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Impact of Phonics Instruction for Readers at Risk

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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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April 10, 2020

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Abstract

This action research study investigated the impact of phonics instruction for readers who are considered to be at risk in their reading performance. For six weeks, the researcher implemented phonics instruction to two 2nd grade students. This instruction was completed in a small-group setting in the resource room. At the beginning of the week, the students were given assessments to see which phonics skills they were missing, then they received instruction based on those skills. Quantitative data was collected at the beginning, middle, and end of the six weeks. This information was collected by using a Diagnostic Decoding Survey and STAR Reading assessment. Findings indicated that there could be an impact of phonics instruction on the reading of students who are determined to be at risk.

Impact of Phonics Instruction for Readers at Risk

This action research investigates the impact of using explicit phonics instruction to students who are classified as needing reading intervention. When it comes to reading instruction, there are many strategies that have been presented to teachers to help readers at risk (Mesmer & Griffith, 2006). The large number of trends is because reading is such an important stepping stone in a child's education. According to Maddox & Feng (2013), being able to read is a foundation to all of a student's learning. Being able to read is a skill that will continue to bring a student success, not only in school, but reading is linked to success in life as well (Salinger, 2003). According to the most recent report from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, only 35% of 4th graders are reading at or above grade level as of 2019, and this was lower than the percentages in 2017 (NAEP, 2019).   This statistic proves that there is a prevalence of readers at risk in classrooms, and the question looms, how do we help these students become successful in their reading as this skill carries over to success in life?

This question has been one of controversy for many years (Cothran, 2014). This controversy reached its height when the government stepped in and created a panel called the National Reading Panel. Throughout their studies, the National Reading Panel found that teaching phonics to students is an effective way to teach students how to read (Ehri, Nunes, Willows, Schuster, Yaghoub-Zadeh, & Shanahan, T, 2001). Educationally, teaching phonics can be defined as teaching students how letters and sounds are connected and can be used to create words (Mesmer & Griffith, 2006,). Reading can be a complex skill for students as they discover the relationship between the letters and sounds to produce words. The goal of teaching phonics to students is to help them see this relationship and become successful readers (Sitthitikul, 2014).

      This study specifically looks at using phonics instruction for students who need interventions to become successful readers. When working with students who are considered readers at risk, it is hard to know the most effective strategy to help them overcome their hurdles in reading. The purpose of this research study is to look at the idea of using phonics instruction and determine its effectiveness for these readers.

      As the National Reading Panel has shown, phonics instruction is an effective way of teaching students how to read (Ehri, et al., 2001). As the researcher looks at implementing this strategy to students who struggle with reading, the hypothesis is that this intervention will make a positive impact on their reading, and their reading scores will go up. The potential impact will be measured by comparing STAR assessment and Diagnostic Decoding Survey data from before and after the intervention to see if the instruction made an impact.

      The students will be given the STAR assessment and Diagnostic Decoding Survey to determine where the weaknesses are in their reading skills when it comes to phonics. They will then be given instruction based on their weaknesses to help them gain phonics skills where they are weaker. As mentioned before, it is hopeful that with this explicit instruction of phonics that meets them where they are currently, the data will show that the instruction was beneficial.

      Throughout the years, there has been much research on whether or not phonics is an effective reading strategy. One piece of evidence to indicate a lack of research is if there is an impact of phonics instruction for students who are behind in their reading. There are some pieces of research that look into teaching phonics to students who struggle, but this research is sparse and has significant gaps. Further research is necessary in order to determine if phonics instruction can help struggling readers overcome the hurdles that they face when it comes to their reading.

Review of the Literature

What is phonics?

Looking for an all-encompassing definition of phonics can be difficult. It is interpreted

in many different ways. At its simplest level, phonics can be defined as anything a teacher does

or says to help students learn how to decode words (Sitthitkul, 2004). Phonics is an important

stepping stone to reading because it teaches students the relationship between letters and

sounds, and our English language is written using those letters (Mesmer & Griffith, 2006).

When teachers are teaching phonics, they are teaching students how to use the alphabetic code

to read words. This way, when students come up with words that they do not know, they know

how to use letter-sound correspondence along with context clues to figure out what the un-

known word is (Ehri, Nunes, Stahl, & Willows, 2001). Even though phonics is something that

can be hard to define, it is an element of reading instruction that is found in many reading cur-

ricula.

History of Phonics

Establishing the birth of phonics can be difficult as it can be traced back to the Ancient

Greeks. Elements of phonics can be seen in the earliest English school books known as the *New*

England Primer or *Webster's Blue Book Speller* (Chall, 1989). In the next decades, using phon-

ics as an instructional strategy was abandoned and revisited several times as the best way to

teach reading was being considered. There were several pieces of research that were conducted

that proved phonics to be an important part of teaching reading, and there continued to be an in-

crease of phonics instruction in the classroom (Chall, 1989; Soler, 2016; McConnell & Kubina

2016).

In more recent history, Congress directed a panel to evaluate research on the effective-

ness of numerous strategies in teaching students to read. This panel, known as the National

Reading Panel, found that early instruction of phonics was the best way to teach children how to read (Cothran, 2014). As a result of the National Reading Panel, there is federal legislation that requires that there be a phonics component in federally funded programs, and that the phonics be explicit and systematic (Mesmer & Griffith, 2006, p. 366). This was implemented when the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 was enacted. This act ensured that schools were meeting the standards for their students in reading and mathematics in Grades 3-8. Tied to this initiative are federal funds that help schools increase their reading instruction with the goal that every student will be reading on grade level by the end of grade 3 (Salinger, 2003). As a result of these initiatives, teaching phonics has become an important element of teaching reading to students.

Arguments

How we should teach students how to read is something that has been argued and researched for years. In fact, some refer to this discussion as "The Reading Wars" (Cothran, 2014). This argument came down to the question if students learn better by learning the code first, or by learning the meaning of the words. As referred above, this question was something that was grappled with by many. In the end, it was found that teaching phonics was an effective way to teach students how to read, but for some, this argument still lingers on (Kim, 2008).

Benefits

One of the biggest benefits of phonics is that it gives the students the tools they need in order to decode words that they come across in their reading (Ehri et al., 2001). The hope is that as they learn more rules, the number of words that they know will grow. When students are taught phonics, they are given the opportunity to learn skills that will help them decode words in their reading but also words that they may encounter in their environment. Teaching them

the essential skill of reading opens up the world for independence, and phonics is one of the first steps to help students gain that independence (Fredrick, Davis, Alberto, & Waugh, 2013).

Ehri, et al. (2001) found that systematic phonics instruction was more effective than any other reading strategy that was part of the research. The authors found that systematic phonics instruction is useful and should be part of a literacy program. A study conducted by Fredrick, et al. (2013), found that phonics instruction was effective for students with moderate intellectual disabilities. There are many other pieces of research that prove the effectiveness of phonics instruction for all students (Maddox & Feng, 2013; Noltemeyer, Joseph, & Kunesch, 2013).

It is hard to ignore the body of research that shows the benefits of using phonics instruction as a part of reading instruction (Ehri, et al., 2001; Fredrick, et al., 2013; Maddox & Feng, 2013; Noltemeyer, Joseph, & Kunesch, 2013). One scholar even went so far as to say to abstain from teaching phonics would be irresponsible on the part of the teacher. This sentiment was re-iterated by teachers. In a survey of teachers, it was found that 99% of teachers who teach reading in grades K-2 find phonics instruction to be either essential or important (Stahl, Duffy-Hester & Doughtery Stahl, 1998). There have been several studies that have been able to prove that phonics instruction made a significant impact on readers' achievement (Sitthitikul, 2014).

Limitations

Even with the research that proves the effectiveness of phonics, there is still another side of the argument. This side believes that phonics is not beneficial for helping students learn how to read. One argument is that all learners learn differently, and there cannot be one program that helps all readers. They believe that there is not a one-size-fits-all or magic bullet when it comes to reading (Shanahan, 2003; Davis, 1999; Dennis, 2010). This side argues that if there was a one-size-fits-all method to teach reading, of course everyone would be utilizing it. But since

there is so much controversy around the topic of using phonics, some researchers argue that it cannot be identified as the best way of teaching reading (Jalongo, 1998).

Another argument that looks at the consequences of teaching phonics is that perhaps teaching phonics helps students learn to read the words, but comprehension of those words is not addressed by the program. Scholars have found through their studies that teaching phonics has not improved comprehension of sentences, paragraphs, or stories (Coles, 2000). Comprehension is an important part of the reading process, and some even consider comprehension to be what defines the process of learning to read. When taught phonics instruction, the students are learning how to read the words, but they aren't understanding what the words mean (Jalongo, 1998).

An additional argument is that students who are taught phonics are slower readers than students who are taught reading in a different way. For example, a study done by Connelly, Johnston & Thompson (2001) showed that students who were taught to read by using phonics strategies had a slower reading pace than other students. The students who were taught phonics were also slower to recognize familiar words, words that they should be able to read without phonics skills.

A final argument states that children will learn to read when they are ready to read. When the conditions are right for them to read, they will be able to be successful in their reading. They need to have a positive feeling about the books that they are being exposed to and the people who are teaching them reading. As mentioned before, this argument believes there is not a one-size-fits-all formula when it comes to reading that will help all readers to be successful (Smith, 1999).

Phonics Use for Readers at Risk

Reading is such a complex skill for students to master. Although teachers know how to prevent reading difficulties while a student is learning to read, there are still students who have weak reading skills as they move throughout the grades (Salinger, 2003 p.84). When presented with a student who has some reading difficulties, it is the teacher's responsibility to enlist the help to ensure that these students can experience success in reading as they continue to develop their skills.

When it comes to teaching students who have been identified as readers at risk, teaching phonics could be a good place to start. It has been found that students who are defined as good readers have good phonological awareness, while it is absent with those who struggle with reading (Sitthitikul, 2014, p. 115). When a student who struggles with reading is taught phonics skills, it is expected that the reading difficulty be remediated and these students are able to go on to be successful readers (Ehri, et al., 2001). When students struggle with the concepts of phonics, they have a hard time being successful in their reading. When teaching phonics to students who are struggling with reading, the preferred form of instruction would be in a one-on-one setting because the lessons can be individualized to what the student is struggling with specifically. If one-on-one tutoring is not accessible, it has been found that small groups produce more growth in reading than in the whole group setting (Ehri, et al., 2001).

There have been numerous studies that prove the effectiveness of phonics instruction in the last 50 years (Ehri, et al., 2001; Fredrick, et al., 2013; Maddox & Feng, 2013; Noltemeyer, Joseph, & Kunesch, 2013). At this time, there has been limited research that had to do with students classified as having special needs. The studies that have been done that focused on this classification of students determined that phonics did, in fact, make an impact on student achievement when it comes to reading. Since the goal of phonics is to break a complex skill of

teaching into simpler steps, students were able to experience success when they were taught phonics instruction effectively (Sitthitikul, 2014).

Approaches to Teaching Phonics

In the National Reading Panel Report that was created in 2000 as mentioned above, it stated that the teaching of reading should be based on scientific research. When it comes to teaching reading, there were five major components of reading that were emphasized. These were phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension. If looking at these components like a piece of a puzzle, teaching phonics is an essential way to help students be successful in their reading (Salinger, 2003, p.80).

There are several different philosophies when it comes to phonics instruction (Pruisner, 2009). Pruisner emphasized that students can be taught phonics intentionally and systematically, with set aside time for the student to learn the different phonemic rules. It can also be taught explicitly through integration, where the student is taught phonics rules through play and real life experiences. The way that students are taught probably depends on age. Many teachers who teach preschool-age students agree that play based is the best way for their students to learn phonics, whereas in an older grade, using a systematic curriculum may be more beneficial (Campbell, 2008).

Looking first at a systematic approach to teaching phonics, there is evidence that systematic phonics instruction can be beneficial for readers, especially those who may struggle (Tyler, Hughes, Beverly & Hastings, 2015). When defining systematic instruction, it is important to look at the scope and sequence of the instruction. Scope includes what the content of the instruction is, whereas sequence is defined by the order in which things are being taught. In

this systematic instruction, there is a scope and sequence in which the teacher instructs the children. These lessons are also usually explicit, which is when the teacher is telling the children exactly what they are trying to teach. When teachers were surveyed by Mesmer & Griffith (2006), many teachers showed a preference to this type of phonics instruction, with an understanding that it should be engaging and allow for student response.

Another approach to teaching phonics is a more implicit, also known as whole language approach, where students are taught language skills through their experiences in the classroom. As mentioned before, this type of learning style may be better suited for younger students. In a study completed by Sonnenscien, Stapleton & Benson (2010), it was found that the phonics instruction needs to meet the students where they are at. When using a whole language approach to teaching phonics, it is important that the teacher be intentional with providing a literature-rich environment. Scholars have proven through their studies that some students develop their phonics knowledge more effectively in a whole-language classroom than an alternative phonics teaching approach (Maddox & Feng, 2013).

As shown above, there has proven to be benefits to both an explicit and implicit approach to teaching phonics. Due to the benefits of using both models of teaching phonics, there have been many teachers who use a mixed model approach to teaching phonics. This mixed approach combines both phonics instruction with the other elements of reading, such as vocabulary and fluency (Noltemeyer et al., 2013). The benefits of using both methods of teaching phonics was proven in a study done by Price-Mohr & Price in 2017. In this study, they found that explicit phonics should not be the only approach to teaching phonics, but that students benefit from a mixed approach where they can learn the rules and apply them to real-life text.

There is much research to back up the different styles of teaching phonics. The two things that could play a role in what style the teacher decides to use is the strength of the students and their age. There is a recommendation from the National Reading Panel to use explicit teaching of phonics when teaching students how to read. However, after reviewing the literature, it seems that there is room for other teaching styles as well depending on the needs of the students (Reutzel, Child, Jones & Clark, 2014).

Another important aspect to look at when determining how to best teach phonics to students is how much time is given to instruction. For a program to be effective, it should be of sufficient intensity for the students. There have been studies that have shown a relationship between the amount of time spent in instruction and student achievement (van de Pol, Volman, Oort, & Beishuizen, 2015; Ross & Begeny, 2015; Camahalan & Wyraz, 2015). Whereas there was no recommended time given, these studies prove that the amount of time that we spend in reading instruction are worthwhile when considering the long-term achievement in reading (Reutzel et al., 2014).

The review of the literature sets the purpose for this action research project. It is evident that the use of phonics as a teaching strategy has been controversial for many years. The researcher intends to look at the effectiveness of teaching phonics for students who are considered to be at risk in their reading.

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study were second graders at Orange City Christian School, located in the rural community of Orange City, Iowa. These students are identified for special education services by use of the STAR Achievement test: the students qualify for special education services if they fall below the 40th percentile rank on these assessments. These services are

usually in the regular classroom with additional support. The students in the group studied fell

below the 20th percentile rank, without having three data points above this 20th percentile rank,

qualifying them for additional assistance in a small-group setting. The particular group of sec-

ond graders addressed in this research project are two male students.

The two males in this group live in homes with both parents who are active and place

value on their children's learning experiences. They regularly attend parent-teacher conferences

and do work outside of school to help their students succeed. Parental involvement is evidenced

by the parents consistently filling out and signing the reading log indicating that they are read-

ing with their children outside of school.

Measurement Instrument

The measurement tools being used to identify the relationship between the independent

and dependent variables are the STAR Reading assessment and a Diagnostic Decoding Survey

created by the company Really Great Reading. In this study the independent variable is imple-

menting phonics instruction to students who are considered at risk readers. The dependent vari-

ables are the reading scores that are collected to determine the students' reading ability from the

STAR assessment and their understanding of phonics from the Diagnostic Decoding Survey.

The variables are quantitative.

The data for this study will be collected using the STAR Reading Assessment and a Di-

agnostic Decoding Survey. The STAR Reading assessment looks at overall reading with some

phonics components built into it. The Diagnostic Decoding Survey is an assessment of phonics

skills for readers at risk that are used to identify which skills they have already mastered and

which skills are weak. The data from both of these measures will be quantitative.

Validity and Reliability of Measurement Instrument

The reliability of the STAR Reading Assessment was completed by using two methods, internal consistency and test-retest correlation. Through these efforts, it was found that the reliability of the STAR Reading test was .97 (STAR, p.22). Since the STAR reading test is aligned to state standards, there is proof of a level of validity. The STAR went further and looked at their reading test compared to many other assessments, and it was found to have validity from .60 to .87, which is considered to be a strong correlation (STAR, p.23).

The Diagnostic Decoding Survey was designed as a diagnostic assessment to identify phonics skills that students are struggling with or may have already mastered. Therefore, to the researchers' knowledge, no research has been published to validate the reliability and validity of this measurement. Even though there is not research published to establish the reliability or validity of the Diagnostic Decoding Survey, it is an important part of the research as it gives an understanding of where the students' strengths and weaknesses lie when it comes to their phonics skills.

Procedures

The researcher used the STAR Assessment to find which students in the 2nd grade fit under the criteria of being under the 20th percentile and needed urgent intervention in their reading. After two students were identified, the researcher used the Diagnostic Decoding Survey to determine where these students were lacking in their phonics skills. Using explicit phonics instruction, with a variety of activities such as games, worksheets and other activities, the researcher then tailored the phonics instruction to their needs, teaching the students based on the rules that they were missing. The students were seen for an average of 90 minutes a week for 6 weeks.

Data Collection

The data that the researcher will be collecting at the beginning of the intervention are the results from the STAR Assessment and the Diagnostic Decoding Survey that was conducted. In the middle of the intervention, there will be progress monitoring assessment completed using both assessment measures. After the six-week intervention is completed, the researcher again gave these two assessments and compared the results between the data sets.

To analyze the data, the researcher will use small n statistics. This type of statistics is used when there is a sample size of less than five participants. In this case, the sample size is only two students, so small n statistics is an appropriate way to analyze at the data. When using this type of statistics, it is important to note that it is difficult to see a big effect of the treatment because the sample is small (Sauro, 2013). The researcher will still be able to analyze the data and see if the phonics instruction made an impact on the students' reading score;, it will just be on a student-to-student basis because of the smaller sample size.

When looking at the STAR assessment, the researcher will look for growth in the scaled score. This score is a range from 0-1400 and is based on the number of questions the student gets correct. As a result of the STAR test, there are also percentile rankings given that can be helpful to see how the student grew. The STAR test also gives goals according to phonics skills, and since this research is based on phonics skills, the researcher will consider these as well as growth indicators.

The Diagnostic Decoding Survey is scored out of 50 and looks at the student reading words in isolation, words in a sentence, and nonsense words. After the assessment piece is given, the researcher can determine where the weaknesses of the student may be and taylor instruction to meet those needs. At the final assessment, potential growth will be seen with the increase of this score out of 50.

Ethics

      This research project does not require approval by the IRB because it is research of the effectiveness of a special education strategy. This research project requires minimal risk to the student and includes teaching strategies and assessments that would be considered even if not a part of the research project. The practices that are used in this research project are practices that are commonly used by the school.

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Results

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      To begin, the researcher analyzed the results of the Diagnostic Decoding Survey. When taking the Diagnostic Decoding Survey, the student can score anywhere from 0-50 points. The researcher used the pre-assessment, progress monitoring, and post-assessment data to determine the effect of the phonics instruction on both student A and student B. Table 1 includes the scores of student A, and Table 2 includes the scores of student B.
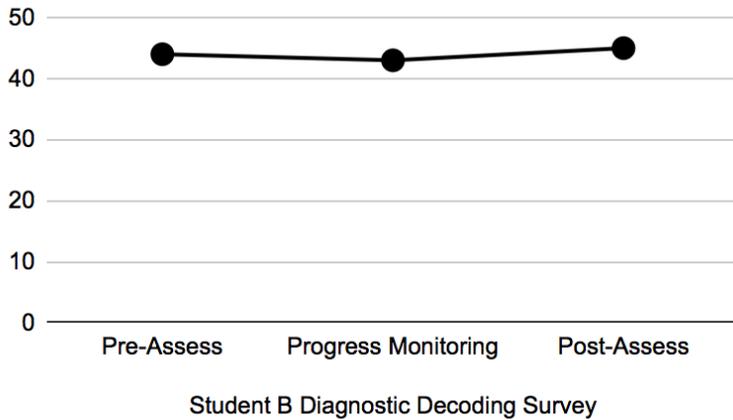
Table 1

Student A Diagnostic Decoding Survey Scores
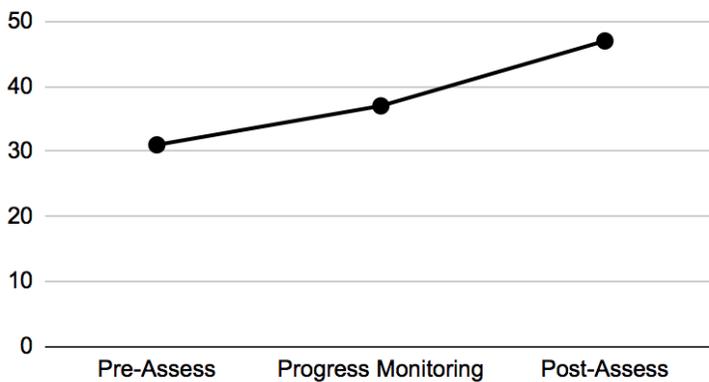
Student A Diagnostic Decoding Survey

Table 2

Student B Diagnostic Decoding Survey Scores

Student B Diagnostic Decoding Survey

The researcher then looked at the results of the STAR Reading Assessment. This assessment is not given as often, so there is only a pre-assessment and post-assessment available for the researcher to analyze. When analyzing these scores, the researcher looked at the scaled score, which is a number from 0-1400 that is based on the number of correct answers that a student answers. Table 1 looks at the scores of student A, and Table 2 looks at the scores of student B.
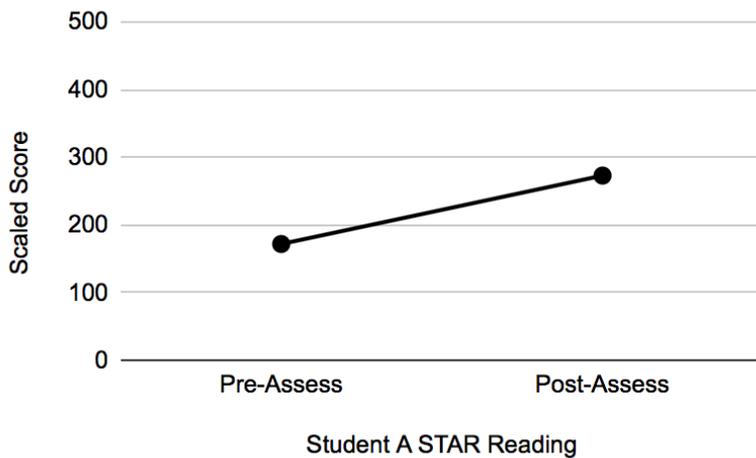
Table 3
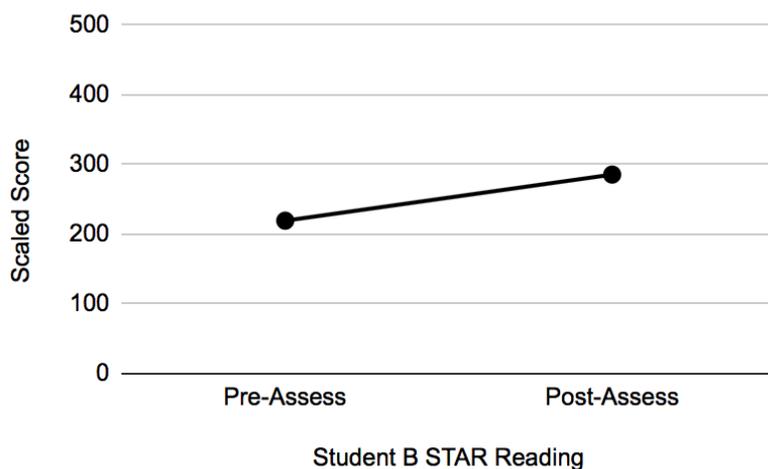*Student A STAR Reading Assessment Scores*

Student A STAR Reading

Table 4
Student B STAR Reading Assessment Scores

Student B STAR Reading

Discussion

Summary of Major Findings

The purpose of this project was to determine whether or not phonics instruction can impact the reading of readers at risk. When considering the Diagnostic Decoding Survey, it can be assumed that the phonics instruction did make an impact for student A. Student A had the lowest score to start with, and there was noticeable growth from pre-assessment to post-assessment. When considering the level of the data, there is a steady increase of the data points, which shows an increase in phonics skills. The data points have good stability and do not fluctuate largely. The trend of the scores goes up, which again, shows that student A did make some improvements in their reading skills correlating with the increase of phonics instruction.

When looking at Student B's data, it is hard to tell whether or not the phonics instruction made a strong impact on the reading skills. Student B started with a higher score than student A, so there was less room for growth. However, student B only made one point of progress from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment. The overall level of the data was an increase of one point. With only three assessment points, it is difficult to tell the stability of the data, but there is some spiking in the progress monitoring score. The overall trend of the data is going

up, but as mentioned before, the increase is not really significant when trying to determine whether or not the treatment of phonics instruction made an impact.

After analyzing the Diagnostic Decoding Survey results of both student A and B, the researcher then moved on to analyze the STAR Reading results. As mentioned before, this assessment is not given as often, so there are only two points of data to consider. Student A increased their score from 172 to 273, which is a 100-point increase. According to the STAR report, a scaled score of 273 put student A in the 45th percentile. When student A started the intervention, student A scored at the 25th percentile. There is limited data to analyze with the STAR results since there are only two data points. For student A, the level increased and the trend was going up. It is difficult to tell the stability of the data as a result of the limited number of data points.

Student A's results show that there was an increase in the reading ability. It is difficult to know if this is a direct correlation to the phonics instruction that took place, but combining the results from both assessments, it is logical to hypothesize that this effect could be the case for student A. Another indication that there was growth in the phonics skills of student A was that in the goals given by the STAR program after the pre-assessment, there were numerous phonics goals that were considered to be 1st grade goals. In the goals given by the program in the post-assessment, there were no phonics goals, indicating that the student had already met the goals for the grade level. With all of this information, the researcher can indicate that the phonics instruction did impact the reading of student A.

Like student A, student B also had an improvement of scores. Student B started the pre-assessment with a scaled score of 219 and increased the score to 285. This was a smaller increase than student A, but student B started with a higher score than student A. When looking

at percentile ranking, student B increased from 37th to 48th percentile. As mentioned before

with student A, there is limited data to analyze the STAR results as there are only two data

points. For student B, the level increased and the trend was going upward. The stability is dif-

ficult to establish as there is a limited amount of data.

   According to the STAR results, student B also had an increase in reading ability. Stu-

dent B had less stable results in the Diagnostic Decoding Survey, so it is difficult to determine if

the increase in STAR reading scores is an effect of the treatment of phonics instruction or if

there are other factors that increased the reading scores, such as instruction that is taking place

in the general education classroom. Like student A, student B started the pre-assessment with

goals determined by the STAR program to be 1st grade phonics skills, but after the post-assess-

ment was completed, none of these goals were indicated as necessary for student B. It is evi-

dent that student B did make improvements in reading, but it cannot be determined if this was

due primarily to the increase of phonics instruction.

Limitations of the Study

   In this study, there are several limitations that are present, that could affect the reliability

of the results. The first limitation is that the sample size is small, which makes it difficult to

generalize the results to other subjects outside of the study. Having a small sample size made it

difficult to see if the impacts of using phonics instruction were big enough. The researcher

could analyze them from a student to student basis, but the data was limited as a result of the

small sample size. An additional limitation when it comes to the sample size is that the two stu-

dents came from similar backgrounds with supportive parents who put value on their child's

schooling. This could sway the results and make it hard to generalize to other samples. An-

other limitation when it comes to the sample size is that the sample size consisted of students

who are considered readers at risk. This was the purpose of the study, but it would be difficult

to generalize the results to subjects who do not have this qualification.

Behavior could also be a limitation to the study. When the students are taking the STAR

reading test, they are doing it on their own. It is possible that the students rushed through the

assessment, so it is hard to determine if the results are completely accurate. This behavior may

skew assessment results. Also, with using readers at risk as the sample group, there could be

other underlying concerns that affect their reading, such as attention concerns, that would also

affect their learning during this research. Another limitation is the amount of time that was

spent with the students. Due to sickness and other scheduling conflicts, there were instruction

times that were missed during the intervention time that could have impacted the amount of

learning that took place. An additional limitation could be the teacher acting as researcher. The

students in this study were part of the teacher's case load before the research, and the teacher

has been trained to meet their needs and this may create bias that would impact the results of the

study.

Further Study

There is limited research to investigate the impact of teaching phonics to students who

have struggled with learning to read thus far (Sitthitikul, 2014). The need for further study is

present to explore the impact of teaching phonics to students who are identified as readers at

risk. This research should also take place with a time frame longer than six weeks, to identify if

the phonics skills are something the students retain and continue to build on to increase their

reading skills.

There could also be further study to look at the various ways there are to teaching phonics. The researcher used teaching phonics explicitly in this project, but as mentioned in the literature review, the idea of best practices of teaching phonics can be controversial. In addition to doing research on phonics teaching strategies, there could also be research done to look at phonics being taught in the general education classroom and how that impacts students who struggle at reading. In this research, the conditions were ideal for students to learn and make improvements as it was a small-group, controlled environment. The researcher questions if the results would be similar if the research took place in the general education classroom. Continuing research on the impact of phonics on readers at risk will give teachers more information on how to best reach these students.

Conclusion

How to teach reading most effectively has been a topic that has been discussed and researched for many years. There have been varying philosophies and methods of teaching phonics to aid in the teaching of reading. This research study looked specifically at phonics instruction for students who are considered to be at risk and what the impact might be on their reading abilities. The results of this research found that for some students at risk, teaching phonics in a small-group setting could be beneficial to their overall reading scores. The results of this study align with previous research that has been done that proves that phonics instruction has a positive impact on students' reading, especially students who struggle.

As teachers, it can be difficult to sift through all of the different methods and philosophies of teaching reading. It is essential for teachers to know their students and what style of teaching suits their students best. For some students, especially those who are considered to be

at risk, teaching phonics as a way to learn how to read may bridge the gap and lead to future

reading success.

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