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The Effects of Daily Explicit Phonics Instruction on Reading Fluency in First Grade

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The Effects of Daily Explicit Phonics Instruction on Reading Fluency in First Grade

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in fulfillment of final requirements for the MAED degree

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to examine the effects of daily phonics instruction on first grade oral reading fluency scores. This 10-week intervention took place in a suburban first grade classroom through whole group and small group instruction. Data was collected using a pre and post confidence interview, weekly written formative assessments, standardized testing, and seasonal benchmark fluency testing. An increase in oral reading fluency was demonstrated following the implementation of daily phonics instruction, but not significant enough to say that the phonics instruction was the sole reasoning for the small increase in fluency scores. Research should continue to identify the effects that phonics instruction has on the fluency of first grade students, and additionally other instructional methods that have an impact as well. Furthermore, a longitudinal study involving how a phonics-based instructional strategy impacts the reading fluency of students in the primary grades. This information can be utilized to best inform reading instruction with first grade students.

Keywords: fluency, phonics, elementary students, assessments

Children have been taught to read in many ways over the course of time. They have been taught to use the whole-language approach, phonics-based approach, or maybe a combination of the two. Regardless, children have been taught spelling rules, letter sound relationships, cueing systems, and how to use context clues when decoding words.

The National Reading Panel Report (2000) decided that reading instruction needs to be woven into five critical pillars: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. These pillars each intertwine with one another - reading cannot happen without one of them. For example, when children have difficulty reading words with the proper rate, prosody, and accuracy, they can have difficulty comprehending a text because of the cognitive load it takes to recognize words (Stevens, Walker, Vaughn, 2017). There are many different approaches to teaching each of these pillars of reading.

The phonics approach to reading focuses on the relationship between letters and sounds. Before a reader can delve into the other pillars of reading, one must first learn that each letter has a specific shape and makes a sound (Dixon, 1996). The phonics approach also focuses on parts of words such as syllables, consonants, vowels, and suffixes. Once the parts of sounds are formed, then readers can begin to form and write words - and eventually sentences and paragraphs. It starts with the smallest pieces of language and continues to build until whole words and phrases are formed (Dixon, 1996).

In 2019, only 35% of fourth graders were at or above grade level in reading (NAEP, 2019). As mentioned before, reading is made up of five critical pillars. What is missing in public education reading instruction that these scores are so low? There have been significant curriculum initiatives in U.S. public schools to increase reading ability in

students. When it comes to a phonics-based approach, students are learning spelling rules and patterns at a young age in order to decode words. As they get older, they can use these known patterns and rules to comprehend more difficult texts. When students are taught to read words by guessing and using context, it becomes more difficult for them to guess correctly as the reading becomes more complex. In the primary grades, students learn to read. As they get older, they read to learn.

In this research, students have been exposed to 30 minutes of explicit phonics instruction every day with additional minutes of phonics intervention throughout the week as well. After a benchmark assessment in oral reading fluency at the beginning of the school year, students will be monitored and progressed over the next few months of getting strictly phonics instruction in reading. The effects of daily, explicit phonics instruction will be measured using oral reading fluency scores.

Theoretical Framework

There are many different theories on how children learn to read - and the ultimate goal of reading is comprehension. Fluency can be defined as reading with the proper rate, accuracy, and prosody (National Reading Panel, 2000). Specifically, LaBerge and Samuels' (1974) theory of automatic information processing says that there are two main components of fluency - accuracy (word decoding) and automaticity in word recognition. Since there is limited cognitive processing space in the brain, the quicker students are able to decode words leaves more room for comprehension of the text (1974). According to LaBerge and Samuels (1974), as students are exposed to text over time, they will increase in the ability to automatically recognize words quickly and without having to use decoding skills. Students go through three different stages - inaccuracy, accuracy, and

automatic. The inaccuracy stage is when students have a difficult time recognizing words, the accuracy stage is when students can recognize words but still need to use decoding strategies, and the automatic stage is when students can read words without using attention.

Explicit phonics instruction is one component of reading fluency. From Rudolf Flesch's (1955) book *Why Johnny Can't Read Flesch* argued that teaching phonics skills allows students to decode words by using spelling rules and mechanics instead of context clues, pictures, and other outside factors. When children are taught that reading is a systematic approach by looking at the alphabet, letter sounds, syllables, and how syllables make words (Flesch, 1955). Once students have this mastered, they are able to focus their attention on comprehending the text.

The automaticity theory suggests that the students in this study should be able to increase their rate, accuracy, and prosody throughout the school year to achieve higher oral reading fluency. One way to do this is for teachers to use explicit phonics instruction while working on increasing reading fluency. According to Flesch (1955), 30 minutes of explicit phonics instruction every day should decrease the amount of attention and cognitive processing needed for decoding words during a one-minute cold read, which will ultimately lead to higher reading fluency in first graders.

Review of Literature

Children have been taught to read in many ways. The National Reading Panel Report (2000) decided that reading instruction needs to be woven into five critical pillars: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. These pillars each intertwine with one another - reading cannot happen without one of them (National

Reading Panel Report, 2000). For example, when children have difficulty reading words with the proper rate, prosody, and accuracy, they can have difficulty comprehending a text because of the cognitive load it takes to recognize words (Stevens, Walker, Vaughn, 2017). There are many different approaches to teaching each of these pillars of reading. This literature review will focus on two: whole language and systematic phonics instruction.

Whole language does not have to be solely considered an approach, but more of a philosophy when it comes to teaching language. When letters and sounds are isolated, the reader is not able to understand the full picture. Reading should be connected to life experiences, the world around us, and meaningful activities (Dixon, 1996). The whole language approach believes that literacy is not just reading words but discussing and communicating with each other. Reading is a natural process that will come to all humans over time (Dixon, 1996).

The phonetic approach to reading focuses on the relationship between letters and sounds. Before a reader can delve into the other pillars of reading, one must first learn that each letter has a specific shape and makes a sound (Dixon, 1996). The phonics approach also focuses on parts of words such as syllables, consonants, vowels, and suffixes. Once the parts of sounds are formed, then readers can begin to form and write words - and eventually sentences and paragraphs. It starts with the smallest pieces of language and continues to build until whole words and phrases are formed (Dixon, 1996). This literature review will examine the importance of oral reading fluency, various predictors of reading fluency, and also the effects of daily phonics instruction.

Importance of Oral Reading Fluency

Thirty-four percent of children entering kindergarten lack basic language skills that promote reading acquisition, and 64% of fourth-graders read below grade level (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2019). Reading fluency has been prevalent in the reading world for quite some time. Slow and disfluent reading can lead to students reading less overall, frustrated reading, and poor comprehension (Rasinski, 2000). Reading fluency is based on the automaticity theory, something that focuses highly on word recognition and comprehending a text at the same time (Samuels, 2007). This theory also focuses on the amount of attention a reader uses to comprehend a text. If a reader is using more attention to decode and read the words, they are using less attention to comprehend the text (Samuels, 2007). There are three parts of oral reading fluency: prosody, automaticity, and accuracy.

Fluency can be considered a “bridge” between decoding and comprehension, which is emphasized by the theoretical framework of Pikulski & Chard (2005). While fluency is not the sole way to comprehend a text, it is an essential pillar of reading. Fluency has to be built on all the pillars of reading, specifically phonemic awareness, oral language, and decoding skills (Pikulski & Chard, 2005). With the percentage of students who are lacking the basic language skills for reading being so low, there are multiple interventions that have been deemed necessary for successful reading as well. While more reading ultimately leads to better reading and comprehension skills, it can be assumed that poor readers will not or cannot read as much as a skilled reader (Pikulski & Chard, 2005). Creating meaning behind a text requires attention. If a reader does not have the fluency skills necessary to commit all their attention to comprehension, reading will become seemingly more difficult (Pikulski & Chard, 2005).

Predictors of Reading Fluency

Oral reading fluency is a predictor of early literacy skills. Poor readers have a variety of struggles - including poor automatic word recognition, poor decoding skills, or struggles to read fluently (McArthur & Castles, 2017). These struggles can be seen while children are attempting to read fluently. While fluency can be misinterpreted as only reading quickly rather than at an appropriate pace with the proper prosody and expression. Fluency leads to the goal of reading - which is comprehension. (Rasinski et al. 2020).

In a longitudinal study done of students' oral reading fluency from 2nd to 6th grade, Lipka (2017) found that phonological decoding was the most predicting variable in reading fluency. Additionally, Lipka (2017) stated that Rapid Automatic Naming (RAN) is a strong predictor of reading fluency in the early elementary grades. As children grow, RAN is used less to predict literacy skills. In another study by Lee and Yoon (2017) found that not only does repeat reading increase automatic word recognition, but it also increases fluency.

Word recognition is not enough for proficient reading, and increased fluency needs to be modeled and practiced with repeated reading. Repeated reading is affirmed as an intervention tool with students who have learning disabilities as well. Stevens, Walker, and Vaughn (2017) found that teachers who modeled repeated reading improved the effectiveness of reading fluency in their students with learning disabilities. In addition to modeled repeated reading, the data also showed that audiobooks were helpful while practicing fluency as well (Stevens, Walker, and Vaughn 2017). Assessing struggling readers using standardized measurements can help determine exactly where children are

struggling to read - whether decoding, comprehension, fluency or something else (McArthur & Castles, 2017). Assessing poor readers for outside factors such as anxiety, depression, or cultural background can also give teachers insight into the support they need in other areas (McArthur & Castles, 2017).

Comprehension and fluency are two of the pillars of effective reading instruction, and they go hand-in-hand. This is emphasized by Little et. al (2017) in a study done on the interaction between reading fluency and reading comprehension. In the interaction between fluency and comprehension, it was found that reading fluency was the top indicator of comprehension. Additionally, but a smaller indicator, comprehension also indicated a change in fluency (Little, et. al 2017). Instead of looking at the two pillars of reading separately, it is important to understand that they interact with each other in meaningful ways if taught correctly.

Effects of Daily Phonics Instruction

Phonics instruction studies the relationships between letters and sounds. It is mainly taught to early readers to help them apply the rules of sounds and spelling as they read. Initially in 2000, The National Reading Panel shared the effects of daily phonics instruction on early elementary aged children. Explicit phonics instruction in kindergarten and first grade may seem too difficult for that age, but the National Reading Panel found that early elementary is the ideal time to teach phonics. The effectiveness of phonics instruction not only showed improvements in early literacy for students, but significantly in students who are English Language Learners (ELL) and students with disabilities (National Reading Panel, 2020).

However, sole, explicit phonics instruction has been challenged by various studies especially when incorporating reading fluency. Price-Mohr and Price (2017) found that while explicit phonics instruction helped reading fluency, a mixed-approach was needed to also increase reading comprehension. Children that are reception-aged have an easier time comprehending texts with relevant and contextual information for their development. A solely phonics-based approach is not sufficient enough for the classroom - but a well-balanced approach between phonics and whole-language (Price-Mohr, Price 2017).

Findings suggest that there are various ways to teach oral reading fluency to children. It has been shown that whole-language and systematic phonics instruction are two quality instructional methods, but each of them has their flaws. Additionally, the goal of reading is to comprehend – and fluency helps students get to that goal. Repeated reading and modeling are two of the interventions mentioned for increasing reading fluency, but they are not the only two measures that have been proven effective.

Methodology

This study used an experimental design. In addition, weekly progress monitoring, fluency benchmark scores, formative written assessments and NWEA test scores for quantitative data presented. Pre and post-student discussions (see Appendix A) were also used to provide insight into student attitudes before and after receiving consistent, daily phonics instruction.

The population for this action research study was first grade students enrolled at an elementary school in a small town in Minnesota. Table 1 references the sample included 16 first graders that were enrolled in school from December 2021 to June 2022.

The sample featured 10 boys and 6 girls. The curriculum involved was a required class and the sample was representative of the first-grade population. A total of 16 students were assessed for oral reading fluency at the beginning of the year and placed in three categories: low risk, medium risk, and high risk for reading difficulties.

Table 1

Sample Demographics

Risk Status	Males	Females
Low	6	3
Medium	0	2
High	4	1

Fall, winter, and spring fluency benchmarks were used for all 16 students. This quantitative data provided the fluency rate in a 60 second cold read for all students. This data provided the growth in fluency from fall to winter after 30 minutes of daily phonics instruction.

For students who were at a high risk for reading difficulties received bi-weekly progress monitoring. The quantitative data provided the Rate of Improvement (ROI) in a 60 second cold read for students below the 25th percentile. This data provided insight if the 30 minutes of phonics instruction in addition to twice weekly phonics intervention is increasing the ROI in students below grade level.

Weekly written formative assessments were used for all 16 students. The data provided clarity to the teacher if students have grasped this week's phonics lessons, which can be tied to increased fluency. This happened every five days.

A pre and post-interview (see Appendix A) were completed with all students at all risk levels. This data showed if daily explicit phonics instruction helped increase their confidence in their oral reading skills.

The seasonal fluency benchmarks were administered by the teacher in a one-on-one setting. The fluency passages were given to the student in a paper copy, and the teacher followed along marking the errors virtually. Each student completed two cold reads that were 60 seconds each. The average of the two scores were taken as their oral reading fluency score. They were then categorized as low risk, medium risk, and high risk. These seasonal benchmarks were done in Fall 2021, Winter 2022, and Spring 2022. Based on these benchmarks, the teacher provided grouping for the interventionist at school and also grouping for interventions in the classroom.

The students who qualified as at risk for reading difficulties began bi-weekly progress monitoring. In a one-on-one setting with the teacher, they did a 60 second cold read of a different fluency passage. The fluency passages correlated with the scope and sequence of the phonics curriculum provided in the classroom to all students. These students had a goal rate of improvement (ROI) of 1.2 words every two weeks. The progress monitoring measured if the students were on track for meeting that goal and if other supports were needed.

The weekly formative assessments were used as an additional data point to see correlation between phonemic awareness, phonics skills, and fluency rates. These assessments were given orally in a whole-group setting, where 80% was considered proficient. These assessments were used to see if the students who struggled to read orally also struggled with written words as well.

The pre and post-interview questions were given to students to either circle the smiley face, middle face, or frown face. This helped the teacher understand if confidence levels were altered by the ability to read fluently out loud.

These data sources were collected over the course of ten weeks in written format, oral assessments, and standardized testing. The data was collected, and the averages were taken for each student, along with the class average. Student performance was analyzed based off the phonics-based instructional strategy.

Analysis of Data

For the pre and post-survey of student feelings toward oral reading fluency, the results were collected and recorded in a table for further review on the themes. For the weekly written formative assessments, data was collected for 10 weeks. The average class score for each week was recorded and put into a table to assure triangulation. The NWEA Language Arts winter and spring scores were recorded and the class averages were taken for both seasons. Lastly, the winter and spring benchmark oral reading fluency scores were recorded. The averages of students at a low risk, medium risk, and high risk for reading difficulties were applied.

The purpose of this study was to identify the effects of daily phonics instruction on oral reading fluency. The research design included quantitative and qualitative data. The research included an open-ended survey that was used to determine the confidence level of students reading out loud to their teacher. It also included three quantitative measures, including NWEA Language Arts benchmark scores, weekly written formative assessment scores, and oral reading fluency scores to look at triangulation.

Confidence in Oral Reading

The first research question that this study addressed dealt with confidence that students had while reading out loud to their teacher. To do this, the teacher gave a written survey with three faces - a smile, a middle face, and a sad face (see Figure 1). The teacher asked these questions verbally while the students circled the corresponding smiley face with their feelings. Their responses were recorded. The results of this table showed that at the beginning of the year in October 2021, six students (36%) felt good about reading out loud, six students (36%) felt neutral about reading out loud, and four students (25%) felt bad about reading out loud. Furthermore, after receiving this survey again in March 2022, nine students (56%) felt good about reading out loud, five students (31%) felt neutral about reading out loud, and two students (13%) felt bad about reading out loud.

Table 1

Pre and Post Confidence Survey

Reaction	Pre-Response	Percentage	Post-Response	Percentage
	6	36%	9	56%
	6	36%	5	31%
	4	25%	2	13%

Assessments

The second research question this study addressed was how students' performance on weekly written phonics assessments correlated with their oral reading fluency scores. Every five days of instruction, students took a written, formative assessment. This assessment included spelling letter sounds, sight words, decodable words, and writing sentences. The raw scores (see Figure 2) were collected and used to

determine the class average each week. After the averages were calculated, 70% and below (red) determined a re-teach day was needed, 70%-80% (yellow) was a student-by-student review if needed, and above 80% (green) was considered proficient.

The students qualified for a concept re-teach on Week 20 and Week 28. They needed a student-by-student review on Week 23, Week 26, and Week 29. Lastly, they scored proficient on Week 21, Week 22, Week 24, Week 25, Week 27, and Week 30. Of the ten weeks studied, students were proficient on six (60%) of them. Of the two weeks that required a re-teach, the two following weeks were both above a 75% average.

Figure 2

Day 5 Assessment Class Average

Week	Class Percentage
20	62.66%
21	81.70%
22	89.82%
23	73.76%
24	84.32%
25	87.98%
26	78.88%
27	81.42%
28	68.24%
29	78.07%
30	83.16%

When students took their winter NWEA Language Arts standardized test (see Figure 3), 15 students tested and had a score. The missing student was due to an absence.

Of the 15 students, one was above the 80th percentile, six were between the 61st - 90th percentile, three were between the 41st - 60th percentile, five were between the 21st and 40th percentile, and none were below the 21st percentile. This data showed that most students (10) were at or above the mean. When looking at the progress during the spring testing window (see Figure 4), three students progressed to above the 80th percentile, as compared to only one student in the winter. In the spring, again six students scored in the 60th - 80th percentile. Three students scored between the 21st - 40th percentile, and two students scored below the 21st percentile. Once again, most students (11) were at or above the mean.

Figure 3

Winter NWEA Language Arts

Scores

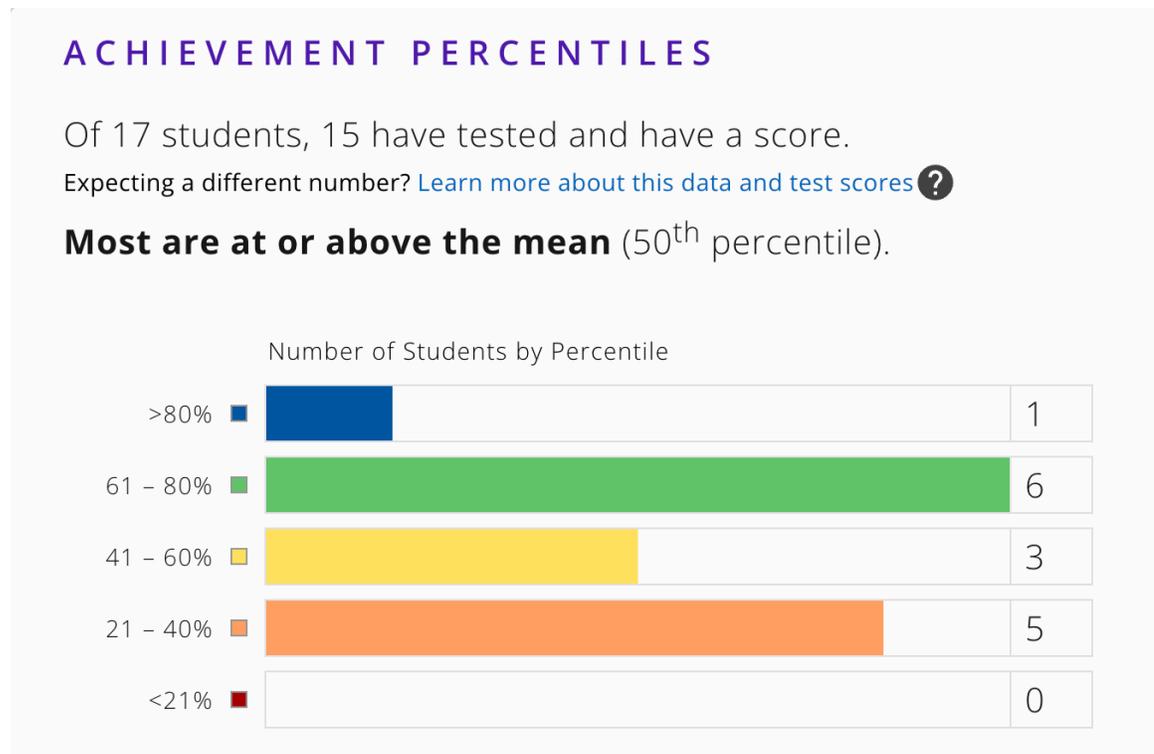
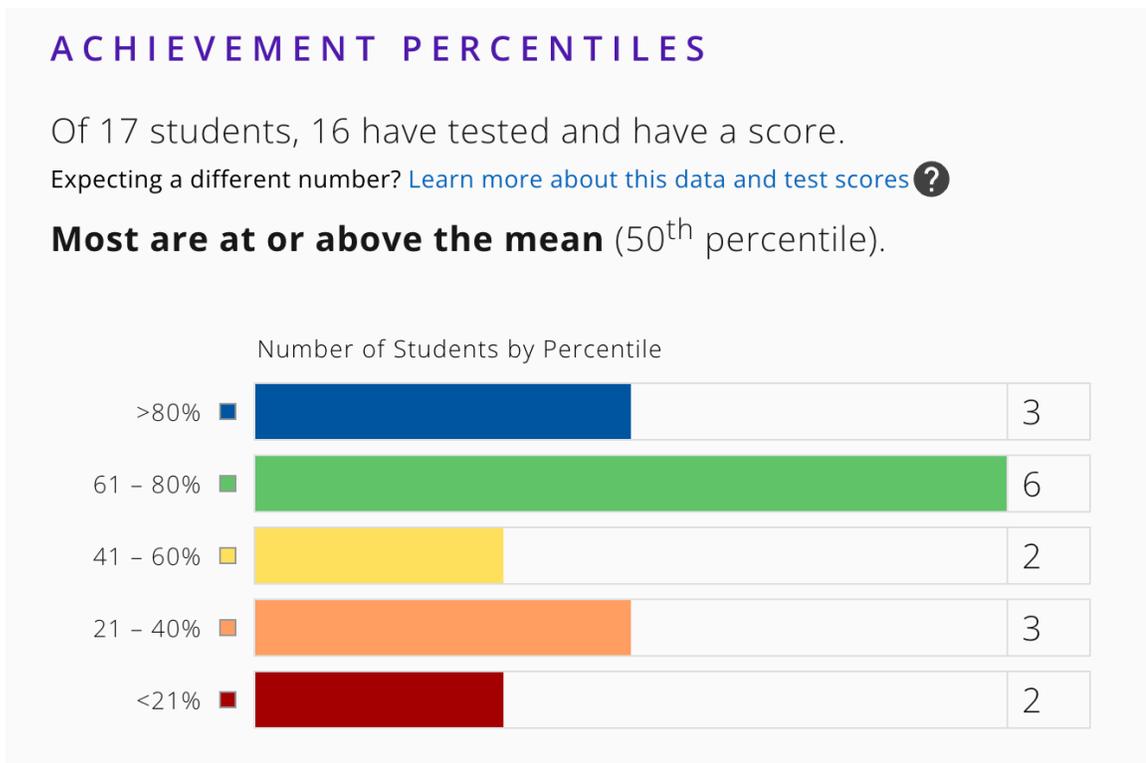


Figure 4***Spring NWEA Language Arts******Scores***

Students were tested on their oral reading fluency in the winter and in the spring (see Figures 5 and 6). This included two one-minute cold read passages that were presented by the teacher. No background or pre-reading activities were taught to the students. The teacher recorded the reading on a laptop while the students read from a piece of paper orally. The teacher marked any errors as they read.

In the winter, the students at low risk read an average score of 48.6 words per minute, putting them in the 49th percentile. In the spring, the low risk students read an

average score of 62.2 words per minute, putting them in the 40th percentile. While the students went lower in percentile, they still increased their reading speed by an average of 13.6 words per minute. In the winter, students at medium risk read an average of 23.5 words per minute and landed in the 13th percentile. In the spring, they read an average of 37.3 words per minute and increased to the 16th percentile. These students increased their words per minute at an average rate of 13.8 and also jumped three percentiles.

Furthermore, students at high risk for reading difficulties read an average of 16.6 words per minute, which put them at the 5th percentile in reading. In the spring, the students at high risk read an average of 22.3 words per minute and landed in the 5th percentile again. These students averaged an increase of 5.7 words per minute.

Figure 5

Winter Fluency Scores

Risk Status	Average Score (WPM)	Average Percentile
Low	48.6	49th
Medium	23.5	13th
High	16.6	5th

Figure 6

Spring Fluency Scores

Risk Status	Average Score (WPM)	Average Percentile
Low	62.2	40th
Medium	37.3	16th
High	22.3	5th

Overall, the students showed growth in various areas of literacy from the winter to spring. With a pre and post-survey, more students felt confident about reading out loud to their teacher than they did prior to ten weeks of explicit phonics instruction. When it came to formative assessments, student performance was sporadic, but included an increase in performance during the weeks after a qualified re-teach lesson. In NWEA standardized testing scores, more students went from at or below the 50th percentile to above the 50th percentile in Language Arts. Two students had an increase in test scores, but still dropped below the 21st national percentile. In oral reading scores, almost all students had an increase from winter benchmark testing to spring benchmark testing. The growth was not always on par with national percentile scores, but there was an increase in words read per minute.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to identify the effects that daily, explicit phonics instruction had on the oral reading fluency scores of first grade students. The data collection tools used included a pre and post interview, NWEA test scores, fluency benchmark scores, and weekly formative assessment scores over the course of ten weeks.

This interview allowed students to use pictures to describe their feelings toward reading out loud. It was hoped that the students who first felt low confidence in oral reading would have an increased confidence after receiving daily instruction in the area. From winter to spring, three more students felt very confident in reading out loud to their teacher. Additionally, only two students did not feel confident reading out loud to their teacher in the spring. While there could be other factors associated with reading

confidence, it is true that there was an increase in confidence among students from the winter to the spring.

Furthermore, another data source was a weekly written phonics assessment. This assessment was used to see if there was a correlation with written phonics skills and oral reading fluency. It was anticipated that these scores could be a telling factor of progression, but the scores were very scattered and inconsistent. There were two weeks where students scored below 70%, which warrants a re-teach lesson in that specific skill for the week. There was not a clear progression in scores from the beginning to the end of data collection, so there is no clear relationship between written phonics achievement and fluency achievement. These formative assessments were also taken by students before data collection started, as data collection began midway through the school year.

The NWEA Language Arts test is a more comprehensive reading test, not just focusing specifically on phonics skills. The goal of this assessment was to see if strictly phonics instruction was still effective when being tested on a range of reading skills, such as comprehension, parts of speech, and other literary elements. In this test, students have the ability to have the questions read to them, which could have an influence on their overall scores. Some questions require them to read the question if they are being tested on their reading abilities. This group of students performed relatively well on both the winter and spring assessments, but it is important to note that two more students scored above the 80th percentile in their spring assessment. While this does show student growth, however, two students did drop below the 21st percentile in the spring assessment as well. There are a few things this could mean - students may have performed better on the phonics part of the assessment while scoring lower on others.

The last data point was a benchmark fluency score for the winter and spring to ultimately see the growth that was made over ten weeks of phonics instruction. Students were divided into three different risk groups - low, medium, and high. The students at high risk were given 15 minutes of small group instruction three times per week, and also saw the reading intervention specialist for 15 minutes twice a week. These students were also progress monitored bi-weekly. While these students did not grow in national percentile scores, they did show growth in words per minute. Most importantly, all students did show an average growth in words per minute from winter to spring.

Furthermore, the students at low risk status had the most growth - both in words per minute and national percentile. Even if these students were already at or above grade level in reading fluency, phonics instruction was still a part of their daily routine. While daily phonics instruction may not be the sole reason for this growth, it did have a positive impact on their reading fluency scores.

Recommendations

There were a few limitations to this study, most importantly length of time. Reading fluency, especially in first grade, is something that takes a lot of time. Additionally, the effects of COVID-19 were unpredictable and made consistent rifts in the time of the study. There were weeks that multiple students would be out of school anywhere from 5-14 days at a time. There were also two breaks from school in the duration of the study - two weeks of winter break and 10 days of spring break.

Another limitation to this study was that students were all receiving the same amount of phonics instruction except for the students at a high risk level of reading difficulties. If there were varying interventions, besides strictly phonics-based, it could

have been easier to see if one strategy worked better than another. It would have been helpful to see growth norms as well as national norms when comparing the change from winter to spring fluency scores. The researcher also learned that student confidence seemed to be a larger part of fluency scores than originally anticipated, so the pre and post survey (see Appendix A) could have been administered multiple times instead of twice. The students' attitudes varied on a day-to-day basis, so there could have been other factors that created difficulties while taking the assessments.

Moving forward, the researcher suggests including explicit phonics instruction during the reading/language arts block. The addition of daily phonics instruction to the reading/language arts blocks can improve the oral reading fluency scores of first grade students. By introducing reading as the relationship between letters and sounds, they can eventually focus on parts of words like syllables, consonants, vowels, and suffixes (Dixon, 1996). After learning these stepping stones, the students can begin to form and write words, eventually leading to sentences and paragraphs.

By introducing the science of reading to students, they are able to decode words by following rules that are explicitly taught. These students were able to increase their reading fluency without the use of whole language approach, such as using the pictures, context clues, or guessing the words by using the first few letter sounds.

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Appendix A
Pre and Post Interview Questionnaire

How do you feel about reading out loud to your teacher?		
		