a brief language lesson, such as a sound of the week, parts of a book, rhyming games, or a book reading followed by a brief discussion of the text. These explicit lessons typically lasted under 10 minutes. Afterward, students engaged in extended free reading time, for about 20 minutes, with a selection of about 30 books. The books ranged from biographies and science books to classic children's stories and beginner readers and were switched out based on interest on a semi-regular basis. Free reading time included small groups reading with an adult, single-student or paired student reading or discussions, or one child reading to a group. I was available at this time for short individual and group work to reinforce emergent skills but spent much of this time observing the group.

Students self-assessed reading skills and attitudes on a chart throughout the data collection process (see Appendix D). Students who could read independently answered self-assessment questions alone, while nonreaders and emergent readers responded to questions through conferencing with a guide. The students were able to participate in these self-

assessments by choice after each session. Students typically spent only a few minutes answering questions. I modeled this self-assessment scale after the Henk and Melnick Reader Self-Perception Scale (RSPS), which was designed to measure student self-perception and efficacy as a reader (1995). I chose to shorten the RSPS to accommodate younger students and eliminate comparison to others as this is not best practice in a Montessori environment. On these self-assessments, students rated their confidence and enjoyment in reading as well as their interest in that day's language lesson or free reading time.

I performed formative assessments of reading skills, including preliteracy, letter recognition, phonemic awareness, phonics awareness, vocabulary development, and reading stages toward fluency and interest during these workshop times. These assessments took place at least once for each child during the intervention period using the same formative assessment forms as the pre-assessments (see Appendix B). Finally, I conducted daily observations during workshop free reading times, typically lasting 20 minutes, to determine student growth in various literacy skills. I recorded observational data on the Field Notes form (see Appendix E). Observations also focused on whether students were using free reading time independently or participating in group work or book events.

A typical reading workshop might include all 14 students participating in a short initial sound sorting activity featuring three letters. In a Montessori early childhood classroom, this can be called I Spy. On a mat in front of the guide would be a variety of objects, including three that start with the sound /b/. The students were seated in a circle, all able to see the objects. The guide and students all named the objects; this creates a shared knowledge of the nomenclature. The guide says to the group, "I spy with my little eye something that starts with the sound /b/." Students raised their hands to respond with an object on the mat that begins with this sound.

Students were then encouraged to come up with words on their own that may begin with this sound, raising their hands to foster taking turns. After this short sound game, students were dismissed to select a book from a large basket of available books. I observed students selecting books to read alone, inviting friends to join them, or asking an assistant guide to read to them. Students were often seen handling books with their peers, discussing the pictures, and taking turns picking the next book. After 30 minutes passed since the beginning of the sound game, I would ring a chime to signal the end of the day's free reading time. Students finished their last book choices, returned the books to the basket, and then resumed typical classroom procedures.

Analysis of Data

For the six-week intervention period, data was compiled through formative assessment (see Appendix B), conferencing (see Appendix C), student self-assessments (see Appendix D), and observation (see Appendix E). Students anticipated this workshop time as they requested sound games and specific texts to add to the basket of available books. Students excitedly engaged in small group book events of two to four children, where they took turns picking out and handling books.
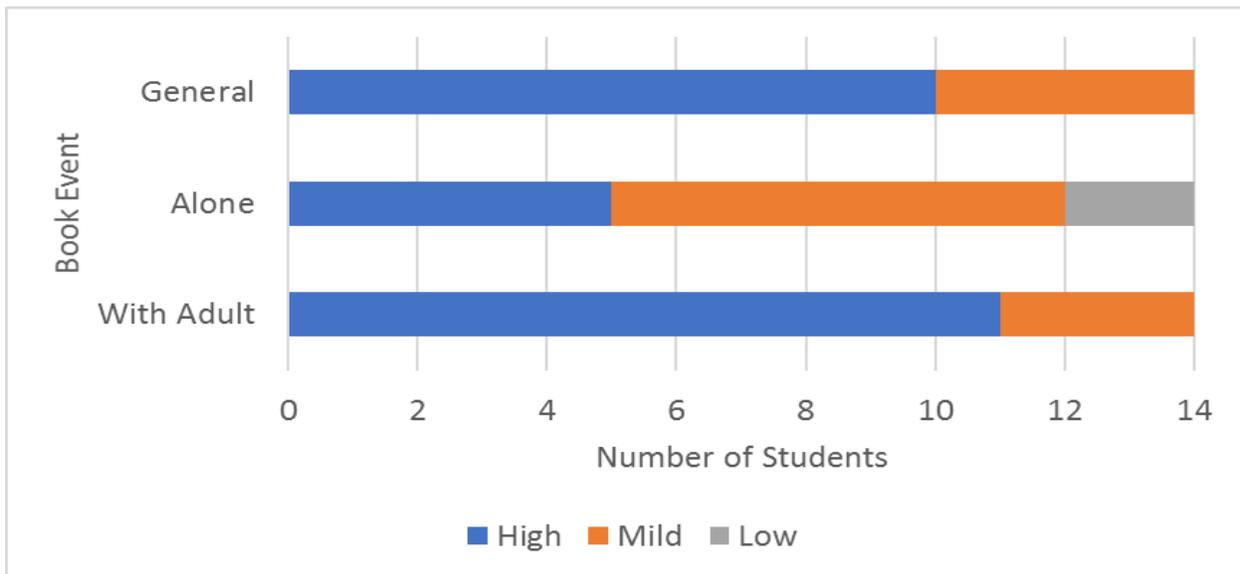
Interest

When setting out to conduct this research, I was curious how students' interest in reading may change after the intervention. During individual baseline conferences, students were asked if they enjoyed reading books; this information is referred to as a general book event. Students were also asked if they enjoyed reading alone and with an adult, which is included in Figure 1. All students communicated an interest in reading books both in general and specifically with an adult, such as parents or teachers. No students reported a complete lack of interest in books or reading. Six students detailed a nightly reading time before bed with a parent that they particularly enjoyed. Three students noted an interest in going to the library. Two students

responded that they enjoyed reading with me in the classroom. Four students talked about

reading books on an electronic device at home. This data indicated that students would be

interested in daily reading times in the classroom and that all students have experience with

different reading materials outside the classroom.

Figure 1

Interest in Reading Prior to Workshop

Note. Figure 1 illustrates student interest in reading, as reported before starting the intervention
per one-on-one conferencing responses. Most students showed interest in most reading events.

Figure 2

Interest in Reading Post Six-Week Workshop
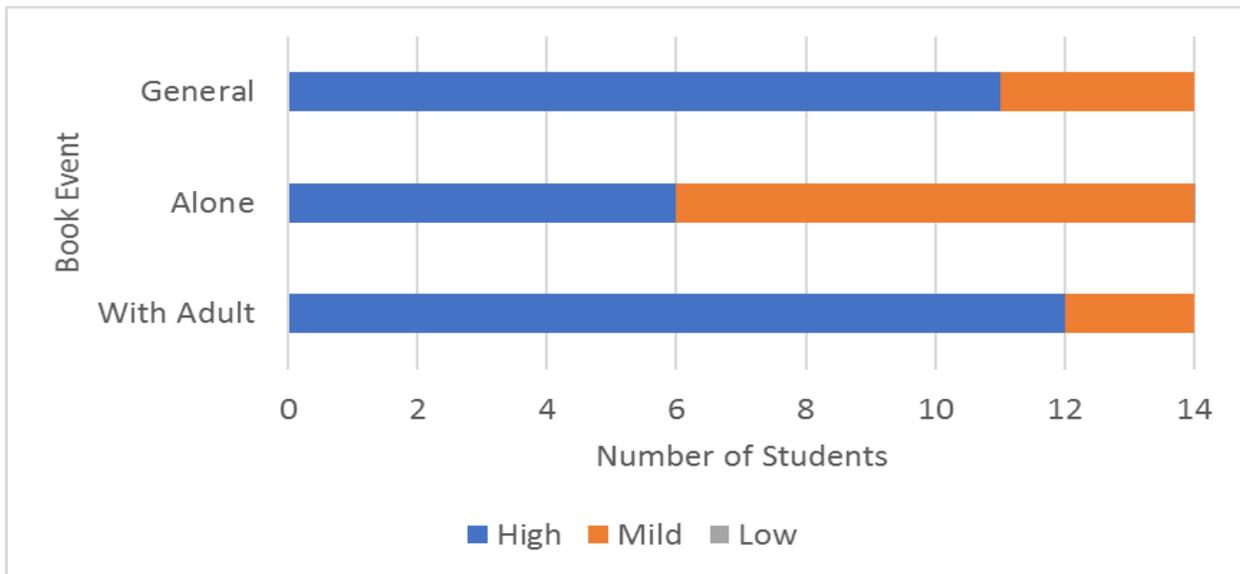
Note. Figure 2 shows that student interest in reading after the six-weeks of intervention increased slightly.

In comparing pre-intervention data in Figure 1 and the post-intervention data in Figure 2, a slight increase is seen across reading events. One more student reported a high interest in general reading after the intervention; over 85 percent of students said they had a high interest in reading with an adult post-intervention. These are small gains but do show an increase in reading interest over the six weeks. Prior to intervention, two students described having a low interest in reading alone; this number dropped to zero after the six weeks of reading workshops. In conferencing after the intervention, four students indicated book workshop fostered the desire to read alone. One of these four students reported, "I like reading alone because I can pick what I want and look at the pictures as long as I want" (Conferencing notes, October 29, 2020). Another student explained that reading alone helped them focus (Conferencing notes, October 30, 2020).

Confidence and Growth Mindset

Prior to the start of the reading workshop intervention, students were asked during one-on-one conferencing and self-assessments whether they felt confident with their reading skills and whether they felt they would get better at reading over time. Many students indicated that they felt some level of confidence and exhibited a growth mindset regarding reading. Five students expressed a high level of confidence. Only two students reported they did not think they could develop reading skills. When asked what would help them become a good reader, some students responded they would need lessons on letters and words and practice.

Figure 3

Student Confidence in Reading Prior to Workshop
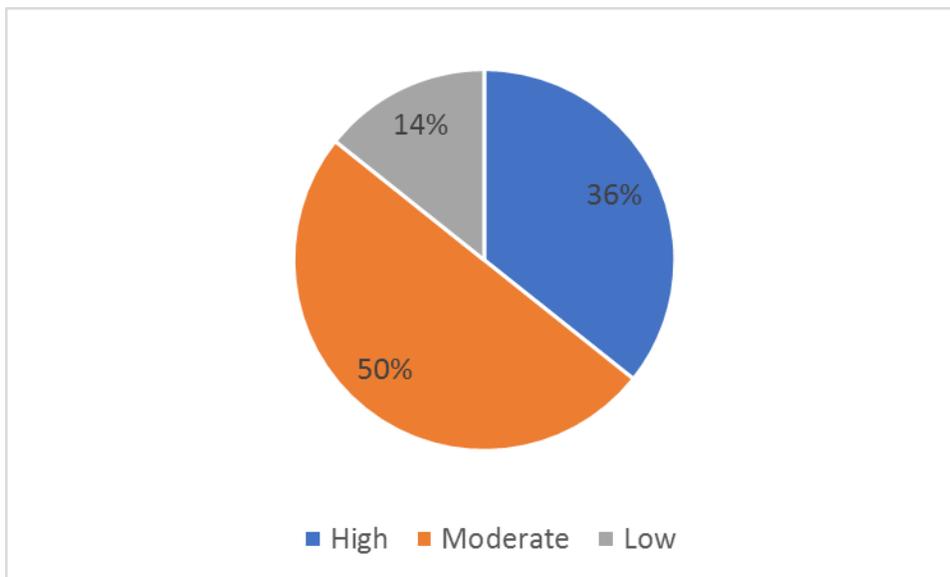
Note. Before starting book workshops, five students reported a high confidence, seven students reported a moderate confidence, two students said they had low confidence in reading skills.

Figure 4

Student Confidence in Reading After Workshop
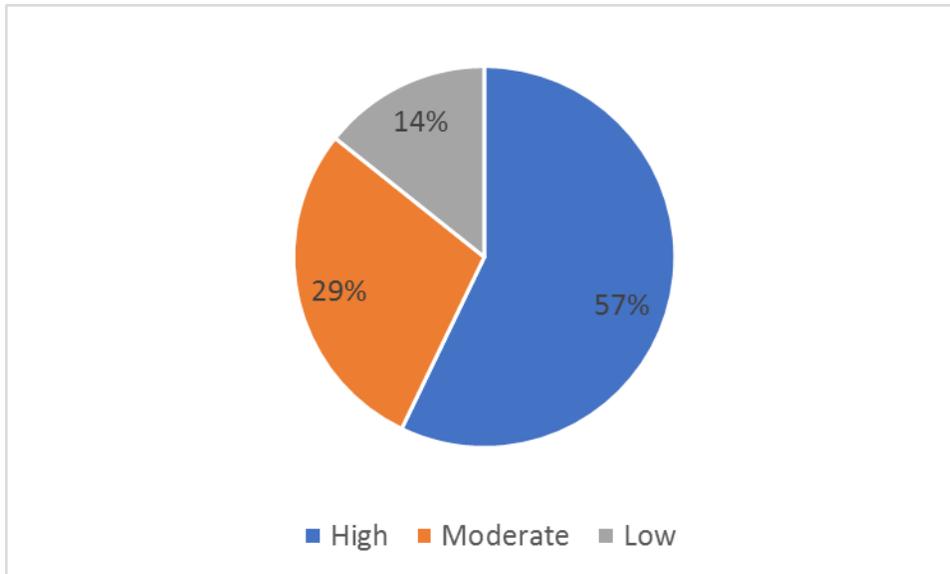
Note. After the workshops, eight students reported a high confidence in skills and only four reported moderate confidence. Low confidence in skills remained the same with two students.

After the intervention period, 21 percent more students expressed a high level of confidence in their reading skills and a growth mindset, a rise from five students to eight. The same number of students, but not the same students, conveyed a lack of sureness in reading skills. This increase in confidence was paired with positive comments from students when they discussed reading. One student told me that reading was something they would learn over time and had plenty of time to learn (Conferencing notes, October 21, 2020). Another explained to a peer that reading was "just something you can do after you practice it" (Observation notes, October 23, 2020).
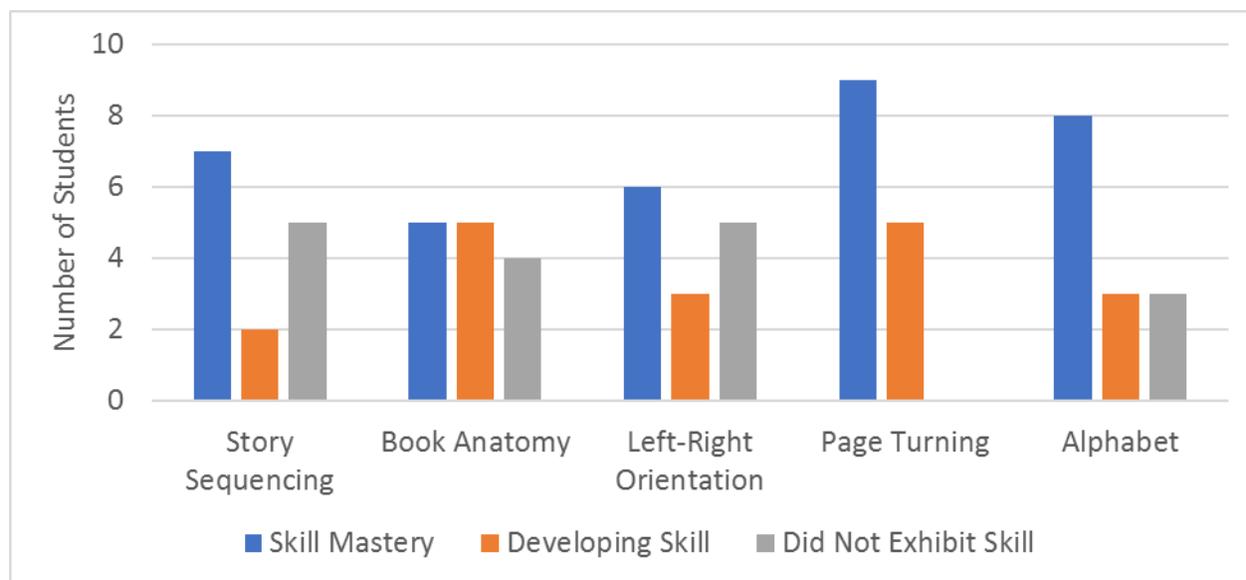
Preliteracy Skills

Through formative assessment and working with students before starting the intervention, I rated the preliteracy skills of story sequencing, parts of a book, orientation, page-turning, and knowledge of the alphabet. Each skill was rated as either mastery, developing, or not exhibited

(see Figure 5). The same assessments were performed after the six weeks of data collection; Figure 6 shows the post-intervention results. Explicit lessons in each of these areas supported students as they worked toward mastery. The first reading workshop lessons focused on preliminary exercises such as turning the pages of a book and the parts of a book, including front and back covers, spine, title page, and dust jacket. As noted in the comparison between Figure 5 and Figure 6, book-handling skills increased from nine to 12 students during the intervention period. Understanding book anatomy also increased, a rise of two students showing mastery and two more students showing developing skills in this area.

Story sequencing was a skill that also increased over time. Five students did not exhibit this skill before the intervention; the number of students not exhibiting story sequencing skills dropped to two at the end of six weeks. Through full-group book discussions focusing on the major plot points, characters, and sequencing of events, students seemed to develop the skills to detail and break down the story. Guides also worked with small groups and individuals during the free reading portion of the workshops to develop this skill through curiosity questions such as, "Who is the main character in the story? How did that character feel at the beginning of the story?" I observed groups of students discussing the characters and the plots of the books they handled. Students revisited favorite texts like Still Stuck by Shinsuke Yoshitake and a particular non-fiction dinosaur book, sharing details, describing the plot, and sequencing the events.
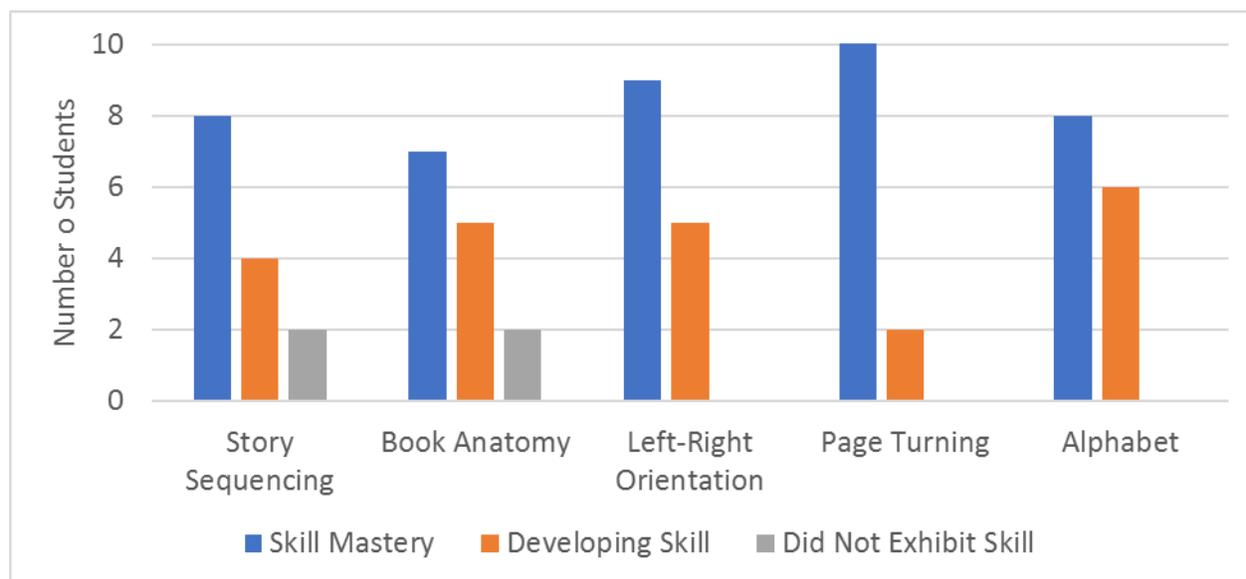
Figure 5

Preliteracy Skills Prior to Workshops

Note. Prior to the intervention, students exhibited various levels of preliteracy skill development.

Figure 6

Preliteracy Skills After Workshops

Note. Preliteracy skill development increased after the six-week intervention. Students showed the greatest development in story sequencing and orientation skills.

Participation and Engagement

Book workshops were highly anticipated times in the classroom. The same group of three students would ask to help set up the lesson for that day's full group. Two students would work together to carry the heavy basket of books to the group each day. When it was time to break into individual or group reading events, students would kindly request a peer to work with them; they would negotiate which book to read first and choose the next book. If the books were not properly restored to the basket, a random student would fix them and occasionally remind others how to restore the books so they would not get damaged.

One first-year student was habitually not engaged in the explicit lesson at the beginning of each book workshop, often choosing to eat snack instead; this student typically joined the workshop for free reading, always reading alone or in parallel with another student. Occasionally a student would disengage from books during the half-hour workshop. They sometimes chose a lesson from the shelf or decided to eat a snack. I allowed this shift in activity because I did not want to make reading a forced endeavor, another obligatory work a student might do to please an adult instead of an independently chosen activity. If a disengaged student chose to misbehave or distract others, I gave that student the option of reading alone or choosing a lesson from the classroom. From observation notes taken during these workshops, there was an average of 1.03 disengaged students throughout the workshops in a given day; 13 days of the 30-day intervention included total student engagement (see Appendix F).

Action Plan

The purpose of this action research study was to increase preliteracy skills and confidence in reading in order to support reading development in a Montessori early childhood classroom, including 14 students aged three to six years. The intervention was a 30-minute

reading workshop that consisted of one explicit language lesson followed by an extended free

reading time. Through observation, I noticed book workshop became a time of calm, focused

socialization. Students worked together to manage the free reading time and the space we used to

meet as a group. There was a shared desire to handle the books with care and to participate in

explicit group lessons. This social cohesion is key to a Montessori classroom; book groups

helped develop this order by offering an extended time to practice a shared activity.

The population of students made gains in preliteracy skills across the board. Students that

were already interested in reading developed a greater interest, especially when reading alone.

The most significant growth was in student confidence in these skills; eight students, over half

the class, reported high confidence in reading skills. Four more students indicated a moderate

level of confidence.

Well-developed preliteracy skills, a love of reading, and sureness in skills will create

stronger readers over time. While the didactic Montessori materials support reading and

handwriting skills, book workshops foster student interest in reading and discussing texts.

Workshops allow for a set time to practice various aspects of the language curriculum and make

meaningful connections to the materials without augmenting the Montessori language lessons.

Students who practice sequencing and discussing a story build strong working memories

(Lervag, 2018). The development of skills, such as sequencing stories, was a main focus of the

reading workshops. In line with Wolf's (2006) study, I found that when offered a selection of

free choice reading materials, guided and independent, students increased language skills over

time. In her research, Wolf (2006) also found that students who can make independent reading

material choices exhibit a greater buy-in or willingness to learn. In my classroom, students were

enthusiastic about participating in free reading sessions. There was clear buy-in from the group for book events and reading.

After the six weeks of intervention, I decided to take a break from reading workshop to focus on lesson presentations in other subject areas. Toward the end of the school day, two students approached me, asking when we would have our reading group. When I responded that we would not be holding a reading group that day, the students were upset. During our daily end of the day group check-in, I asked the class if they would like to continue book workshops, and they unanimously voted to keep the workshops going. It was clear to me that this intervention had become an important part of the students' day; there was a strong desire to read with peers and discuss stories. These workshops had fostered a buy-in for reading. I plan to continue this practice of daily reading groups indefinitely as it positively impacts my students' development in so many ways, academically and socially.

Due to lowered class sizes resulting from COVID-19, this study only included 14 students; two of these students could read non-phonetic words at the time of the action research intervention. I am curious how results may change if I were to duplicate this intervention in the future with a larger class size, which in my environment is typically 25 students between three and six years of age. A larger class size would allow for more data for comparison and possibly more students who are ready to read texts. A further study to discover the effects of reading workshops on phonemic and phonograph awareness and reading development is needed. This further research could incorporate the same reading workshop model with student assessments focused on the development of phonogram awareness and progress through the Montessori early childhood reading sequence. Integrating developmentally appropriate reading tasks in early

childhood classrooms, such as book workshops, would support students as they learn to read and foster reading readiness for first-grade students.

Early childhood and elementary teachers often feel pushed to accelerate reading instruction, to create stronger readers sooner (Wolf, 2006). As a trained Montessorian, I know that pushing a developing skill negatively affects the student, undermining confidence and self-direction in education. Offering various interdisciplinary reading options can increase student interest and allow students to develop reading skills organically over time. Reading workshops in a Montessori early childhood environment can offer organic reading opportunities without forcing children to gain new skills before they are developmentally ready for those skills. Through a book workshop model in early childhood, reading readiness is scaffolded: students work to further develop preliteracy skills, gain independence in reading events, and increase confidence in these skills. The freedom of choice in materials and the opportunity to share book events with peers increases interest and fosters a love of reading. Interest, confidence, and readiness are a strong foundation for developing capable readers.

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Appendix A

**Emergent Literacy and Reading Skills in the Montessori Early Childhood Environment
Through Reading Workshops
Assent Form**

August 10, 2020

Dear Families,

In addition to being your child's guide in Early Childhood Community 1, I am a St. Catherine University student pursuing a Masters of Education. As a capstone to my program, I need to complete an Action Research project. I am going to study emergent reading skills and interest because I want to explore new strategies for teaching literacy, informed by best practices for brain development, and create an optimal learning environment for each child.

In the coming weeks, I will be implementing a daily reading workshop including a short language lesson followed by an extended time for children to conduct free reading activities as a regular part of the morning work cycle. All students will participate as members of the class. In order to understand the outcomes, I plan to analyze the results of these workshops to determine if there is an increase in emergent reading skills including phonetic awareness for younger children and reading fluency in older children.

The purpose of this letter is to notify you of this research and to allow you the opportunity to exclude your child's data from my study.

If you decide you want your child's data to be in my study, you don't need to do anything at this point.
If you decide you do NOT want your child's data included in my study, please note that on this form below and return it by Friday, August 14. Note that your child will still participate in the activities but his/her data will not be included in my analysis.

In order to help you make an informed decision, please note the following:

●   I am working with a faculty member at St. Kate's and an advisor to complete this particular project.

●   There are no foreseen risks involved in this study. The intention is to increase interest in reading in order to foster a developmentally appropriate environment for children to develop language skills in diverse ways. The Montessori method supports opportunities for children to learn from each other, support each other's development, and maintain a positive social atmosphere. These workshops will be guided by these principles.

●   I will be writing about the results that I get from this research. However, none of the writing that I do will include the name of this school, the names of any students, or any references that would make it possible to identify outcomes connected to a particular student. Other people will not know if your child is in my study.

●   The final report of my study will be electronically available online at the St. Catherine University library. The goal of sharing my research study is to help other teachers who are also trying to improve their teaching.

●   There is no penalty for not having your child's data involved in the study, I will simply delete his or her responses from my data set.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Annie Rebori at annie.rebori@natureswaymontessori.com. You may ask questions now, or if you have any questions later, you can ask me, or my advisor Dawn Quigley at (651) 690-6170 who will be happy to answer them. If you have questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you may also contact Dr. John Schmitt, Chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board, at (651) 690-6720.

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

_____   _____
Annie Rebori, Early Childhood Lead Guide   Date

OPT OUT: Parents, in order to exclude your child's data from the study, please sign and return by Friday, August 14.

I do NOT want my child's data to be included in this study.

_____   _____
Signature of Parent   Date

Appendix B

Student:_____ Date:_____

Child Can Recite Alphabet Independently (circle any incorrect letters)

a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z

Notes:

Observation Notes, Comments, or Concerns
(room on back for expansion):

Phonemic Awareness
(X out sound child creates independently. Circle sounds child does not know. Underline letters child can name.)

a (short, map)
a (long, ate)
b
c (hard, cat)
c (soft, circle)
d
e (short, egg)
e (long, key)
f
g (hard, gorilla)
g (soft, giraffe)
h
i (short, igloo)
i (long, ice)
j
k
l
m
n
o (short, octopus)
o (long, oval)
p
q
r
s
t
u (short, under)
u (long, mute)
v
w
x
y (glide, yak)
y (vowel, fly)
z

Phonogram Awareness
(X out sound child creates independently in the context of a word. Circle sounds child does not know.)
*denotes advanced phonogram

Double Vowel
au (faucet)
aw (flaw)
oy (toy)
oi (oil)
oo (pool)
oo (hook)
ou (four)
ou (out)*

Long a
a/a_e (cake)
ai (snail)
ay (play)
ea (great)*

Long e
e/e_e (eve)
ee (seed)
ea (peace)
eigh (eight)*
ei (reindeer)*
ey (they)*

-r Controlled
ar (car)
er (teacher)
ir (first)
or (for)
ur (hurt)

Long i
i/i_e (kite)
y (fly)
igh (thigh)

Double Consonant
th (soft, thin)
th (hard, think)
ch (hard, chin)
ch (soft, chute)*
sh (shut)
ng (ending)
ck (duck)
wh (what)
kn (knot)
gn (gnat)
ph (phone)

Long o
o/o_e (tote)
oa (oat)
oe (doe)
ow (slow)
ough (dough)*

Long u
u/u_e (use)
u_e (oo, June)
ew (chew)*

Appendix C

Reading Workshop Student-Teacher Conference Plan
Child:_____ **Age:**_____ **Date:**_____
Conditions of Conference: __pre-intervention __post-intervention
Other Conditions of Conference:_____
Do you like books? What type of books do you like most? What happens/What is described in these books? Do you have a favorite book?
(*Child book interest: Low   Medium   High*)
(*Child is able to sequence plot   Child is unable to sequence plot*)

Do you look at them alone? With family? Who do you read books with outside of school?
(*Child interest reading alone: Low   Medium   High)*
(*Child interest reading with adult: Low   Medium   High)*

Where do you get books? Do you buy them? Visit the library? Use a device?
When do you read books at home? Bedtime? In the mornings? Many times a day?
(*Child is able to identify/describe book events   Child unable to identify/describe book events*)

How does reading at home make you feel?
(*Child has positive feeling   negative feeling   neutral feeling*)

Can you read? Do you feel confident/nervous/unsure of yourself when you practice reading?
(*Child confidence: Low   Medium   High*)

How does reading by yourself feel?
(*Child has positive feeling   Child has negative feeling*)

Do you think you'll get better at reading? What do you think will help you?
(Child shows growth mindset   Child has negative mindset)

Appendix D
Reading Workshop Self-Assessment

Name: _____ **Date:** _____

	Yes	Mostly	Some	Not much	No
1. I was focused on reading during workshop today.	😎	☺	😐	☹	😧
2. I read alone today.	😎	☺	😐	☹	😧
3. Someone listened to me read today.	😎	☺	😐	☹	😧
4. I listened to others read today.	😎	☺	😐	☹	😧
5. I was able to help someone today.	😎	☺	😐	☹	😧
6. I asked for help.	😎	☺	😐	☹	😧
7. I learned something today.	😎	☺	😐	☹	😧
8. Workshop was fun today.	😎	☺	😐	☹	😧

Draw or write about reading workshop today.

Appendix E

Reading Workshop Field Notes

Date:_____   **Session Time:**_____

Conditions of Environment During Session (weather, events, visitors, other pertinent information)

Subject of Explicit Group Lesson:

Instructor's Perception of Lesson Effectiveness:

__# of students

Subject of Focused Observation (circle one)

1st years   2nd years   3rd years   confident readers   not confident readers   weak phonetic awareness

Skill-based group. List skill(s)_____

Tally all events observed, one tally represents one child	**Whole Time**	**Most Time**	**Some Time**	**None**
Participated in group				
Seems engaged				
Works alone				
Works in pair or group				
Handled book correctly				
Worked to decode text				
Child requested help				
Child gives solicited help				
Child showed use of explicit skill				

Notes

Appendix F

Table 1

Student Disengagement During Book Workshops

Date of Workshop	Number of Disengaged Students
August 31, 2020	1
September 1, 2020	1
September 2, 2020	1
September 3, 2020	0
September 4, 2020	1
September 8, 2020	2
September 9, 2020	0
September 10, 2020	0
September 14, 2020	1
September 15, 2020	3
September 16, 2020	0
September 17, 2020	4
September 18, 2020	0
September 21, 2020	0
September 22, 2020	0
September 23, 2020	2
September 24, 2020	1
September 25, 2020	0
September 28, 2020	0
September 29, 2020	0
September 30, 2020	0
October 1, 2020	0
October 2, 2020	2
October 5, 2020	1
October 6, 2020	3
October 7, 2020	2
October 8, 2020	3
October 9, 2020	1

Note. Table displays number of disengaged students during each workshop. Disengagement included not participating for more than half of the 30-minute workshop sessions.