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# Sight Words and Phonics: The Connection that Helps Early Elementary Students Read Fluently

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Sight Words and Phonics:  
The Connection that Helps Early Elementary Students Read Fluently  
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An Action Research Project Presented  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Education  
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### Abstract

The purpose of this action research project was to determine if combining phonics and memorized vocabulary words into the reading instruction for Tier 2 students would increase fluency speed. For six weeks the researcher introduced Dolch sight words according to grade level to Tier 2 students. This was done in addition to the typical phonics instruction done in the general education classroom and Tier 2 resource room. At the beginning of each week students were given a list of 20 new vocabulary words. Throughout the week, students were asked to use these words in sentences, find them in books, and practice them using sensory activities, such as sand and shaving cream writing. Data was collected through quantitative testing done weekly to show students' increase in memorized vocabulary. It was also done through quantitative testing using the Curriculum Based Measure and STAR Reading tests.

### Sight Words and Phonics:

#### The Connection that Helps Early Elementary Students Read Fluently

The idea of teaching reading to an entire classroom of on-level readers is a wonderful dream. This idea seems farfetched and in many ways, the reality of it is exactly that, however, there are techniques and teaching styles available to help move our classrooms closer to that dream. Using these different techniques can get teachers closer to that dream of having all students be on-level readers. Phonics and memorized vocabulary words have been a part of reading curriculum across the country for many years. Many school systems choose one program or another and focus on teaching students either phonics or whole-word reading. These programs come with their own data and research proving them to be useful and important parts of your daily curriculum. In many ways these programs are pinpointing the needs of students readers. However, as we consider the research done, neither phonics based programs, nor whole-word programs are making enough of a difference in the classroom. The idea of using both phonics and memorized vocabulary words as our reading curriculum will change the way reading is taught throughout the country.

Much research has been done in the past concerning phonics and vocabulary practice in reading programs. This research has focused on one program at a time, leaving the idea of using both phonics and memorized vocabulary overlooked. Teachers across the country are continually looking for new ways to teach reading to their students, especially their struggling readers, and the idea of teaching both phonics and vocabulary has been missed repeatedly. The research that has been done, however, has shown that all students are able to better learn when the techniques are combined and taught together. By utilizing both techniques, students will have a chance to increase their memorized vocabulary and sight word lists as well as learn to break down and

sound out words. All student learners will then be included in the appropriate learning space as teacher's pinpoint their individual learning styles. Research has shown that these tools will continue to assist students as they begin reading and continue into higher grades.

The research will consider the connection between memorized sight words and phonics programs and the increase in Tier 2 students' fluency rates. Research so far has shown a varied history of fluency as it has been defined. It has also discussed appropriate assessments to use with our students. Sight words have been reviewed and considered in regards to their benefits and limitations when taught alone. These considerations and results have been used in many whole-word reading programs throughout the country. Phonics has also been researched and studied. Researchers have looked at these programs' benefits, limitations, and results. In many ways, both sight words and phonics have been shown to be helpful for both struggling and on-level readers. Researchers, however, are now wondering if a combination of both techniques will be the tools needed to push students toward their goal for fluent reading even faster and with fewer difficulties.

### **Review of the Literature**

The idea of fluency in connection to sight words and phonics is something that has been greatly discussed over the years. In the past changes in teaching have occurred. There were times when phonics was widely used and there were others when whole-word instruction was encouraged. These changes have focused on using either phonics or sight words, rather than choosing to utilize both components. Many schools are already using both phonics and sight words in kindergarten programs, however, as students' age; they are forgoing the sight words and focusing more and more on phonics. The idea of phonics and understanding how words are put together is a great technique for reading in many situations; however, not all students learn

best under those conditions. Research done by Fredrick and Resinski (2011) has also shown us that phonics and sight words used together reaches the maximum amount of students in their learning styles. Using both phonics and sight words will increase students' fluency and, in connection to that, increase their comprehension as well (Fredrick, 2013; Resinski, 2011).

### **Fluency**

Fluency is a main part of every school's reading curriculum. Fluency in itself is one part of the reading process; however, it is a part that remain important in many educational circles today. Student's reading fluency is used to predict comprehension scores in the future. It is also used to judge a student's ability to understand how words are arranged and put together. Using fluency, teachers are able to better understand how their students are reading and what they are understanding using grammar. Rasinski (2011) says reading has three main pieces. First, phonics and vocabulary are introduced. From there comprehension and fluency are encouraged. These parts are then used to bring about word knowledge, fluency, comprehension, and writing (Rasinski, 2011). By using fluency, teachers are able to see how their students are reading and work that needs to be done in regards to teaching students to read smoothly and accurately in grade level texts. According to Rasinski (2011),

fluency is the component of the reading process that allows readers to decode the words in a text with sufficient accuracy and automaticity (efficiency) to allow for understanding the text and that reflects the prosodic features imbedded in the text. (p. 3)

Connor (2014) defines fluency as "the rate, accuracy, and prosody of reading" (p. 1).

### **History**

Fluency has had a varied history as different instruction techniques were utilized. The idea of oral reading fluency was seen as unimportant up until the 1970s and 1980s. In the study

done by Rasinski (2011), the importance of oral reading went unnoticed until Richard Allington identified it as “the neglected reading goal” (p. 1). From there oral reading fluency grew in popularity. In 2000, the National Reading Panel said that any reading program without fluency teaching was missing a crucial piece of the reading puzzle. Without fluency instruction, students would be missing much of the reading process (Rasinski, 2011, p.1). This led to an increase of fluency testing in schools. From there the use of fluency has seen some rise and fall as teachers utilize different parts of the process. The main reason behind these declines has been the result of the way in which fluency is assessed in students (Rasinski, 2011, p. 1). However, “The discovery of a relatively strong association between oral reading rate, also called oral reading fluency (ORF) and measures of reading comprehension and overall reading achievement has led to the use of the ORF as the primary tool for assessing reading fluency” (Rasinski, 2011, p. 1). Following this No Child Left Behind (NCLB) became the newest law concerning reading and fluency. NCLB called for an increase in reading fluency and testing. This in turn brought about a country wide awakening of the idea of fluency, its usefulness in the classroom, and an understanding of the part it plays in the reading process (Braun-Zukowski, 2009). Today reading fluency is seen as important piece of the reading process. In 2013, Alberto did a study concerning the usefulness of fluency teaching and testing in the early years. This test showed that students increase their reading abilities by reading practicing and understanding fluency. The study also showed the students with a good understanding of the why and how behind fluency became better readers and were able to make more connections to the text (Alberto, 2013). Braun-Zukowski (2009) continues this idea by adding that there are four main components to reading. “Decoding, comprehension, metacognition (thinking about thinking of the active monitoring and regulating of one’s reading), and attention (the effort used to process information

from the text)” (Braun-Zukowski, 2009, p. 25) are the components that make up a good part of a reading curriculum. Fluency is not the only piece in reading, but without it, reading would not be complete.

### **Assessments**

The use of assessments on fluency rating has long been discussed. There are many who believe that fluency in itself is a good assessment of how a child is reading, however, Connor (2014) says, “fluency and comprehension are directly related” (p. 1). According to Rasinski (2011), “fluency involved the accurate and automatic recognition of words in written text; the expressive (oral) production of the text that reflects syntactic and semantic nature of the text (prosody); that it is an interactive process that involves the making of meaning (comprehension) and is itself influenced by the readers’ comprehension; that its properties are operative in authentic uses of silent as well as oral reading” (p. 2). “Struggling readers may be able to decode words accurately. However, if they have to invest too much of their limited cognitive resources into that task, they will have less available for comprehension” (Rasinski, 2011, p. 2). With all of this in mind, it is easy to see that the assessment of fluency in itself will not be as useful as we first thought, especially as the child ages. Rather, fluency needs to be assessed in relation to comprehension. This task can be accomplished in many ways. Alberto (2013) suggests using word and picture matches, putting words into sentences, and filling in blanks. These tasks require the child to first read each word and comprehend its meaning before accomplishing the task.

### **Expectations**

There are many expectations when it comes to fluency. In 2017 the national fluency standards were updated. These are being used country wide as teachers assess their student’s fluency.

Table 1

*Fluency Norms Chart 2017*

Grade	Percentile	Fall WCPM	Winter WCPM	Spring WCPM
1 <sup>st</sup>	90	--	97	116
1 <sup>st</sup>	75	--	59	91
1 <sup>st</sup>	50	--	29	60
1 <sup>st</sup>	25	--	16	34
1 <sup>st</sup>	10	--	9	18
2 <sup>nd</sup>	90	111	131	148
2 <sup>nd</sup>	75	84	109	124
2 <sup>nd</sup>	50	50	84	100
2 <sup>nd</sup>	25	36	59	72
2 <sup>nd</sup>	10	23	35	43

Note. WCPM means words correct per minute

Note. From “Fluency Norms Chart (2017 Update)” by Reading Rockets, 2018, p. 1

With these goals in mind, teachers are able to assess their student’s fluency rates in connection to their comprehension scores.

### **Best Practices**

When it comes to fluency, there are many different ways to go about teaching student to read smoothly and with expression. In his research, Rasinski (2011) found that there were a few methods that proved to have the best results when used. First, the idea of phrasing played in important role in students reading. When students know and understand pauses and breaks in reading they will be able to better comprehend the text. To begin this process, Rasinski (2011)

says to encourage stopping at periods and pausing at commas. Once students have mastered these ideas, you can move on to understanding how texts flow and where pauses for breaths could naturally occur. When working on phrasing, Rasinski (2011) suggests using plays, songs, and poems to encourage pausing at appropriate places and practicing the flow of normal speaking. Next, Rasinski (2011) suggested the idea of guided repeated reading. This requires teachers to prepare texts at the student's level. These texts are first read with the teacher. From there the student reads the story over again until the words become fluid as they read. Another suggestion from Rasinski (2011) is the use of oral assisted reading. Some ideas for this include choral reading with the entire group of students or paired reading where one student is a higher reader and assists the lower reader.

### **Sight Words**

Sight words are a list of the most common words used in the English language. These lists are created to be memorized by students in the early grades as they are beginning their reading journey. There are two main sight word lists currently in use in American schools. The Fry list and the Dolch list are used most often. These lists are comprised of the most common words found in the English language and are sorted according to reading difficulty. Each grade level has their own list of 100 words, which the students are to memorize and learn. This in turn makes reading easier. For the purposes of my research, the Dolch sight word list will be used.

### **Best Practices**

There are many ideas about best practices when it comes to sight words. Alberto (2013) says, "some students learn best through phonics, but some learn best through sight word memorization" (p. 2). Sight word memorization can be useful for all students as they learn to read. However, as students are asked to memorize their words, it is important to remember to put

the words into contexts that make sense for the students. “Demonstrations of reading lists of single words are not sufficient because they lack a logical sequence leading to the reading of connected narrative or connected environmental text which make use of various grammatical structures” (Alberto, 2013, p. 2). By putting sight words into context, students will have a better understanding of their meaning and how to use them in sentences. They will also be more likely to remember the word as they see it used in different places.

When preparing a student’s list of words Alberto (2013) suggests using words around them and those in which their setting requires. Having students learn each other’s names and locations throughout the room is a good place to start. By making the words relevant to the students’ daily lives, they will be able to use the words and place them in memory faster. January (2017) suggested the use of flashcards with pictures and sentences as a beneficial way to memorize sight words. There are many ways to work on memorizing sight words. As long as the words are presented in multiple formats, are seen in sentences, and are applicable to the child’s life, the students will be able to make connections and will place the words into their long-term memory banks easier.

### **Benefits**

As Rasinski (2011) says, “reading is a multi-task operation” (p. 2). This means that as a child is reading and sounding out words, they are simultaneously comprehending the story. Rasinski (2011) argues that by memorizing the majority of the words children will encounter while reading, they will use less brain power to decode and will be able to put forth more effort as they comprehend.

In her work with autistic children, Spector (2011) adds four more benefits to memorizing sight words. Spector (2011) says,

first, as an introduction to reading, sight word instruction may be useful in teaching the communicative intent of print and providing a sense of accomplishment and motivation around learning to read. Second, a sight word approach may be a more accessible instructional starting point than a phonics-based approach for student with autism who have difficulty with abstract, auditory-based concepts. Third, once mastered, a corpus of known sight words may be used as a foundation on which to build understanding of more abstract alphabetic concepts and methods. Fourth, sight words instruction may be embedded as a strand within a comprehensive literacy program that includes instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and comprehension. (p. 4)

The idea of memorizing sight words is easily mistaken as a teaching technique from the past, however, for many of the students seen in the classroom, simply memorizing and being able to identify commonly used words in their text will increase fluency, comprehension, and confidence while reading.

### **Limitations**

As we consider the use of sight words while teaching children to read, it is easy to focus on the benefits. However, we must also consider the limitations of only using memorization. As students memorize more words, they will become confident readers with those words. However, they will struggle to decode new and bigger words as they appear. In her work with analytic and synthetic phonics, Johnston (2012) found that students who only were exposed to sight words as they learned to read were unable to successfully accomplish reading tasks in the upper grades. As the texts got more difficult, the students were unable to put to use any phonics skills because their reading up to that point had focused on reading words they already knew. This limitation caused students' reading scores to level off in the upper grades.

## **Phonics**

### **Best Practices**

Phonics is a tool used throughout schools as a way to teach students how to sound out words. Phonics introduces letter rules to students as they come across bigger, unknown words. This idea allows students to break words into smaller portions and combine letters to make new sounds. Rhona Johnston (2012) worked with a group of ten-year-old boys and girls as she researched the use of analytic phonics and synthetic phonics. “Analytic phonics is the use of phonics with a whole-word approach. This means that students are taught to memorize new words as they are introduced. Synthetic phonics, on the other hand is a grapheme-phoneme based phonics program” (Johnston, 2012, p. 3). This means that students are taught how words are put together. Synthetic phonics teaches students the rules to forming words in connection to their reading and writing. In her research, Johnston (2012) found that those students who were taught using synthetic phonics were better able to tackle new words as they were introduced. This group of students knew how to decode and sound out new words, which meant that as they grew and were exposed to harder and bigger words, they were able to decipher what each word said. Johnston also discovered that those students who were taught with analytic phonics appeared to be more advanced in the lower grades where reading is easier and words are smaller. However, as they moved through the grades, their reading scores plateaued because they were unable to decode new words in their texts.

### **Benefits**

One of the biggest benefits of a phonics program is the ability to know and understand how words are put together. As students are taught more rules, their understanding of why certain letters make certain sounds grows. From there they are able to tackle bigger words by

splitting them apart and looking for letter patterns. In her research with students with moderate intellectual disabilities, Fredrick (2013) says,

those who receive phonics instruction are provided with opportunity to learn generalizable word-analysis skills that increase the probability of decoding a novel, untaught word encountered in their environment. Word analysis skills are considered an academic form of literacy and include phonological awareness, letter-sound correspondences, blending-saying each sound in a word slowly without stopping between sounds, and telescoping-saying the sounds quickly to read the word. (p. 2)

### **Limitations**

The use of phonics on its own is the main limitation. For many children with intellectual disabilities, the idea of taking a language rule and applying it to the sentences they are tasked with reading is daunting. Phonics is a great program for all students to learn and understand, but for many it requires hours of practice and reminders to recall the facts they have learned. By combining the use of phonics and sight words, teachers will eliminate some of the frustration that comes with having to decode and sound out every word on the page. The use of both phonics and sight words also limits the amount of multi-tasking the brain is required to do as the child is reading, as Rasinski (2011) says. By taking away some of the required sounding out and memorizing common sight words, the students will be able to focus more on comprehending the story in front of them.

### **Comprehension**

#### **Definition**

Comprehension and the ability to comprehend what is read can be a difficult challenge. Elleman (2017) defines comprehension as, “extracting meaning from text and forming a coherent

mental model” (p. 2). She says this ability is a “multidimensional, complex skill” (Elleman, 2017, p. 1) which requires many levels of teaching. The idea of comprehension can seem so simple and clear-cut to those who easily understand what is being read, however, for those students who struggle with envisioning the story, comprehension can become a task that seems impossible. Elleman (2017) says researchers have “found multiple sources that contribute to such difficulties, including weaknesses in decoding, working memory, linguistic reasoning, executive functioning, vocabulary, and prior knowledge” (p. 2). Elleman (2017) suggests two ways to increase student’s comprehension abilities. First, she discusses the use of background information. Elleman (2017) says when students understand the vocabulary and background connected with the story they will have a better chance of understanding the main ideas in the story as well. Without the background knowledge, students will be left to decode the story as well as the words and vocabulary within it. Secondly, Elleman (2017) suggests the use of comprehension strategies when teaching students to comprehend. The traditional strategies used when teaching students the art of comprehension range from teaching them to stop and think about what they are reading to looking back for answers to the questions asked. These strategies are helpful for many students, however, they can also pose issues when texts become too lengthy for students to check through for every question. According to Elleman (2017) researchers have not yet found the best way for educators to teach comprehension. She suggests continuing what is already in place in the educational system and rely on researchers to find a better way in the future.

### **Fluency and Comprehension Connected**

There are many ways in which fluency and comprehension are a connected unit. In his paper on reading comprehension for those with Autism, Ricketts (2013) says, “In the early stages

of learning to read, children must develop the word recognition skills that will enable them to read words and connected texts accurately and fluently. However, skilled reading also involves understanding the meaning conveyed in texts and it is well accepted that oral language skills underpin reading comprehension” (p. 1). Kim (2014) says, “Accurate and fast reading of connected text, widely known as oral/text reading fluency, has been shown to have a strong concurrent and predictive relation to reading comprehension” (p. 2). When children are able to recognize words and read assigned texts without stopping to decode, their comprehension and understanding of the story will improve. By working to improve student’s fluency using phonics and memorized vocabulary words, improvements in comprehension will also be achieved.

### **Best Practices**

In her research on teaching comprehension, Holly Diehl (2011) found a strategy that not only helps students make connections, as they comprehend texts, but also builds student’s confidence as they learn they are able to comprehend as they read. Diehl (2011) says,

first, the cycle begins with the teacher's explicit strategy instruction, in which he or she models and explains to students how to use essential comprehension strategies. During the second phase, called scaffolded support, the teacher offers varying degrees of support as students practice the strategy. The gradual fading of this support leads to the final phase, called independent application, which is when students are able to use comprehension strategies while reading on their own. (p. 2)

Using this model, teachers will be able to model and explain comprehension strategies already in place. As students learn these strategies, they will be able to use them in their individual reading. Students needing more assistance will receive explanations and modeling from their teacher.

Finally, as students are confident in their abilities and have demonstrated their knowledge of comprehension skills, they will be allowed to make use of the learned strategies on their own.

### **Response to Intervention Framework**

Response to Intervention is a framework created for those students requiring additional assistance in their learning. It is a “Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) used to facilitate the academic success of all students” (Handbook, 2016, p. 1). This framework allows teachers to use data and classroom observations to place students in tiers. Each tier in the system provides the students with more assistance based on what is already being taught in the classroom. As student needs become apparent, they travel up the tiers until they receive the amount of assistance required. Within the Response to Intervention framework, there are three tiers. Each tier builds upon the ones below it. Students are able to travel between the tiers easily as they learn and develop new skills. Using the Response to Intervention framework, teachers and students benefit from the resources and personal put into place to help those requiring more assistance.

#### **Tier 1**

Tier 1 is the largest tier. It is where all students within the classroom fall. This tier is run by the classroom teacher and all students receive the help they need within the classroom walls. In tier 1, all students are able to perform the required assignments with little to no help. Tier 1 requires no additional time or assistance from outside staff members. Data and observations from this tier show students on or above grade level. Students in this tier will continue with their learning with no additional help.

#### **Tier 2**

Tier 2 is a level in which all students require additional assistance outside of the general classroom atmosphere. These students may or may not have a diagnosis of a learning disability. All students in the Tier 2 category require reinforcement of the basic reading content, including fluency, decoding, word knowledge, comprehension, and phonics knowledge and understanding. Much of Tier 2 instruction is reinforcement of what is taught in the classroom. It may also include some additional training in strategies for comprehension, fluency, and word knowledge.

### **Tier 3**

Tier 3 is the level with the most intervention. Most students in Tier 3 require assistance in multiple subjects. They may also require alternative curriculum for that which is used in the general education classroom. Students in tier 3 may be pulled from the general education classroom for instruction using the alternative curriculum. When this happens, however, the student is taught similar content, just at their instructional level. This tier may adjust the way the student learns in comparison to their peers, but in the end, the overall content remains the same.

This research will be exploring the connection between using memorized sight words and phonics instruction and the increase of Tier 2 students' fluency speed in the early elementary grades. The research will address the needs of Tier 2 students by providing phonics and sight word instruction before testing their fluency speed. By combining these pieces of reading instruction, the Tier 2 students will increase their fluency speed, and in connection to that, increase their comprehension as well.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

The participants in the study include seven first grade students and seven-second grade students from the 2017-2018 school year. The growth of these students will be compared to

seven first grade students and seven-second grade students from the 2018-2019 school year. The participants are students in the Tier 2 level of intervention. This means that all of the students involved are significantly lower in reading fluency and comprehension than their peers. The students involved include five girls and two boys in first grade and five second grade girls and two boys in second grade.

### **Preparation of students**

Students were prepared for the study through explanations and examples. As students were introduced to new vocabulary words, the researcher showed students how to draw pictures, underline parts of the word, or chunk pieces of the word together to make recognizing it and remembering it easier. The researcher also took time to review key phonics topics taught in the classroom to reinforce these ideas. Finally, students were reminded of phonics rules and vocabulary words as they were found in their everyday reading assignments.

### **Data Collection**

Vocabulary and phonics instruction were introduced and reinforced in the Tier 2 resource room for the first six weeks of school. During that time the researcher used a variety of ways to introduce and instruct students in memorizing their new vocabulary words. This was done through rote memorization, games, puzzles, sentence writing, book searches, and sensory spelling, including sand and shaving cream. At the beginning of the testing period the researcher performed the Curriculum Based Measure (CBM) test. This test requires students to read three grade appropriate passages for one minute each. From there the tester can determine fluency rate and word recognition. The researcher also gave the students involved the STAR reading test. This is a national, standards-based test student's take on i-pads in their classrooms. Students are

asked a variety of questions at grade level and are timed on each question. As they get questions correct the test asks more difficult questions. If questions are answered incorrectly, the test asks easier questions. The results show teachers a student's fluency and comprehension levels.

Following this tests, the researcher introduced students to lists of Dolch sight words at their grade level. These lists contained 20 words. To begin, each student was asked to read the list. As they read, the researcher corrected the student as needed. Any missed words were then marked or a picture was drawn to help the student visualize what the word said. Reminders and markings were put on the letters of each word to help the student remember vowel teams, etc. In the following weeks, students were asked to review and reread the sight word lists. The researcher marked any word said within three seconds as mastered. During this time, students were also encouraged to read and find their vocabulary words in different locations. Students performed word hunts in books, wrote their words in sentences to ensure understanding, and played games to reinforce their automatic recognition. Throughout these six weeks the researcher also introduced and reinforced the phonics curriculum being taught within the general education classrooms. This was done through games, spelling words, and rule hunts within books. Finally, at the end of the six weeks, the researcher performed another Curriculum Based Measure (CBM) test to look for increases in fluency and word recognition. Students were also given the STAR reading test again to look for increases in fluency and comprehension levels. These increases will then be compared to increases students made in previous years where phonics and vocabulary were not taught together.

### **Ethics**

This research project does not require IRB approval because it is research on the effectiveness of special education instructional strategies. This project includes research on

instructional strategies in special education using common curriculum. The project also follows the three criteria laid out. It will result in minimal risk to the students, the research will be performed in the resource classroom at school, and the project will use commonly accepted educational tools and assessments already established and used by the school.

### **Variables**

When collecting data the researcher used three tools. The first is the CBM. The curriculum based measurement is a quantitative measure that is used to measure student reading speed and accuracy. The reliability of this measure is .90 (Daniel, p. 3). There is no validity listed for the CBM. The researcher also used the STAR reading test. This test is quantitative and is used to measure student reading speed and accuracy. The validity of this test ranges from 0.60 to 0.87 (STAR, p. 23). The reliability of this test is 0.97 (STAR, p. 22). Finally, the researcher used weekly check-ins to ensure students understanding and memorization. The check-ins happened on Thursday of each week. If the student was able to correctly read the vocabulary word within three seconds the researcher considered the word memorized. This tool is qualitative and does not have a reliability or validity ranking.

### **Results**

#### **Data Analysis**

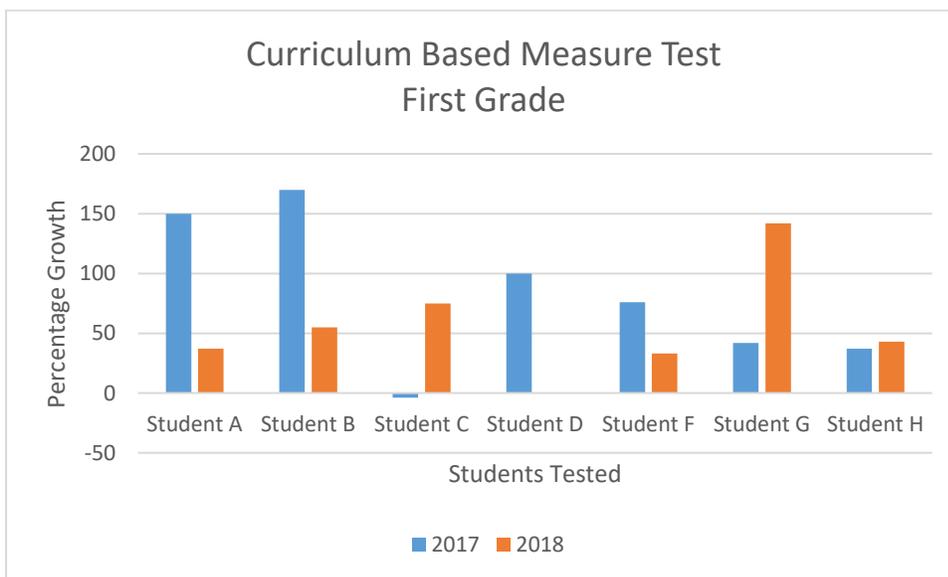
To begin, the researcher considered the data taken from the Curriculum Based Measure (CBM), which tests the students' fluency speed and abilities. The researcher viewed the test results of seven first grade students in the 2017-2018 school year and seven students in the 2018-2019 school year. The researcher then computed the growth percentage of each student and compared the growth between the years.

Table 2

*First Grade Percentage Fluency Growth*

Student	2017	2018
A	150	37
B	170	55
C	-4	75
D	100	0
E	76	33
F	42	142
G	37	43

Table 2 and figure 1 show the results of these comparisons. The seven first grade students in the 2017-2018 school year had phonics instruction during their six weeks in the Tier 2 classroom. In the 2018-2019 school year, the seven students had phonics instruction as well as intentional vocabulary instruction during their six weeks between August and October.



*Figure 1* First Grade Percentage Growth Comparison

After considering the growth percentages made by the first grade students, the researcher also considered the students in the second grade groups. The researcher took the results of seven

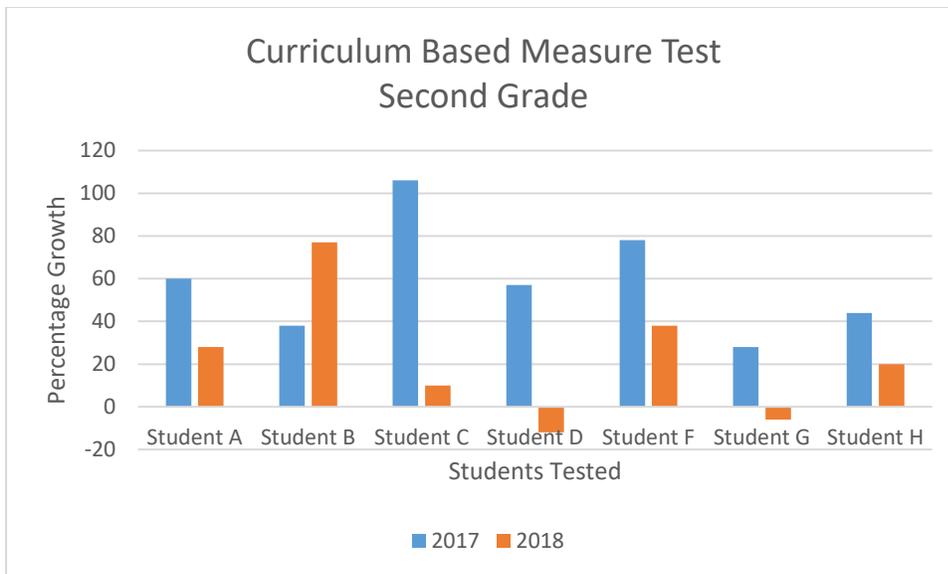
second grade students in the 2017-2018 school year and seven second grade students in the 2018-2019 school year. After computing the percentage growth the research compared the results between the two school years.

Table 3

*Second Grade Percentage Fluency Growth*

Student	2017	2018
A	60	28
B	38	77
C	106	10
D	57	-12
E	78	38
F	28	-6
G	44	20

Table 3 and figure 2 show the growth percentage made by the seven second graders tested in the 2017-2018 school year and 2018-2019 school year. During the 2017-2018 school year the second grade students were taught reading skills through phonics instruction. During the 2018-2019 school year the students were taught reading skill through phonics instruction and intentional vocabulary instruction. The results shown are the growth percentages compared between the two years.



*Figure 2* Second Grade Percentage Growth Comparison

With the Curriculum Based Measure results in mind, the researcher also considered the results of the STAR reading test. This test shows students' abilities to comprehend, decode, and understand meanings of words. The researcher considered the percentage growth made by seven first grade students in the 2017-2018 school year and seven first grade students in the 2018-2019 school year. The researcher then compared the growth made by each student with that of the students in the corresponding year.

Table 4

*First Grade Comprehension Percentage Growth Comparison*

Student	2017	2018
A	280	5
B	65	-5
C	60	39
D	362	96
E	65	53
F	105	31
G	40	-23

Table 4 and figure 3 show the comparisons of growth made by the seven first grade students during the six weeks in the 2017-2018 school year and the 2018-2019 school year. Throughout the six weeks in the 2017-2018 school year reading instruction in the Tier 2 classroom was done through phonics programs. The six weeks of reading instruction done in the 2018-2019 school year include phonics instruction as well as intentional vocabulary instruction.

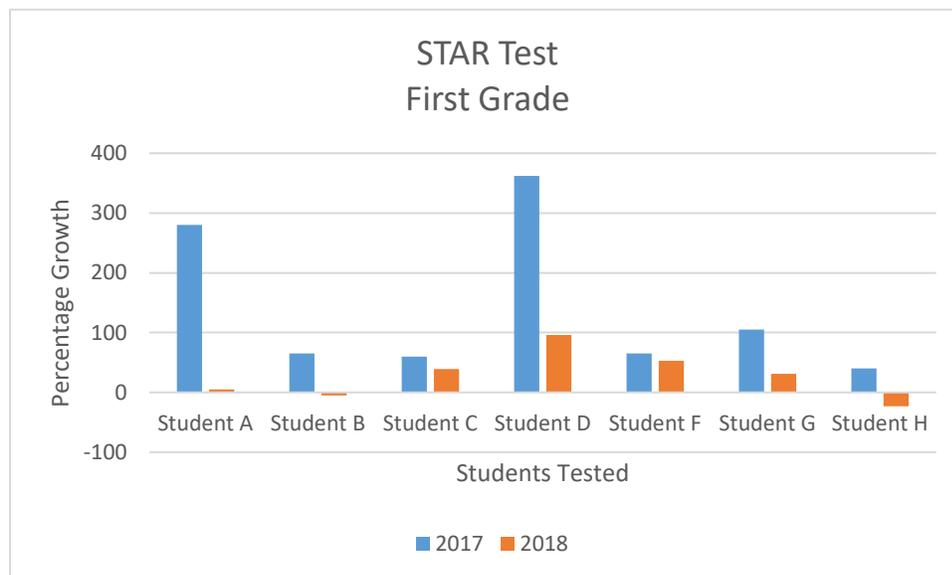


Figure 3 First Grade Percentage Growth in Comprehension

The researcher also considered seven students in second grade. The researcher compared the percentage growth made by seven second grade students in the 2017-2018 school year and seven second grade students in the 2018-2019 school year. They then considered the data and compared the growth made by each of the students in the corresponding years.

Table 5

*Second Grade Comprehension Percentage Growth Comparison*

Student	2017	2018
A	44	308
B	-26	74
C	-23	-1
D	-3	8
E	-10	181
F	-6	53
G	-1	112

Table 5 and figure 4 show the percentage growth made by each of the students during the six week testing period. During the 2017-2018 school year, students were taught reading using phonics instruction. During the 2018-2019 school year, students were taught reading using phonics and intentional vocabulary instruction.

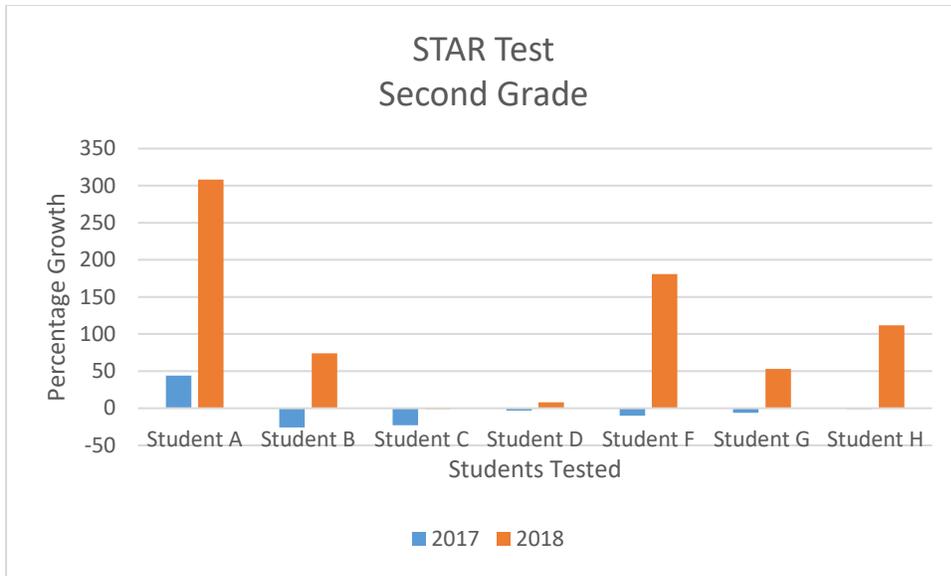


Figure 4 Second Grade Percentage Growth in Comprehension

## Discussion

### Summary of Major Findings

Previous research has shown that the use of sight words and phonics has been tested and considered for years. Some teachers find the use of phonics to be sufficient and other use only sight words when teaching. The research shared in the literature review focuses on the use of phonics and vocabulary instruction as a team. Research previously done has shown that these two parts of reading instruction are crucial to the success of new readers. By using both of these tools, students have a well-rounded perspective of reading. Every classroom has a variety of learner needs and using both tools in reading instruction helps teachers reach all of those needs. Previous research has also shown that using phonics and vocabulary instruction as helpful tools as students get older. Vocabulary instruction assists students as they are beginning the reading journey. These words are the most commonly used in the English language and quickly come to mind as students are reading. Phonics, on the other hand, assist children as they begin to sound out words, but also assist, as students get older. Even into adulthood, people sound out new and unfamiliar words as they read. Teaching these basic phonics rules helps in this decoding process. Previous research has also shown that non-traditional learners typically have success in learning through different means. This means that the use of memorized vocabulary and phonics instruction will increase students' learning and help them grow in their abilities to read. Without instruction in both areas, teachers will miss the learning needs of all students in their classrooms. Earlier research shares that neither tool is bad on its own, but using both as a team will increase student understanding and reading abilities.

The research done in this action research project looked at the use of phonics and memorized vocabulary. This data was then compared to data from previous years where

memorized vocabulary was not a key part of reading instruction. The research considered seven children in first grade and seven children in second grade who attend the Tier 2 resource room for reading assistance. These students range from basic reading needs to those diagnosed with learning disabilities and autism. These students were given phonics instruction in connection to that which was being taught in the general education classroom. They also were given lists of common sight words from their grade level to be memorized. These words were learned through games, writing, and book searches. Through all of this, students were able to show the researcher that they had mastered these words and were ready for more.

As the researcher considered the data, it was clear that for some students a combination of memorized vocabulary and phonics instruction at the beginning of the school year was useful, but for the majority of children it made little to no difference. The research results show that students from the 2017-2018 school year generally grew more between the months of August and October than those in the 2018-2019 school year. This is true for both the fluency test and the comprehension test. With this in mind, the researcher can see that the use of more phonics instruction is better for the majority of students in the Tier 2 resource classroom. In the past, phonics and reading strategies has been the main tools taught in the Tier 2 resource classroom. These tools are reinforced throughout the grade level, but are specifically taught and encouraged in the resource room. The children in attendance are given a number of reading strategies throughout the school year and are asked to use them whenever they come to an unknown and unfamiliar word. These strategies have been in place for a number of years. With the research project this year, the use of memorized vocabulary has taken the place of some of this strategy instruction.

After the researcher considered the results of the test, they were able to better understand the tools available when teaching reading. Both phonics and sight word instruction are important, but from the research, the researcher can see that the use of more phonics will be beneficial for more students in attendance in the Tier 2 resource room. The researcher can see that the use of both phonics and sight word instruction is important and beneficial, but can see that phonics is more useful, especially as students age and grow in their reading abilities.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There are a number of limitations that come to mind when considering a comparison of fluency results in Tier 2 students. First, the groupings of students only contained seven from each grade level. This means that the results are limited to a small number of students and could be easily swayed by student effort and participation. A small grouping of students makes it hard to generalize the results for all Tier 2 students in America. Another limitation is the background variety of students. All students, except one included in this study was Caucasian and came from a middle class family. The researcher recognizes that changes in these areas could sway the data results. Again, these items make it hard to generalize the results for all Tier 2 students in the United States. Another limitation in the study could be the teacher acting as the researcher. As a Tier 2 educator, the researcher has been trained to help students based on their current needs. This may create bias and change the results. As Mills (2014) states, “Teacher researchers studying their own practices also differ from traditional researchers because they are committed to taking action and effecting positive educational change on their own classrooms” (p. 5). A third limitation to this research was the time frame used. The beginning of the school year is difficult as children are remembering how to “do” school and are learning new routines. The time frame could also be a limitation because students were just beginning to get into a routine of

their own when learning vocabulary words. Six weeks is a very short amount of time when considering students' reading abilities. Lessons in phonics in the classroom are still very easy at the beginning of the year, and student's understanding of how sight words and phonics works is still in its infancy. Finally, a limitation in this study is the use of Tier 2 students. Many of the students involved have pre-existing focus issues and learning disabilities. These may have affected the results of the study as these students may have lost focus during the testing times or during their vocabulary and phonics instruction. It is also possible that the students involved missed key phonics or vocabulary instruction during times when they were not focused and ready to learn.

### **Further Study**

The research completed in this action research plan brought forward many new questions. First, the researcher will want to look into the results of teaching phonics and vocabulary for an entire school year, rather than six weeks. The first grade students were just beginning to read and were overwhelmed by the amount of new words and reading strategies being introduced. It is possible that as students gained comfort levels in reading and learning vocabulary they would increase their reading abilities more than in previous years. The researcher will also want to explore different ways to teach vocabulary words. In this study there were a number of ways put into practice, but the researcher may want to see which way is most effective. In addition, the researcher will want to try this study with general education students. This additional research will open the doors to more students and remove the limitation of testing students with pre-existing focus issues and learning disabilities.

### **Conclusion**

This research explored the connection between using memorized sight words and phonics instruction and the increase of Tier 2 students' fluency speed in the early elementary grades. The research considered the idea of using sight words and phonics as a team when teaching first and second grade students who struggle with reading fluency and comprehension. The findings of this research has shown differences to that of the previous research done in this area. Previous researchers have found that the majority of students are able to increase their abilities to read and understand words when they were taught using a combination of phonics and sight word instruction. Previous research has also shown that students struggling with reading or who have been diagnosed with learning disabilities are better able to understand words and vocabulary when they are explicitly taught sight words. By memorizing the words commonly used in books and reading passages, students have shown an increase in fluency and comprehension abilities. The research done in this action research plan has shown that some students were positively affected by the use of both tools, but the majority of students showed little to no additional growth than that which was expected in the first three months of school. This research is important to consider when looking into reading instruction. The use of both sight words and phonics as a team is important in reading instruction, but at the beginning of the year, it is difficult to see its true affects in early elementary reading abilities. By keeping this research and previous researcher's results in mind, it can be a relief to some educators to know that the beginning of the year will look very similar, but as students grown and develop their reading abilities will continue to increase.

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