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## **Effective Interventions to Support Struggling Readers in Upper Elementary Grades**

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**Effective Interventions to Support Struggling Readers in Upper  
Elementary Grades**

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in fulfillment of final requirements for the MAED degree

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to identify and implement strategies and interventions for non proficient readers in upper elementary grades that can be integrated into the general education classroom. Beginning in middle school, students receive limited direct literacy instruction and support even if it is still needed. Many secondary students read several years below grade level which prohibits them from succeeding in courses, college, and careers. This study consisted of a focus group including 5 fourth grade students that were identified as struggling readers through a series of diagnostic screening tests. The students engaged in three targeted reading interventions to support their reading gaps and build confidence and efficacy to flourish as readers. This study found that targeted instruction paired with strong relationships supported struggling readers to cultivate reading skills and take ownership of their reading habits and skills. Building trust and confidence with each student establishes and maintains the integrity of each intervention. Empowering students to realize their capacity for learning and encouraging them to take responsibility for their own learning leads to increased success of interventions.

*Keywords: Tier 1 intervention, non proficient readers, struggling readers, reading efficacy*

“Reading is central to our ability to make sense of both our inner selves and our surroundings. Therefore, it is imperative that unskilled readers are given opportunities to improve.” This idea quoted by Owen Barden (2010) summarizes the power of reading and the urgent need to address literacy issues in K-12 schools. A diverse group of readers will be found in any K-12 classroom. There will be a wide range of ability levels, experience, interest, and motivation. As students age, an accumulating gap between proficient and non proficient readers makes it difficult for struggling readers to catch-up (Allington & McGill-Frazon, 2018). Two-thirds of students identified as a "struggling reader" by third grade continue to experience academic difficulties through high school (Goddard, Goddard, & Kim, 2015). An understanding of the world and the way an individual fits into this world are found through text (Barden, 2010). If a student is behind as they enter the intermediate grades, they are less likely to integrate contextual information which is a crucial part of their foundation of knowledge (Glennon, Nitschke-Shaw, Copley, & Fitzgerald, 2015). The first line of support in any classroom is the general education classroom teacher. There needs to be a deeper inquiry into exploring strategies that have been proven effective within a general education classroom to support struggling readers and provide tools necessary to fill the gaps in their learning.

With the data collected over the last three years at a school regularly performing higher than the state and neighboring districts, there remains evidence that suggests students have not mastered foundational reading skills entering fourth grade (Eagle Ridge Academy, 2019). This problem exists beyond one school; this is a national issue. The National Assessment of Educational Progress found that in 2019, only 35% of fourth graders are at or above grade level (NAEP, 2019). Adding to the urgency,

academic success and reading proficiency are linked together (Reis, McCoach, Little, Muller, & Kaniskan, 2011). Reading and literacy proficiency has been a critical issue since even before President Bush enacted No Child Left Behind in 2002 (Dee & Jacob, 2011). While reading curricula, strategies, and support has been an urgent focus for educators, little evidence has been found to suggest the efforts from No Child Left Behind has made a significant impact (Dee & Jacob, 2011), meaning non proficient readers in fourth grade are still struggling.

When examining patterns and trends within the data, a significant reading gap continues to increase and correlate with low socioeconomic levels (Reis et al., 2011). Reading instruction and curricula are not accurately addressing students' instructional needs, resulting in unengaged and disinterested students (Reis et al., 2011). General Education teachers often instruct the average student in a one-size-fits-all approach (Goddard, Goddard, & Kim, 2015). With 65% of fourth-grade students reportedly below grade level (NAEP, 2019), adjustments to the one-size-fits-all approach needs to be considered. This has led to the question: What effects will researched, differentiated strategies and intervention in a general education classroom have on the reading growth of students who are receiving additional interventions in a fourth grade classroom after one cycle?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Improving the success of struggling readers in upper elementary grades is grounded in the framework of self-efficacy theory. Albert Bandura (1977) developed the theory to suggest an individual's belief in the ability is essential to succeed in a particular task. In education, Bandura's (1977) ideas theorize that a student's

confidence with a particular skill or concept will correlate with academic achievement. Furthermore, educators believe that building and maintaining self-efficacy coincides with determination and grit necessary to overcome challenges and obstacles (Lorsbach and Links 1999). In reading, students with strong self-efficacy believe they have the capacity to tackle the skill or task and are more likely to respond positively to intense interventions. Whereas students with low self-efficacy tend to doubt themselves and their potential (Cho et. al 2015).

When struggling readers participate in reading in a general education classroom, the text and tasks can seem out of reach. According to the self-efficacy theory, students who intrinsically believe in their capacity to succeed can achieve the intended outcome more efficiently than those who may be more reluctant readers. In this study, self-efficacy played a role in the success of heterogeneous comprehension discussions and Peer Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) for some struggling readers. Another study (Cho et. al 2015) examined the cognitive impacts of intensive reading interventions in fourth grade students and found that inadequate responders typically had lower self-efficacy and attention than high and adequate responders. When a challenge is presented, efficacious students find a way to solve the problem (Afflerbach, Cho, Kim, Crassas & Doyle, 2013). In this study, when interventions appeared to plateau or students seemed frustrated, the theory of self-efficacy was considered. Intentional texts, student conferencing, collaboration with tier 2 and 3 interventionists, intentional grouping and partnering was essential in the success of growth for students.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

## Definitions and Key Concepts

When thinking about supporting struggling readers, there are many terms used to describe strategies and tools. It is essential to clearly define and understand the similarities, differences, and nuances for each term.

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a targeted change in behavior or performance. It examines the progress of instruction or curriculum within a school, classroom, or individual student (Marchand-Martella, Ruby & Martella, 2007). RTI requires eight core principles. (1) teach all children (2) intervene early (3) multi-tier model (4) Problem-solving method (5) researched-based instruction (6) monitor student progress (7) Data-Driven Instruction (DDI), (8) assessments (Marchand-Martella, Ruby & Martella, 2007). RTI must use at least three tiers of increasingly intensive instruction: a universal screener, DDI placement, and formative assessments (Dougherty, 2016).

Tier one intervention is "nesting" or embedding intervention in a whole group or core curriculum environment; generally, the classroom teacher gives the intervention instruction. (Jones et al., 2012). The first tier of RTI is intended to be a preventative measure to keep students out of tier 2 and tier 3 interventions. A tier one setting for intervention is typically the general education classroom (Dagen & Bean, 2020).

A term that is often incorrectly used synonymously with interventions is differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction modifies and adjusts the classroom curriculum to allow all students to successfully access the curriculum (Dagen & Bean, 2020). It affords teachers the ability to meet the needs of a broad range of student abilities found within a heterogeneous classroom (Firmender et al., 2013). When done correctly, differentiated instruction will reduce behavior issues, boredom, and frustration

(Dagen & Bean, 2020). To differentiate, teachers modify instructional content, process, or assessments to facilitate the success of a student or student group that would otherwise not have their needs met. For example, in reading, teachers should provide text that simultaneously challenges and engages all ability levels (Firmender et al., 2013). Conversely, an intervention is an additional support to fill a gap of a struggling student. Differentiation may provide instruction to all students; whereas an intervention is supplemental material provided only to below level students usually in reading or math (Dougherty, 2016). When a teacher differentiates, they may be planning for "academic diversity" by providing opportunities for all students to successfully access the curriculum (Goddard, Goddard, & Kim, 2015). Therefore, in theory, a differentiated curriculum in first through third grade could be more likely to help produce a developmentally proficient reader.

### **Upper Elementary Proven Best Practices**

Reading has been a foundation of school since the beginning of education. Throughout history, researchers have been studying the methodologies of instruction in schools. Saunders, (2017) suggests including five proven useful components in a general education reading class. Effective upper elementary classrooms should include modeled responses, explicit critical thinking skills, literature-based instruction, choice materials, a variety of balanced groupings (Saunders et al., 2017).

Evidence suggests that students make academic growth when they are exposed to repeated opportunities to comprehend with a variety of text types. (Walpole et al., 2017). For this to be possible, it would require a reading curriculum to include a balance of a wide range of literacy instruction, groups, and integrated text (Walpole et al., 2017).

Literature suggests reading fluency is closely correlated with automaticity, word decoding, and therefore freeing the brain to comprehend the text. There is clear evidence that good fluency generates proficient comprehension and excellent comprehension aids in fluent reading. In other words, fluency and comprehension are considered reciprocal (Jones et al., 2012).

As previously discussed, differentiated reading instruction is not only effective but essential in a reading classroom. Saunders (2017) explains that differentiated instruction is most effective in upper elementary classrooms when there is a balance of homogeneous and heterogeneous groupings. Furthermore, the consistent use of formative assessments extends the positive impact of intentional and focused differentiated instruction (Goddard, Goddard, & Kim, 2015). Theory suggests that students receiving a flexible education are more likely to have higher achievement than those receiving a one-size-fits-all approach (Goddard, Goddard, & Kim, 2015).

### **Potential Strategies or Interventions**

The question remains, *how does one successfully execute a differentiated classroom in reading in order to support struggling students?* “Learning to read is a deeply individual and dynamic process” (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2013 p. 190). As educators it is essential to first, consider the climate. Implementing school-wide norms requiring classrooms to instruct with differentiation had promising results in one study (Goddard, Goddard, & Kim, 2015). Coleman’s theory on social norms states that although one might *suggest a norm*, the norm will not be followed unless the masses participate or behave according to the norm (Elster, 2003). This study was consistent with Coleman’s theory because differentiation was a schoolwide expected norm. The idea supported

that informal social pressures encouraged the desired behavior. This study found statistically significant evidence of increased student achievement in reading from the previous year (Goddard, Goddard, & Kim, 2015). A random sample from 78 schools, within a sizable Midwestern district, found a direct correlation to differentiation norms and positive results in both reading and math. When comparing the variable of norms, the results show a lift of 0.17 higher than the standard deviation (Goddard, Goddard, & Kim, 2015).

When thinking about school-wide implementation, a comprehensive school reform (CSR)\* curriculum, Bookworms (Walpole et al., 2017), was implemented with statistically significant higher fluency and comprehension achievement against the control group. CSR is another name of an evidence based program implemented school or district wide. The Bookworms program was used in upper elementary classrooms (grades 3-5), and it generated differentiation from a variety of entry points (Walpole et al., 2017). The program includes routines for students to build and maintain fluency, comprehend, build vocabulary skills, and requires complex text selection (Walpole et al., 2017). In this model, teachers design instruction to increase background knowledge, vocabulary, and text structure by taking "prior knowledge they need to build mental representations that bridge the new to the known" (Walpole et al., 2017 p. 274).

PALS, Peer Assisted Learning strategies, is another structure with proven success. This method involves high achieving peer students serving as a "tutor" using highly structured and scripted prompts with a struggling student (Thorius & Graff, 2018). PALS focuses on foundational reading skills: phonological awareness, decoding, comprehension, and fluency. Three activities have demonstrated a significant impact:

partner reading retells, paragraph shrinking, and reduction relay. An additional advantage of this method is that PALS is considered a reciprocal method where both students develop positive outcomes.

A conversation with a literacy specialist (Gordon, 2019) led to the understanding of a common thread between struggling readers. When upper elementary tier 3 students were asked, "What makes reading difficult?" An overwhelming majority of the students expressed concerns with the inability to read unfamiliar words. These responses support the need to focus on giving students a toolbox. Direct and explicit encoding strategies improve students' ability to decode unknown words (Weiser, 2011). Students experiencing difficulties with phonological awareness, fluently reading, and spelling will benefit from encoding instruction (Weiser, 2011). Furthermore, high quality and high quantity independent reading are proven to increase reading achievement in a classroom setting for older students (Topping, 2007).

A unique method, Video Self-Modeling (VSM), is an intervention allowing students to watch themselves read fluently in hopes of recreating the behavior as a habit (Montgomerie, 2014). VSM increased the students' self-efficacy, thereby aiding in reading fluency growth (Montgomerie, 2014). Reading fluency has been linked to reading comprehension (Montgomerie, 2014).

Lastly, a meta-analysis of literature and studies suggests a systematic use of repeated reading has shown evidence of improving reading achievement (Jones et al., 2012). Repeated reading is a differentiated intervention engaging in a practice of repeating the same passage numerous times. Familiar and embedded vocabulary words allow students to focus on fluency and comprehension (Jones et al., 2012). This

strategy can be modified and integrated with many ways to support the core curriculum. If word knowledge is limited, explicit instruction of the words is beneficial. A listening preview can be used to support at-risk struggling readers.

### **Considerations**

With all of the work being done with the diverse needs of readers worldwide, there are some contradictory ideas, considerations, and issues present in today's literature. One issue is that many classroom teachers were serving as interventionists blurring the lines and not providing as much supplemental instruction needed to bridge the gap for struggling readers (Dougherty, 2016). There is more research supporting best practices for tier 2 and tier 3 interventions leaving classroom teachers with a lack of scientifically based methods for meeting the needs of struggling students in a tier-one setting, which is exacerbating the issue (Jones et al., 2012). Therefore, not only are classroom teachers required to provide interventions to students, but fewer studies are providing effective strategies for teachers to intervene when students do not respond to reading instruction. Struggling readers are often misidentified. When interventions are in place at schools, a study analyzing the impacts of RTI in schools found that 45% of schools in the sample provided interventions to proficient readers (Dougherty, 2016). Therefore, schools were using supplemental resources for proficient readers, not prioritizing them for tier 2 and tier 3 students.

Along the same lines, RTI systems require interventions to be "research-based." Johnson (2012) explains that there is no standard definition for the term scientifically validated instruction, therefore, creating "widespread uncertainty" of the quality of RTI instruction practiced.

There is also literature contradicting the idea that guided reading is a best practice instructional strategy for differentiation with a reading classroom. Guided reading involves a small group of homogenous students interacting with a whole text in an intentional and supported manner (Gaffner, Johnson, Torres-Elias & Dryden, 2014). Gaffner (2014) states the importance of implementing small group guided reading in elementary classrooms is “critical” for early elementary readers. On the other hand, the Bookworms curriculum spent the majority of the instructional time instructing students at grade-level standards, not instructional level texts. A few high-quality routines made challenging text accessible to all students. Results illustrated that more students made more significant growth gains than those reading texts at their level (Walpole et al., 2017). Additionally, guided reading does not focus on explicit phonics instruction in upper elementary grades. Evidence suggests that a significant hurdle for struggling readers to improve reading is increasing phonological awareness and orthographic mapping to be able to decode unknown words efficiently (Montgomerie, 2014).

### **Methodology**

This classroom action research method used a focus group approach while incorporating quantitative data to triangulate data. Research occurred in a tier one general education setting during small group, individual conferencing, and whole group instruction during the scheduled reading block. The process began and ended by assessing all students as part of the school’s regular reading screening process to identify participants using Curriculum Based Measurement (easyCBM) & Phonological Awareness Screening Test (PAST). In addition, teacher-made quarter interim assessments and report card grades were used to identify the focus group. Anecdotal

notes, progress monitoring, and pre and post student interviews were used to determine any statistical growth in reading of struggling readers.

The student participants attend a diverse charter school in the Western suburbs of Minneapolis, MN. The focus group consisted of 5 fourth grade students who qualified for additional reading support outside of the general education classroom, 2 females and 3 males during the 2020-2021 school year. One student qualified for English Language services in addition to the highest level of reading intervention support. Three students were black and two were white. Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the research took place in the Spring of 2021.

Once the students were identified for the focus group and permission was granted, the eight-week intervention began. Throughout the intervention period, progress monitoring and data collection occurred. Progress monitoring consisted of teacher-made exit tickets aligned to the intervention objective(s) and/or components of an informal reading inventory. Finally, after the 8 week period, students were reassessed using a separate version of easyCBM and PAST as evidence of growth. Data collected was analyzed with norm references (compared against other students) and with individual references (examined individual trajectory).

After analyzing diagnostic testing and collaborating with the school's reading specialist, students met in a small reading group focusing on decoding text and syllabication to help with oral reading fluency. Comprehension skills were isolated using primarily reread or pre-read texts from other parts of the school's curriculum. This group met two times per week for 20 minutes. Anecdotal notes were collected and other formative assessments were administered throughout the 8-week period. The group

began each session with a syllabication activity. Students repeatedly worked through speed reading 337 syllables found in the 5000 most commonly used words. A timer was set for one minute and correctly- read syllables were placed into the *yes pile*, and incorrectly pronounced or unknown syllables were placed in the *no pile*. At the end of the minute, the student counted the number of correct syllables in the *yes pile* and recorded their growth on a table. The remainder of the session focused on comprehension strategies. The objective of each session was to preview or reread the Core Knowledge novel *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table*, the text that was used as part of the whole group reading curriculum (Core Knowledge, 2020). On occasion other texts were utilized to expose students to a variety of text types. When students previewed the text, the goal focused on accurately summarizing, retelling the events, analyzing the characters and their motivations, and describing as well as maintaining key details. When students reread the text, they were given the opportunity to think beyond the text. Using Habits of Discussion, students synthesized the text by engaging in a small group discussion (Lemov, 2005). This discussion encouraged students to make inferences, predict, and connect. Habits of Discussion checklists and feedback sheets were provided to students at the end of each discussion.

The PALS, Peer Assisted Learning strategies, method was incorporated into whole group lessons using reciprocal teaching strategies and intentional pairings of strong readers supporting the students in this focus group. PALS was incorporated into lessons throughout the day to provide students with an opportunity to repeatedly read different types of texts. A short passage of 250 words or less was identified weekly from the history text, a Core Knowledge text, or a science article used in class. To begin the

weekly process, the passage was modeled fluently aloud by the teacher. Then pairs of students tracked errors and self-corrections and took turns reading the passage. The students repeated this process until the session ended (around 8 minutes). This same passage was used 2-3 times per week. PALS' pairs were maintained for the entire 8 weeks and were established by proficiency of fluency determined from the easyCBM words per minute diagnostic passage.

With the use of Zoom and Canvas, the school's learning management system, students engaged in Video Self Monitoring (VSM). This method allowed students to record themselves reading orally and fluently with texts they have worked with previously in class to self-assess and reinforce fluent reading behavior. As a class, students discussed habits of a fluent oral reader. Using a modified rubric from Fountas and Pinnell, students self assessed their oral reading fluency by examining their pausing, stress, intonation, phrasing, and rate. Before attempting this independently, the class listened to examples of fluent and not fluent readers and discussed areas to improve using language from the rubric. On Fridays students in this class participated in distance learning as part of the school's Safe Learning Plan due to the COVID 19 pandemic. Each week all 4th graders were tasked with recording and assessing their oral reading fluency with the passage used in PALS. One-on-one conferencing took place the following week to discuss self reflection and a goal for the upcoming week. *Appendix C* shows the rubric students used to self reflect and develop a specific goal for the following week. This form was also used in one-on-one conferencing with students.

The tailored differentiation the students in this focus group participated in was intended to adjust the fourth grade reading curriculum to make it accessible to

struggling readers while targeting troublesome gaps. As these students continue to work towards autonomy in their education, the interventions were also deliberately designed to intrinsically motivate and empower students as independent readers. Additionally, these high quality interventions provided tools for the struggling readers to take ownership in their own reading growth.

### **Data Analysis**

The EasyCBM assessments provided a comprehensive understanding of a student's reading ability. It is a computer based assessment that automatically generates a Lexile reading level for each student. This test measured fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. EasyCBM provides normed charts of student percentile performance nationwide. This data allowed for immediate educational decision making in identifying students for the focus group and targeting essential skill gaps in reading. The raw score allowed a direct comparison of growth from winter to spring scores.

The Phonological Awareness Skills Test (PAST) informed the type of phonological gaps the upper elementary student had. Unmastered phonemes were identified and targeted in intervention. Once a skill group was mastered per the PAST scoring guide, that section was not revisited in subsequent tests. This data examined the number of red (unmastered) levels in the winter and then compared with the number of red levels in the spring to determine growth and mastery.

The Burke Student interview provided insight into student self efficacy, interest, motivation, and opportunity to build a relationship. The open ended nature of the questions provided non-bias awareness into their beliefs about reading. The qualitative

data collected informed text choice used for instruction, and answers were compared from winter to spring interview. Words and phrases expressing reading motivation and efficacy were key indicators of success.

The anecdotal records observed and provided formative feedback to support student goals in one-on-one conferencing with each student in the focus group. Weekly syllabication results were shared, a comprehension goal was identified, and self-assessed fluency progress was discussed with specific goals identified for the following week. The notes kept continuously throughout the 8 weeks kept individualized goal setting focused and organized.

A teacher-made interim assessment was given as a diagnostic tool in the winter intended to mirror the Minnesota Comprehension Assessment (MCA). The data collected from the assessment was used as part of the school's metric when identifying students for tier 2 or tier 3 intervention. The test was analyzed to determine the skill areas not yet mastered, depth of knowledge patterns, potential stamina issues, and test taking strategies.

## **Findings**

### **Intervene when readers struggle**

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects researched differentiated strategies or interventions had in a general education setting on student reading growth who were also receiving additional reading interventions in a fourth grade classroom after eight weeks. The researcher identified students for this case study using a series of diagnostic tests to determine students not proficient in reading at a fourth grade level. Qualitative data was collected to measure student efficacy, interest, and attitude(s)

towards reading. Through an eight week period, students engaged in a series of interventions and instructional methods targeted to support reading proficiency.

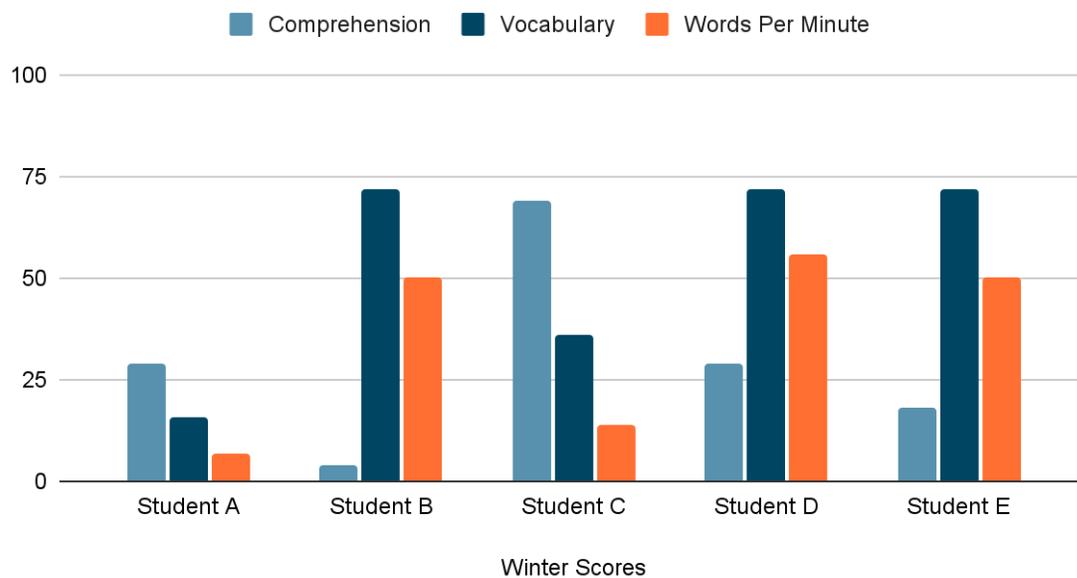
Lexile measures students' ability to read a text at a specific complexity and a text's complexity. It is intended to help students find *good fit* books. Lexile measure scores range from 0L for a pre-reader- 2000L for an advanced reader. Lexile examines text complexity, vocabulary, and word count when identifying a score or level. *Table 1* shows the Lexile scores generated automatically from the easyCBM computer based assessment. This assessment paints a picture of a student's current reading level at a given time. Students engage in three components: comprehension, vocabulary, and oral reading fluency. Four of five students maintained or increased Lexile levels from winter to spring. Three of five students are reading above the normed 50th percentile range. The school's metric for reading proficiency was slightly higher at 850L. With this metric, only 20% of the group left 4th grade reading at the recommended reading level.

**Table 1**

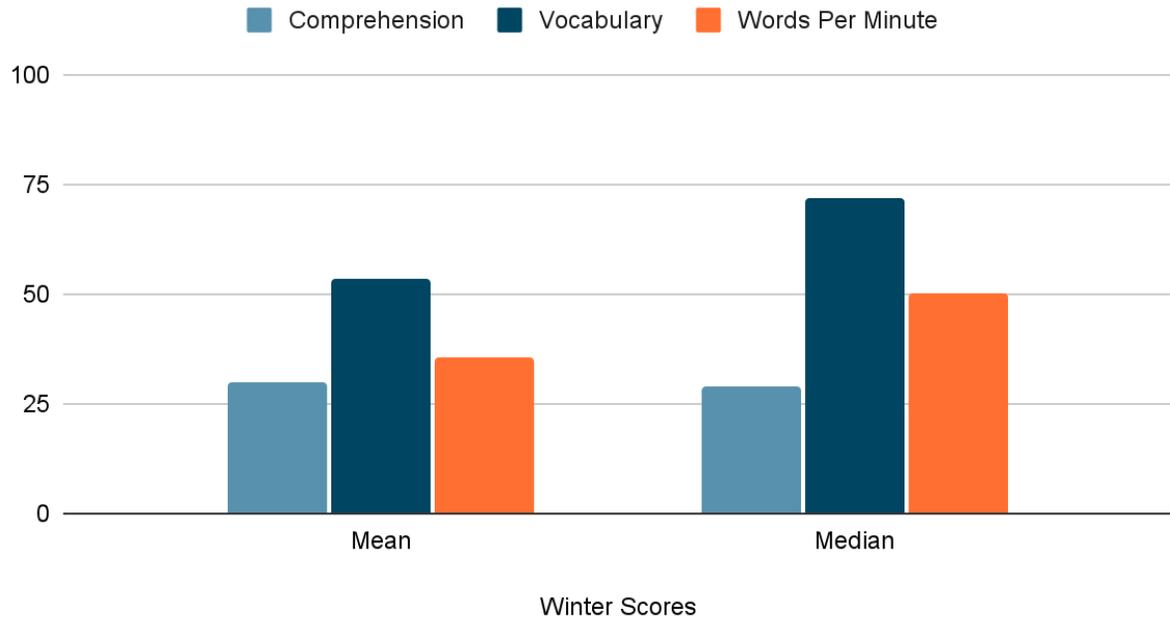
***EasyCBM Winter to Spring Lexile Scores***

	Winter 50th percentile- 790L 90th percentile-1110L	Spring 50th percentile- 830L 90th percentile-1160L
Student A	725L	725L
Student B	505L	850L
Student C	725L	560L
Student D	280L	835L
Student E	725L	835L

EasyCBM is a computer based assessment that measures three key components of reading mastery. *Tables 2 and 3* illustrate the normed percentile scores for each student in the focus group for each reading component assessed. Within the focus group, the average comprehension and vocabulary score increased by ~20% from winter to spring. Individual student scores vary considerably from winter to spring potentially due to learning environment variability as a result of distance learning as a result of the COVID 19 Safe Learning Plan. Students at home learning environment was impossible to control and therefore an equitable testing space was not maintained.

**Table 2*****EasyCBM Winter Sub scores*****EasyCBM Winter Breakdown**

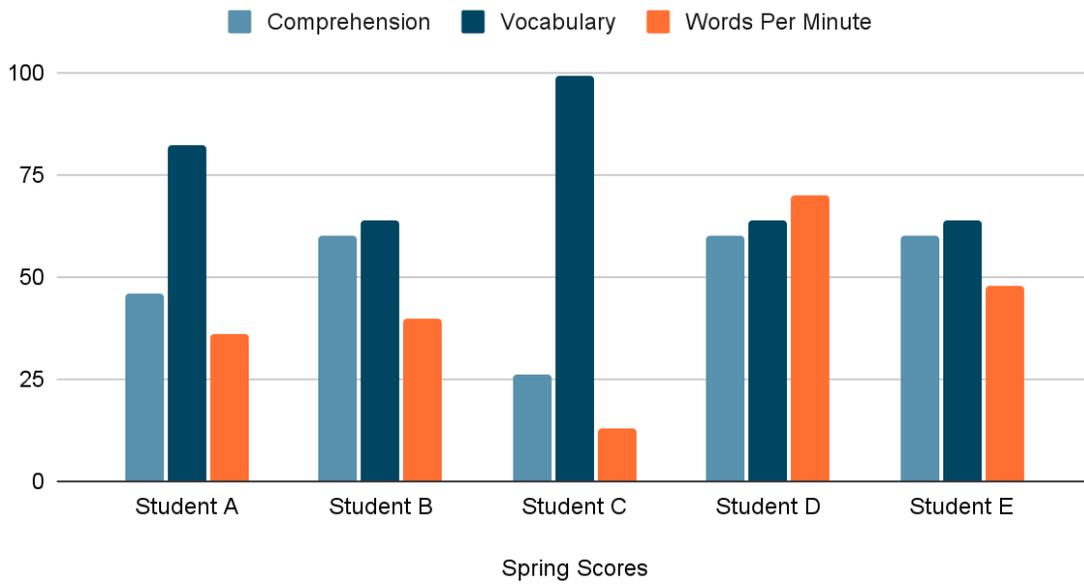
### Mean & Median



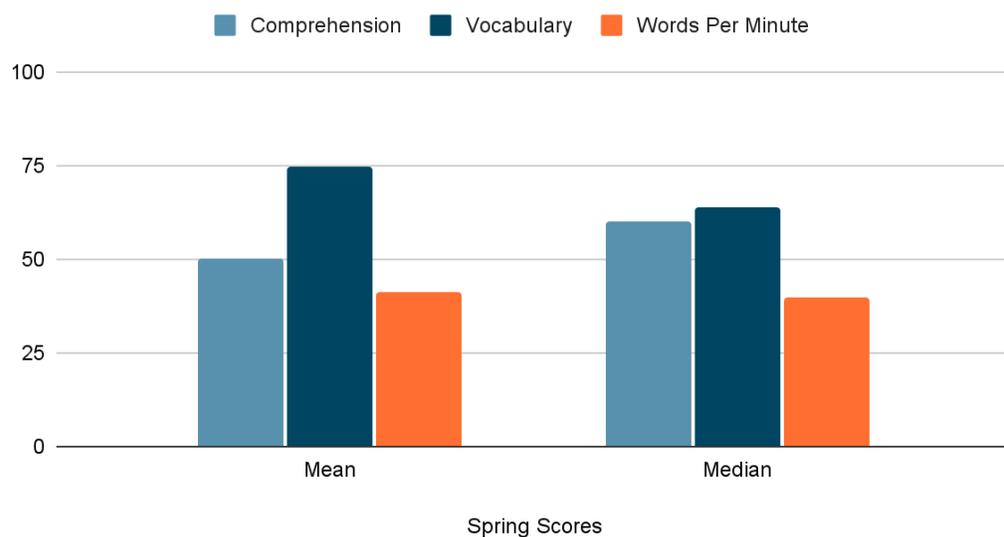
**Table 3**

### *EasyCBM Spring Sub scores*

#### EasyCBM Spring Breakdown



### Mean & Median

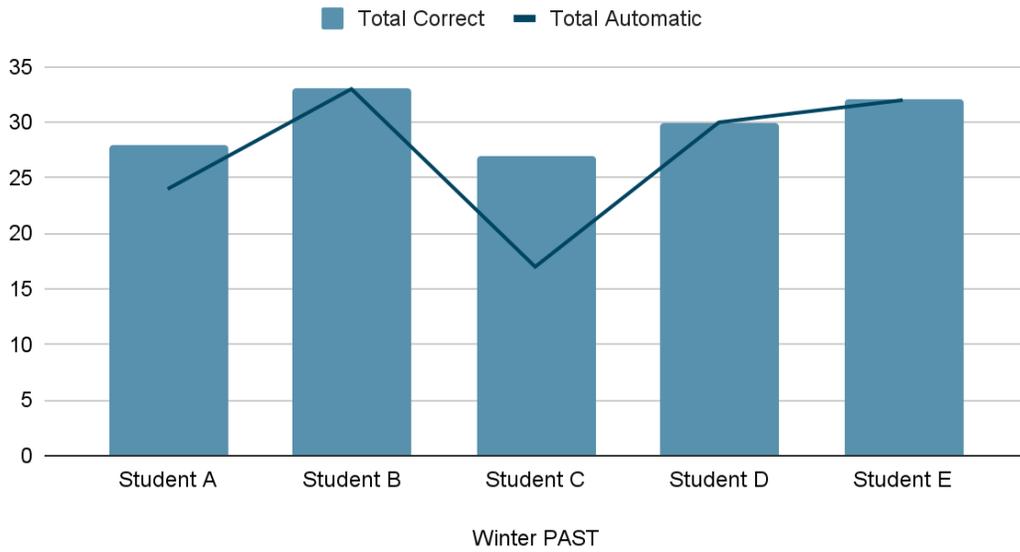


The Phonological Awareness Skills Test (PAST) assessed each student's ability to hear, manipulate, and identify phonemes in oral vocabulary. The assessor read a prompt with a task for the student to complete orally. If the student responded correctly in  $\leq 3$  seconds, the phoneme was automatic. If the student needed the assessor to repeat the question or answer correctly in  $> 3$  seconds it was recorded as correct. There are a total of 34 phonemes assessed. Once the student masters a phoneme section automatically, they are not assessed on those sections again. Tables 4 & 5 show the growth from winter to spring. Some struggling students find success in an oral listening assessment because no reading or writing is required. At the same time, this assessment identifies specific gaps keeping a student from finding success in reading. For example, Student C had many phonological awareness gaps.

#### Table 4

##### *Winter PAST Phoneme Mastery*

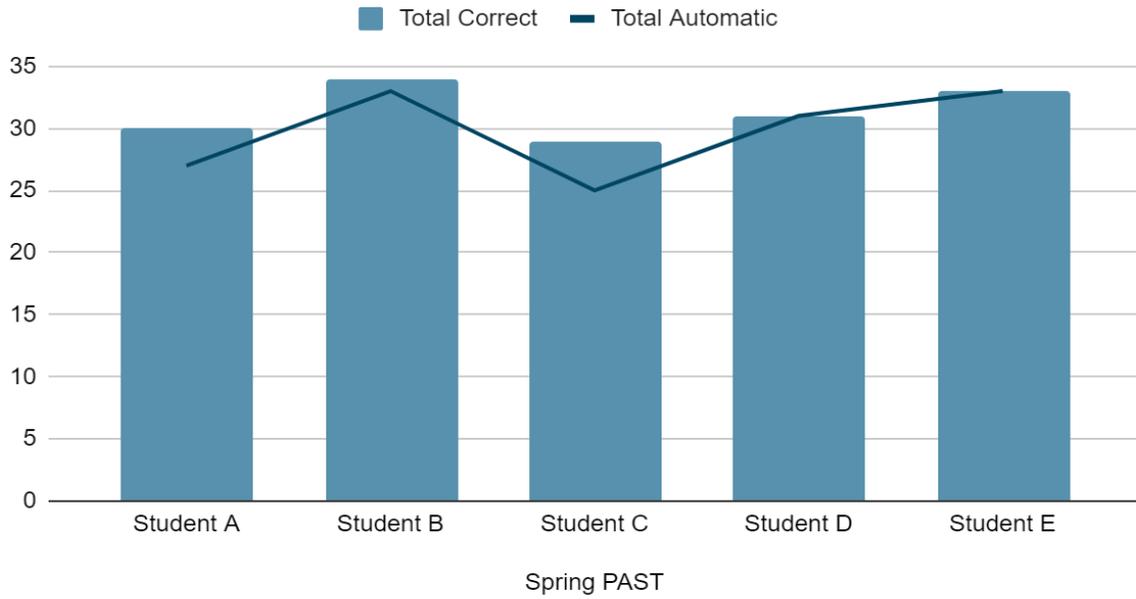
### Winter PAST Phoneme Mastery



**Table 5**

### *Spring PAST Phoneme Mastery*

### Spring PAST Phoneme Mastery



The Burke Reading Interview provided insight into student efficacy, attitude, and interest regarding each student's feelings about reading. In the winter, when students were asked about strategies or tools they already use when reading, most were brief or ambiguous. For example:

*Teacher: When you are reading and come to something you do not know, what do you do?*

*Student B: Try it*

*Teacher: Tell me more about that.*

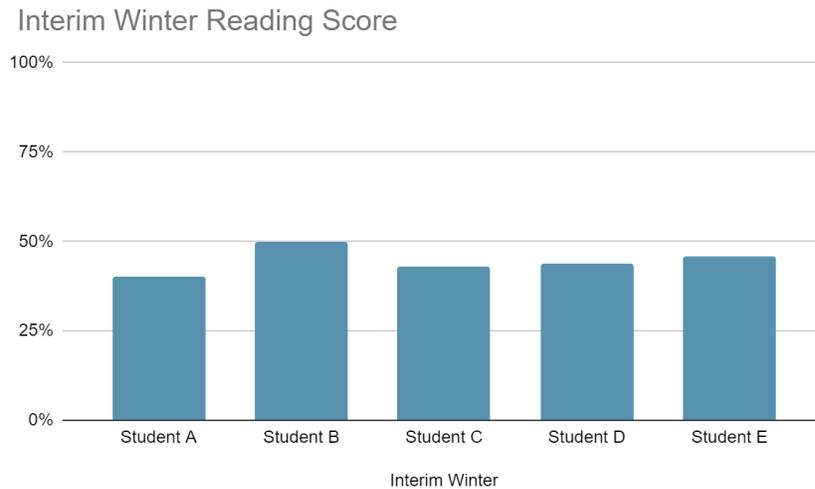
*Student: Look at the word or skip it.*

Student E was able to give specific strategies when answering the same questions. This student responded by saying, "Look at the words before or after, ask a friend or adult, Google, sound it out." Two of the five students responded yes to the question, "Do you think you are a good reader? Why or Why not?" The two students that said no explained they are unable to focus and "It is just not my thing." One student simply said, "I am working on it." The students' candidness provided insight into their efficacy and attitude. When meeting with students during one-on-one conferences, this data allowed the researcher to use language to improve this mindset. The researcher was intentional to praise goal accomplishments.

Table 6 shows an additional diagnostic tool used to identify students for the focus group. The average score for the entire class of 23 was 73%. The mean for the students identified for the focus group was 45%. This is a difference of 29% and therefore proving these students are significantly reading below their peers reading at a fourth grade level.

**Table 6**

### ***Reading Interim Test Scores***



### **Conclusion**

Intervening to support struggling readers as they enter upper elementary grades is essential to aid in the progress of their academic success (Reis, McCoach, Little, Muller, & Kaniskan, 2011). After a deep inquiry into effective reading interventions and an extensive effort to understand student motivation, attitude, and specific gaps, a plan was established and executed. When students enter fourth grade struggling to read, the sense of urgency increases while the curriculum becomes progressively less accessible making it difficult to fill gaps and grow in a natural upward trajectory. The integration of a flexible reading curriculum intended to chip away at unmastered reading skills identified through a series of diagnostic assessments, observations, and collaboration with colleagues created a more accessible and targeted experience for a group of struggling readers in one fourth grade class. Additionally, developing a strong relationship and seeking to understand each student's cognitive state of mind was a crucial component of building trust and efficacy.

Students in the focus group were more likely to participate in whole class discussions in the spring compared to the fall. Students were able to communicate and articulate their goals and progress towards their goals. Appendix A shows the conference template used as a formative assessment and planning guide for students' targeted goals. After modeling and leading the conferences in the beginning, students slowly shifted to taking ownership of their conferences by leading the conversation and communicating their own needs. This indicates increased conscientiousness and efficacy in taking ownership of their learning.

Challenges surrounding the COVID 19 pandemic protocols, attendance, continuous shifting of learning models, and a vast number of uncontrollable variables with distance learning required a deeper look at observational and formative data to get a fuller picture of growth. Holding students accountable was challenging in a distance learning setting. Therefore, fidelity of application and integration of the interventions was difficult to maintain with all students at all times throughout the 8-week period. Students did participate in distance learning through a hybrid model when COVID 19 quarantine protocols were required. Technology and internet issues were continuous and difficult to find permanent solutions. Therefore, data and findings of the pre and post assessments may be skewed as a result of non-traditional teaching methods and experiences. Additionally, the sample size was extremely limited with only five students participating in this study.

The findings from this action research found that targeted reading instruction supported growth in vocabulary development, comprehension, and phonological

awareness. Students maintained fluency skills. Through anecdotal observation, students flourished in their confidence and efficacy.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following conclusions were drawn:

- Targeted instruction paired with strong relationships supported struggling readers to cultivate reading skills and take ownership of their reading habits and skills.
- Building trust and confidence with each student establishes and maintains the integrity of each intervention.
- Empowering students to realize their capacity for learning and encouraging them to take responsibility for their own learning leads to increased success of interventions.

Though sizable growth was not found in pre and post data specifically in oral reading fluency, integrating targeted interventions for struggling readers is not only effective but arguably the responsibility of the classroom teacher. Links between academic success and reading proficiency prove the necessity to adjust general education instruction in order to support struggling readers particularly in upper elementary grades (Goddard, Goddard, & Kim, 2015).

While adjusting and remediating the reading curriculum may seem counterintuitive to supporting the group as a whole, the results for this study did not impact rigor or negatively affect readers at or above grade level. 73.4% of fourth

graders received a recommended score of 850L or higher in the spring (Eagle Ridge Academy, 2020).

As mentioned, the sample size in this study was small, and therefore it is difficult to validate statistical significance of the study. However, this does not change the impacts this study potentially had long-term on five students. Post reading data yielded positive results and upward trajectory of growth. With that said, 80% of the focus group's reading levels did not reach the recommended reading level of a fourth grader at this school in the spring. Reading gaps still exist and therefore targeted interventions should be considered in subsequent years.

Finally establishing and maintaining student efficacy creates necessary capacity for learning. The student must be motivated and believe the difficult task of reading is possible. This is particularly true when students are already struggling (Cho et al. 2015). Appendix B shows the language used in the Burke Reading Inventory used to seek an understanding of students initial capacity for growing as readers. Although the data collected did not provide data about student academic needs and gaps it did support a deeper understanding of the child's cognitive state of mind.

Students deserve to be proficient readers. General education elementary classroom teachers have the ability to support students in that journey. Helping to cultivate intrinsically motivated and efficacious readers paired with targeted instruction helps struggling readers to flourish and grow as lifelong learners.

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### Appendix A

*Teacher copy*

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Weekly Goal:

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Benchmarks:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

Observations:

Inferences & Considerations for next week...

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*Student Copy*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Weekly Goal:

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I know I will have met my goal when... \_\_\_\_\_

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## Weekly Schedule &amp; Menu

	Mon	Tue	Wed.	Thurs	Friday (DL)
Round 1	X		X		Fluency Recording & self- assessment
Round 2					
Round 3					

**Menu Options:**

- Read-to-self
- Novel Work
- Independent Practice
- Meet with teacher (pre-scheduled- X)

Home practice: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent signature \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

### Burke Reading Interview

1. When you are reading and come to something you do not know, what do you do? Do you ever do anything else?
2. Who is a good reader you know?
3. What makes \_\_\_\_\_ a good reader?
4. Do you think \_\_\_\_\_ ever comes to something she/he does not know?
5. “Yes” – When \_\_\_\_\_ comes to something he/she does not know, what do you think he/she does?  
  
“No” – Suppose \_\_\_\_\_ comes to something he/she does not know. What do you think he/she would do?
6. If you know someone is having trouble reading, how would you help that person?
7. What would your teacher do to help that person?
8. How did you learn to read?
9. What would you like to do better as a reader?
10. Do you think you are a good reader? Why or Why not?

### Appendix C

#### Self Reflection: Oral Reading Fluency

	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Pausing refers to the way your voice is guided by punctuation</b>	Almost no pausing to reflect punctuation or meaning of the text	Some pausing to reflect the punctuation and meaning of the text	Most of the reading evidences appropriate pausing to reflect the punctuation and meaning of the text	Almost all the reading is characterized by pausing to reflect punctuation and meaning of the text
<b>Phrasing refers to the way you put words together in groups to represent the meaningful units of language.</b>	No evidence of appropriate phrasing during the reading	Some evidence of appropriate phrasing during the reading	Much of the reading evidences appropriate phrasing	Almost all the reading is appropriately phrased
<b>Stress refers to the emphasis you place on particular words (louder tone) to reflect the meaning as speakers would do in oral language.</b>	Almost no stress on appropriate words to reflect the meaning of the text	Some stress on appropriate words to reflect the meaning of the text	Most of the reading evidence stresses on appropriate words to reflect the meaning of the text.	Almost all of the reading is characterized by stress on appropriate words to reflect the meaning of the text
<b>Intonation refers to the way your voice varies in tone, pitch, and volume to reflect the meaning of the text—sometimes called expression.</b>	Almost no variation in voice or tone (pitch) to reflect the meaning of the text	Some evidence of variation in voice or tone (pitch) to reflect the meaning of the text	Most of the reading evidences variation in voice or tone (pitch) to reflect the meaning of the text.	Almost all of the reading evidences variation in voice or tone (pitch) to reflect the meaning of the text
<b>Rate refers to the pace at which a reader moves through the text—not too fast and not too slow.</b>	Almost no evidence of appropriate rate during the reading	Some evidence of appropriate rate during the reading	Most of the reading evidence is at an appropriate rate.	Almost all of the reading evidences appropriate rate
<b>Integration</b>	Almost none of	Some of the	Most of the	Almost all of the

<b>involves the way you consistently and evenly orchestrates rate, phrasing, pausing, intonation, and stress</b>	the reading is fluent	reading is fluent	reading is fluent	reading is fluent
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**Final Score:**

**Today's Date:**

**Next Week's Goal:**