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## **The Impact of Making Reading Heavenly Instruction on Fluency and Accuracy**

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The Impact of Making Reading Heavenly Instruction on Fluency and Accuracy

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Northwestern College

An Action Research Project Presented  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Education

Dr. Daniela Syed

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### Abstract

The purpose of this action research project was to determine if using the systematic phonics program Making Reading Heavenly would have an impact on student fluency and accuracy in reading. For five weeks, the researcher introduced a new phonics lesson each day, where students learn and practice a new skill. With each new lesson, students continued to practice skills learned in previous lessons. Each Monday, the teacher-researcher assessed student fluency and accuracy using reading passages from a benchmark leveling kit. Analysis of the data shows that overall, the majority of students made progress between the pre-test and post-test assessments, increasing their fluency and accuracy.

*Keywords:* fluency, accuracy, multisensory, phonics

### The Impact of Making Reading Heavenly Instruction on Fluency and Accuracy

Student reading success relies on the teaching of multiple skills, strategies, and concepts, as well as factors outside of the school building. Teachers use a variety of reading strategies to increase student fluency, accuracy, and comprehension each year. Teachers are free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as most helpful for meeting the goals set out in the standards (Iowa Core, 2016). By the end of the school year, students will be able to read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension (Iowa Core, 2016). These strategies are often taught through reading curriculum programs and standards that build as students reach each grade level.

At the beginning of each school year, one common goal of educators is to determine each students' reading level. Children at the kindergarten and grade one levels should be expected to read texts independently that have been written specifically to correlate their reading level and their word knowledge (Iowa Core, 2016). Teachers assess student reading levels to determine which students are below grade level, which students are advanced or above grade level, and which students may need additional support beyond the classroom walls. Students come into the first grade classroom at various levels of reading, with various needs. No set of grade-specific standards can fully reflect the great variety in abilities, needs, learning rates, and achievement levels of students in any given classroom (Iowa Core, 2016). These first few years of reading instruction are very important to student reading success in the future, setting the foundation and building on those foundational skills and concepts (Iowa Core, 2016). Especially during these foundational years, it is necessary to provide quality reading instruction and strategies to help teachers meet the needs of all students.

Not only are students coming into the first grade classroom at different levels of reading, but they all have different learning styles as well. Being able to meet the needs of each student in the classroom is the goal, and differentiation is a key component in that goal. Some students learn more effectively through using music, while others learn more effectively through movement activities (Sreenidhi & Chinyi, 2017). Other students yet prefer to learn through pictures or videos, while other students learn best through a combination of the styles (Sreenidhi & Chinyi, 2017).

Through reading curriculum, students learn many aspects of reading and language. One area that often is a little gray is sounding out words with different spellings, such as when to say /s/ for the sound of the letter 'c'. There is a need for better explanation of the language than simply memorizing words. Over the years, it is very noticeable when students have to spend a large amount of time decoding many words in a text, losing sight of what the text is about and they begin reading words individually.

There is limited information and research currently about the Orton-Gillingham reading instructional strategy and its impact on fluency and accuracy. The program, Making Reading Heavenly, implements many strategies from Orton-Gillingham and other research-based strategies through instruction (Angel, 2011). With this limitation in information and research on the program Making Reading Heavenly, this research will provide new knowledge and experience to help guide instruction and implementation in future years.

This paper will investigate how the strategies included in the phonics program Making Reading Heavenly impact student fluency and accuracy. This research will look into the multisensory instruction approach of the Making Reading Heavenly program being implemented as new curriculum in a first grade classroom and what impacts it has on student fluency and

accuracy. This program includes many research-based strategies that have shown individual success, and it also includes instruction on the background of our English language and rules (Angel, 2011). To assess the impact of Making Reading Heavenly on student fluency and accuracy, the teacher will assess student progress through a benchmark leveling kit that assesses words correct per minute and accuracy.

### **Review of the Literature**

There has been a great need for quality reading instruction, with many areas of research looking into best reading practice. Many of these research-based reading strategies are included in the school reading curriculum for whole group reading, small group reading, and interventions. There are many research-based strategies that focus on specific skills within the reading programs provided to teachers. Making Reading Heavenly focuses on multiple strategies, creating a multisensory learning experience with Orton-Gillingham being a strong piece of the program (Angel, 2011).

Teachers assess a student's phonics skills and phonological awareness to determine where the student is at in their reading journey. In the first grade classroom, the students are still in the beginning stages of reading instruction and learning how to read (Iowa Core, 2016). After a few years learning the foundational skills of reading, first grade continues to focus and build upon the foundational skills, but a little more in depth than in previous years' learning (Iowa Core, 2016). First grade is a year where some start by reading basic level reading texts at the beginning of the school year to reading chapter books by the end of the school year.

Assessments are an important element in the teaching process throughout the school year to determine student growth in decoding, fluency, accuracy, and more areas, and provide insight for targeted instruction based on student needs (FAST Norms and Benchmarks, 2019). State mandated assessments, such as the FAST assessment, measure these skills and provide data for teachers to act upon (FAST Norms and Benchmarks, 2019). When students are struggling in reading, especially in fluency the older the student gets, teachers assess the student's knowledge and skills to see if there has been an area they have not mastered and is holding them back in their reading.

These foundational skills are necessary and important components of an effective comprehensive reading program designed to develop proficient readers with the capacity to comprehend texts across a range of types and disciplines (Iowa Core, 2016). The foundational years are an incredibly important time to set the stage for future reading success. Children's early literacy experiences set a foundation for developing the emergent literacy skills that prepare children to become successful, independent readers (Stevens, Van Meter, & Warcholak, 2010). The importance of emergent literacy skills as a foundation for proficient reading has led to the development of interventions to teach these skills (Stevens et al., 2010).

### **Phonics**

Phonics is an important element in the early years of learning to read. According to McArthur et al. (2015), there are three components of a typical phonics training route. The three components include letter identification, translation of letters into sounds, and blending these sounds together to create a spoken word (McArthur et al., 2015). According to Schlesinger & Gray (2017), reading interventions that utilize systematic phonics have been shown to address the core phonological deficits found in dyslexia, and phonics instruction has been shown to be effective for teaching word decoding and spelling to all young children. Making Reading Heavenly focuses on this systematic phonics approach through daily lessons (Angel, 2011). Systematic phonics instruction introduces phonics elements such as letter sound correspondence and spelling patterns in a planned, sequential manner (Schlesinger & Gray, 2017).

### **Phonological Awareness**

Phonological awareness is an important element in learning how to read. Teachers use multiple strategies to practice the skills involved in phonological awareness. According to Paige, Rupley, Smith, Olinger & Leslie (2018), an individual has phonological awareness when they are

aware that words have constituent sounds, and that those sounds do not always hold meaning within a word, such as syllables, onset and rime, and phonemes. Kilpatrick (2012) describes in his research that phonological awareness includes the ability to notice that spoken words can be divided into smaller units, such as syllables, onsets, rimes, and phonemes. He also notes that students who develop phonological awareness to the phoneme level are able to quickly and easily map printed words to permanent memory, while those that do not do this typically struggle in reading (Kilpatrick, 2012).

### **Phonemic Awareness**

Phonemic awareness is also an important step in being a successful reader. Phonemic awareness involves the units of sound (phonemes) that are represented by the letters in the alphabet, and it is an especially important part of the phonological awareness understanding (Chappell, Stephens, Kinnison, & Pettigrew, 2009). There are many skills and strategies focused on through phonemic awareness to help students get ready to read. Chappell et al. (2009) state that when assessing phonemic awareness skills, researchers focus on the components involving rhyming, alliteration, blending, segmenting, and phoneme manipulation. Throughout the year in first grade, phonemic awareness skills are continuously practiced, considering it is still a foundational year of learning how to read (Iowa Core, 2016). Students work on segmenting words to the phoneme level, blending sounds together to make words, and manipulate sounds to make new words (Iowa Core, 2016). In one study, children who received phonemic awareness and letter-sound knowledge in an intervention showed significant improvement in their reading skills, to show that phonemic awareness and letter-sound knowledge are two important skills that have an effect on successful reading (Hulme, Bowyer-Crane, Carroll, Duff, & Snowling, 2012). In another study, Wade-Woolley (2016) found that phonemic and prosodic awareness were

significantly correlated with all reading outcomes. They also found that both phonemic and prosodic awareness were significant predictors of long or multisyllabic word reading, and both are also important in reading short words, but phonemic awareness played a larger role (Wade-Woolley, 2016). Syllables are one of the main teaching points of the Making Reading Heavenly program (Angel, 2011).

### **Multisensory Learning**

Multisensory learning is a large component of the program Making Reading Heavenly (Angel, 2011). Multisensory learning is when instruction includes auditory, visual, and movement-based activities to emphasize features of instruction (Sayeski, Earle, Davis, & Calamari, 2019). Hamilton (2016) describes multisensory instruction as involving the reception of information using two or more senses during the learning process. Multisensory learning is also a big component in the Orton-Gillingham instructional model that is included in the program of Making Reading Heavenly (Angel, 2011). In the Making Reading Heavenly program, students learn movements specific to each sound in the alphabet to create a deeper understanding of the sounds in words (Angel, 2011). Young students, as well as adults, have their own learning styles and preferences. Some people learn by seeing (visual), some people learn by hearing (auditory), and some people learn by doing (kinesthetic) (Sreenidhi & Chinyi, 2017). It's important to find the best fit for each student. Some children find it unusually difficult to learn to read even though they have had normal reading instruction, they have normal intelligence, and they have no known neurological or psychological problems, and this condition is often called developmental dyslexia (McArthur et al., 2015). The multisensory approach is the idea of reaching more than just one area of learners. Many times, multisensory learning strategies are brought to teachers' attention through students with occupational therapy services, but Making Reading Heavenly

provides instruction on multisensory strategies to all students in the classroom (Angel, 2011). In Newman's (2019) research, it is noted that the most successful approach for dyslexic students is the multisensory approach, but all learners may benefit from multisensory strategies.

### **Orton-Gillingham**

Making Reading Heavenly is based on the strategies of Orton-Gillingham (Angel, 2011). The Orton-Gillingham approach was created by Orton and Gillingham. Orton and Gillingham worked together to create an approach to reading that explicitly taught students the elements of language, and facilitated students' automaticity in applying this knowledge to the decoding and encoding of language (Sayeski et al., 2019). There are certain distinguishing features of the Orton-Gillingham approach that stand out among other programs. Sayeski et al. (2019) explain that these features include direct, systematic, incremental, and cumulative lessons, cognitive explanations, diagnostic and prescriptive methods, linguistics-based instruction, and multisensory engagement. Most of these features are shown throughout the Making Reading Heavenly program on a daily basis.

There are some researchers who have expressed limitations within the Orton-Gillingham approach that are worth noting. Sayeski et al. (2019) state Kilpatrick found that Orton-Gillingham fell short in terms of providing instruction in advanced phonemic awareness, such as phoneme deletion skills. The Making Reading Heavenly program includes tasks such as phoneme deletion, phoneme substitution, and phoneme addition (Angel, 2011). Some teachers in our district wonder if Making Reading Heavenly is the best fit for all students, or if it is a program that should only be used for students who are struggling in reading or those that have dyslexia.

There are many positive results and reviews of the Orton-Gillingham approach as well. One study investigated the impact of multisensory language instruction on letter name and sound production, word reading, and word spelling, and the results of the study showed Orton-Gillingham instructional strategies to be effective in promoting basic literacy skills (Schlesinger & Gray, 2017). In Ring, Avrit, & Black's (2017) study, it was shown that teaching phonological awareness and phonics improves phonological awareness, phonological decoding, and reading skills.

### **Assessments**

Assessments are one way that teachers can monitor student understanding either by a quick informal assessment or a more standardized version. Students in first grade are given the FAST (Formative Assessment System for Teachers) reading assessment (FAST Overview, 2019). The FAST assessment is given in the fall, winter, and spring (FAST Overview, 2019). During the fall assessment, the students read one sentence on each page, and by the winter and spring assessments, they are reading full paragraphs on one single page (FAST Overview, 2019). First grade students are building their skills on reading sentences and putting multiple sentences together on a page to read. The benchmark leveling kit is a tool for teachers to assess student progress in fluency and accuracy throughout the year. During this assessment, teachers have students read books at their instructional level to assess how many words they can read correctly in one minute. Hosp & Suchey (2014) state that reading is a complex process that changes depending on the type of text, purpose for reading, and reading topic, and that the complexity of the reading process makes it challenging to assess exactly what is happening when readers read and understand text. Curriculum-based measures (CBMs) represent one approach in widespread

use to teachers' need for time-efficient reading assessment that is technically adequate and provides information useful for formative decision making (Hosp & Suchey, 2014).

### **Decoding**

During the foundational years, children begin to learn decoding skills that will help them to be successful readers. Decoding makes a significant contribution to reading comprehension, and in one study found that decoding accounted for some of the variance in the scores in reading comprehension (Nunes, Bryant, & Barros, 2012). When explaining decoding to students, teachers might explain it as figuring out a word or sounding out a word. During instruction, students may come to a word that they try to sound out, yet sounding out the word is not always helpful due to different spelling patterns or rules. The English language is complex but not insurmountable... every time teachers engage in professional development or training that enhances their knowledge of the structure of language and strategies for teaching this structure to students, they are becoming more skilled technicians of reading (Sayeski et al., 2019). Knowing why a word is pronounced in a particular way can be empowering for teachers- stronger explanations and new strategies for remediation stem from understanding language development- and can allow for more insightful assessment of students' strengths and needs (Sayeski et al., 2019). According to Angel (2011), by understanding and learning the rules of the English language, such as spelling patterns, students will be able to read many more unknown words as opposed to memorization of words.

### **Spelling**

Spelling is another component of Making Reading Heavenly that is helpful to decoding unknown words. Explicit and supplemental handwriting and spelling instruction can play an important role in teaching writing to young children who acquire text transcription skills more

slowly than their peers (Graham, Harris, & Adkins, 2018). According to McNeill & Kirk (2014), the most effective spelling instruction teaches spelling as a linguistic ability by directly facilitating key skills that underlie spelling development. Making Reading Heavenly focuses on spelling patterns and understandings of the rules of the English language (Angel, 2011). The three metalinguistic skills that are strongly related to spelling acquisition are phonemic awareness, alphabetic knowledge and pattern knowledge, and morphological awareness (McNeill & Kirk, 2014). In one study, Hamilton (2016) researched the effectiveness of multisensory instruction and response system for enhancing the spelling of dyslexic students. Hamilton found a significant increase in the number of words spelled correctly (Hamilton, 2016). In one study of first grade students, researchers discovered the three linguistic awareness skills were unique predictors of word reading, and phonological and orthographic awareness were unique predictors of spelling (Kim, Apel, & Otaiba, 2013). Handwriting is a piece of the Making Reading Heavenly process as well, and researchers explain that in kindergarten, handwriting fluency and spelling added significant unique variance in predicting writing fluency after accounting for language, reading, and IQ (Kent, Wanzek, Petscher, Al Otaiba, & Kim, 2014).

### **Fluency**

Fluency is defined as accurate and automatic word reading (Hosp & Suchey, 2014). Fluency is one of the major goals of all reading programs and is a goal for first grade students to build upon throughout the year as well. When a student has good fluency, they are able to understand the text more easily. When students have to sound out each word to understand which word they are reading, it can become choppy, and they often lose sight of what the story or text is about. This can lead to poor understanding of the text. Fluency is the combination of accuracy and speed that characterize competent performance (Chappell et al., 2009). At the first grade

level, student fluency is assessed through a reading benchmark kit, as well as our routine FAST assessments. According to Chappell et al. (2009), common fluency instruction includes modeling fluent reading, having students participate in repeated readings, and encouraging students to read silently.

### **Fluency and Accuracy in Connection to Comprehension**

Student reading accuracy is an important aspect in teaching students to read. Grade one students will be able to read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension (Iowa Core, 2016). In many cases, if the text is too difficult for the student, the student can become too frustrated and shut down, and if the text is too easy, it will not be challenging enough. The standards set grade-specific standards but do not define the intervention methods or materials necessary to support students who are well below or well above grade-level expectations; no set of grade-specific standards can fully reflect the great variety in abilities, needs, learning rates, and achievement levels of students in any given classroom (Iowa Core, 2016). In the benchmark leveling kits used to assess fluency and accuracy, students are to read a few pages in a text to see how many words can be read correctly in one minute, and how accurately the students read the text.

Reading fluency is a different construct from reading comprehension, but fast-operating word identification processes are considered a foundation for text comprehension (Nunes et al., 2012). When students do not have to pause at every word to figure out what it says, they will be able to hear the story or listen to what the text is telling them much better than having to sound out each word before moving on to the next. Smooth, accurate reading can lead to many benefits as a reader. Reading fluency problems are the main characteristic of poor readers (Snellings, Van Der Leij, Blok, & De Jong, 2010).

In summary, there are many important pieces to the puzzle when implementing a systematic phonics curriculum, such as Making Reading Heavenly. The components of a phonics program have been proven effective in many cases to build the foundation and beyond for readers of all ages. These include, but are not limited to phonological and phonemic awareness, which are present in the Making Reading Heavenly program (Angel, 2011). The use of multisensory instruction in phonics instruction is one of the larger components of Making Reading Heavenly, and implements an approach that reaches more than just one area of learners (Angel, 2011). The Orton-Gillingham instructional approach is one that has been around for about 100 years, and is often spoken about through dyslexia, but we know that it has been shown to be beneficial for all students to learn the Orton-Gillingham approach (Sayeski et al., 2019). These strategies and approaches are shown to have positive results with decoding, fluency, and accuracy in student reading abilities (Sayeski et al., 2019). Assessments are a tool for teachers to measure progress and monitor student fluency and accuracy. The Making Reading Heavenly program does not yet have a specific assessment piece, but we are able to gather data on this through the Next Steps in Guided Reading benchmark leveling kit and the FAST assessments as well. The Next Steps in Guided Reading benchmark leveling kit will be used each time the teacher-researcher assesses student reading fluency and accuracy to ensure accurate data is being recorded.

This research will be helpful in understanding the impact that the Making Reading Heavenly program on fluency and accuracy. The program explicitly teaches students to break apart words and understand spelling patterns through the six different syllable types and a deeper understanding of the English language, so that when students see the spelling patterns and parts

of words, they will more than likely be able to decode more quickly and therefore read more fluently with better accuracy (Angel, 2011). This research will assess this impact on student reading fluency and accuracy in the first grade classroom. This will be the students' first full year of instruction in the Orton-Gillingham and multisensory learning approach through the Making Reading Heavenly program.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

This action research was conducted with a first grade class of 13 students in the general education setting. This research was conducted in a Northwest Iowa school district during the fall of the 2019-2020 school year. The elementary school in which this research was conducted has one section for each elementary grade, preschool through fourth grade. Middle school and junior high grade levels are also located in this building. The first grade students mostly range in age from six to seven years old, with one eight year old. There are eight male students and five female students. Eleven of the thirteen students are Caucasian, along with one Hispanic student and one African American student. There are two students in the classroom that receive special education services throughout each day for math, reading, and writing. One student receives an hour of services each day, while the other student receives thirty minutes of services each day. One of these students is a student with special needs. There are also two students in the classroom that receive speech services twice each week for thirty minutes each time. The students are integrated into the general education classroom setting except for the times receiving services.

### **Measures**

The research conducted was used to determine if using a newly implemented phonics program, Making Reading Heavenly, is effective in increasing student fluency and accuracy. This research measures the students' scores from the pre-test and the post-test of a timed reading assessment. The Next Step in Guided Reading benchmark leveling kit was used to provide an assessment to monitor student progress through reading passages. The teacher-researcher used a one-minute timed reading passage to assess the amount of words read correctly in one minute, as

well as recording the amount of words read incorrectly to determine the accuracy rate for each student. The amount of words read correctly are added up, and the errors are subtracted from that total for fluency or words correct per minute. The amount of words read correctly is then divided by the total amount of words the student read to find the accuracy. For example, if a student read 70 words in one minute and read two words incorrectly, the fluency is 68 words correct per minute, with an accuracy of 97%. During this research, the teacher-researcher made observations and notes throughout each lesson during implementing the program. After assessing student reading fluency and accuracy, the phonics program Making Reading Heavenly was implemented.

### **Procedures**

Phonics instruction through the Making Reading Heavenly program was implemented at the beginning of the school year for five weeks. The first grade general education teacher followed the guided lesson plans available from the program teaching manual, teaching one lesson each day along with an activity practicing that skill. These lessons were implemented in the first grade classroom for twenty minutes each morning, after the core reading instruction block.

During the lessons, the teacher followed the use of the gradual release of responsibility instructional strategy. She introduced the new learning, practiced the new skill with the students, and gradually allowed the students to work independently on the new skill. Every day, the teacher-researcher practiced the sound movements with the class either by following the sound movement chart in the classroom, or by listening and watching the video that shows each sound move with audio as well. Throughout each lesson, the teacher-researcher also integrated the use

of think-pair-share and table group discussions to increase the number of students participating in the discussions.

These lessons included, but were not limited to, work on matching letters with the sounds, matching sound movements with sounds and letters, clapping syllables, sounding out each word, and writing words according to the sounds in the words. The activities practiced skills that were taught during the lesson, and included work such as writing the first sound in words, matching words with their rhymes, and determining the amount of syllables in words. The main focus of the first five weeks of instruction were on the sound movements, blending the sounds together to make words, beginning to learn about the six syllable types, and the clap, touch and write process.

The sound movements for each letter were one of the first important pieces in the program to teach (Angel, 2011). Each letter has a specific sound movement for the sound it makes. For example, for the /i/ sound, students take their finger and pretend to itch their face while saying “/i/, /i/, itch” (Angel, 2011). Once the students learned all of the sound movements, the teacher-researcher was able to teach students how to sound out words using these sound movements, as well as write words. To practice and help the students master these sound movements, the teacher-researcher throughout each day used the secret code. The secret code is where the teacher silently signals the sound movements of a word, and the students have to watch carefully and put the sounds together to determine the word the teacher is sounding out. Many times, the teacher-researcher would practice the secret code during transitions or during moments where students finished their work at different times. The sound movements also are helpful during the syllable type lessons.

Another large component of the Making Reading Heavenly phonics program is six syllable types (Angel, 2011). Before any of the six syllable types can be taught, the students really needed to learn how to find the syllables in each word, so the teacher-researcher spent time practicing how to find the syllables and clap out the syllables they hear in words. The students really enjoyed finding the syllables in their own names and working with their names on different activities within the Making Reading Heavenly program. They also enjoyed the challenge of a more difficult word, such as figuring out how many syllables were in the words ‘vacation’ or ‘television’. Students were soon trying to think of larger words to determine the amount of syllables in the word. Finding the syllables in each word helps students with syllable types in future lessons (Angel, 2011).

The Clap, Touch, and Write Process implemented in the first few weeks of instruction is a process that puts the two components of syllable counting and sound movements together to investigate a word (Angel, 2011). The teacher first says the word clearly, with the students repeating the word back to the teacher. Next the teacher and students clap out the syllables in the word, stating the number of syllables in the word. Then, the students take each syllable and touch the sounds while using the sound movements, and finally the students write the letters that go with each sound movement (Angel, 2011). Through this process, the students were continuously practicing their sounds, sound movements, and blending sounds together to make words. Another important skill they were practicing with this strategy is writing the letters that match each sound they make.

Each Monday, the teacher-researcher assessed student fluency and accuracy levels according to each students’ reading level to monitor progress over time. Data on fluency and accuracy was assessed each Monday in the classroom with the Next Step in Guided Reading

benchmark leveling kit. The participants were asked to read from a text while the teacher recorded notes during the assessment. The teacher set the timer for one minute to know when to mark the last word read.

## Results

### Data Analysis

Quantitative data was collected in this research, through a pre-test and post-test of a reading fluency and accuracy leveling benchmark assessment. The students were assessed on their fluency and accuracy of a reading passage. Students were given a reading passage that they were to read for one minute, while the teacher assessed their fluency and accuracy by marking any errors and counting the amount of words read correctly.

All but one student raised their fluency scores from the first assessment to the second assessment, with the highest growth being 40 words correct per minute. One student scored 3 words correct per minute less on the second assessment compared to the first assessment. Overall, on average the first grade classroom gained 17.54 words correct per minute on the second assessment. This progress between the Pre-test and Post-test dates was made during the use of the new phonics program Making Reading Heavenly daily classroom instruction. Eleven of the students made progress in lowering their errors by one to three words. One student remained at the same number of errors, while another student increased his errors by one. Overall, on average the first grade classroom decreased errors by -1.62 words in a one minute timed reading from the first assessment to the second assessment. This progress between the Pre-test and Post-test dates was made during the use of the new phonics program Making Reading Heavenly daily classroom instruction.

Students were assessed on fluency and accuracy for progress monitoring on a weekly basis for the teacher-researcher to review. Students did not read the pre-test and post-test reading passage for progress monitoring each week. They read various reading passages during these weekly progress monitoring times. The pre-test and the post-test were the same reading passage.

The teacher-researcher hoped to see an increase in words correct per minute, as well as a decrease in errors for each of the students. Almost all of the students raised their fluency scores, and almost all of the students decreased the amount of errors.

A dependent groups *t* test revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in pre-test scores on reading fluency ( $M = 34.38$ ,  $SD = 27.20$ ,  $n = 13$ ), as compared to post-test scores on reading fluency ( $M = 51.92$ ,  $SD = 30.29$ ,  $n = 13$ ) following implementation of the phonics program Making Reading Heavenly with strong effect size,  $t(12) = 5.29$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = 17.54$ . On average, there was a 17.54 point difference between the pre-test and post-test.

A dependent groups *t* test revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in pre-test scores on reading accuracy ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ,  $n = 13$ ), as compared to post-test scores on reading fluency ( $M = 1.38$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ,  $n = 13$ ) following implementation of the phonics program Making Reading Heavenly with strong effect size,  $t(12) = -4.88$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = -1.62$ . On average, there was a -1.62 point difference between the pre-test and post-test.

## Discussion

### Summary of Major Findings

Overall analysis of the data collected between the pre-test and the post-test benchmark assessments show that most students made increases in their fluency and decreases in their errors over time. Overall, students gained an average of 17.54 words between the pre-test and post-test. Only one student had a lower amount of words read correctly on their post-test, but this student also made one less error on the post-test than on the pre-test. Students also decreased their errors on average by -1.62. Scores show on the post-test that only one student increased in the amount of errors while reading the passage, and that student increased by one error. This also means that all other students remained at the same amount of errors or decreased their amount of errors during the post-test assessment.

This data shows that the use of the phonics program Making Reading Heavenly had a positive impact on student fluency and accuracy. By analyzing this data, the teacher-researcher may choose to continue using Making Reading Heavenly for current and future first grade students, while continuing to collect data throughout the school year to monitor the impact of using the program for one school year. This research provided more insight to first grade phonics instruction and more background knowledge on spelling patterns to better explain to students.

Overall, the Making Reading Heavenly program was supplemental to student reading success. The students responded positively to the lessons, and the assessments showed an increase in fluency and accuracy during the time of implementation. The teacher-researcher gained a deeper understanding of phonics and implementing strategies to help students become successful readers. The teacher-researcher was able to explain more clearly the spelling patterns and rules of the English language.

### **Limitations of the Study**

One limitation of the research is the number of classrooms involved. Due to only having one first grade classroom in our building, it was not possible to compare one classroom that used Making Reading Heavenly with one classroom that did not use Making Reading Heavenly. Being able to have access to more data would have given even more information on the program's impact on student reading fluency and accuracy. There also may have been more validity of the program had we been able to compare one classroom using the program to one that did not use the program.

Another limitation was that the program was new to the teacher-researcher. The teacher-researcher spent a large amount of time learning about the program and practicing learning strategies, but it was still new and some areas needed further explanation than the manual provided. Each year, the teacher will become more knowledgeable of the lessons and concepts, as well as how to more effectively instruct students on the program.

### **Further Study**

Further research may be conducted on the average progress students make in their reading fluency in any given first grade classroom. The students in this study made great progress in their reading fluency, but further study could be done to compare if it is considered normal progress for this time period of the school year. Through this investigation, researchers could determine if the Making Reading Heavenly program has helped students make greater progress than normal.

Further study could also be conducted after the school system has implemented Making Reading Heavenly for one or more years. Since this is the first year the program has been

implemented, some of the instruction given to the first grade students this year will be review for next year's first grade students, since they will learn certain terms and sound movements in kindergarten. Next year's first grade students may be able to work at a little faster pace, since they will have already had a full year's instruction in the program. Learning the common language presented in the Making Reading Heavenly program will help students understand more each year. By hearing the common language as they move through each grade level, they will be more familiar with concepts such as syllables and the syllable types.

An additional area of study could also be to consider pairing a phonics instruction approach with a sight word study to determine if that makes an even greater impact on student fluency and accuracy. This program uses the term 'outlaw' words instead of sight words, so it practices regularly used words. However, each week there are only a few outlaw words used through instruction. Further study could be conducted to determine the effectiveness of pairing Making Reading Heavenly with a more powerful sight word study.

### **Conclusion**

This action research was completed to determine the impact of Making Reading Heavenly, a phonics program new to the district, specifically on student fluency and accuracy. The teacher-researcher conducted the study to find an effective program in teaching areas of the English language that are not supported in other literacy curriculum in the district. In the past, there was often confusion when explaining the rules of the English language to students, and this program helps to bridge that gap in understanding. Students learn the ‘why’ behind the rules, instead of simply learning the rule, that often holds no meaning to the students.

The results of this research support the new program in supplementing our district reading curriculum. Through daily phonics lessons that allow students to interact through sound movements and practice activities, the students seemed to enjoy this approach. This study shows that implementing a systematic phonics instruction program has a positive impact on student fluency and accuracy by overall increasing reading fluency and accuracy.

More research needs to be conducted to conclude if the program Making Reading Heavenly plays a significant role in increasing student fluency and accuracy. Students made significant progress in fluency and accuracy scores, but normal month to month growth needs to be considered to show the full impact of the phonics program. More research also needs to be conducted to determine if pairing a phonics approach with a sight word study would have a greater impact.

This research has provided more insight to phonics instruction, as well as a deeper understanding of the English language for the teacher and students. Students are learning more about the English language that previous students in first grade were not exposed to until a much later grade level. These students will keep building on the skills they learn in first grade and keep

expanding on their knowledge as they move to each new grade level. As we continue to teach year after year, students will come to each grade with a common language from Making Reading Heavenly, where we can continue to reach deeper understandings of the English language.

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