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Phonics: The Breaking Apart of Words to Help All Children Learn to Read

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Abstract

This action research project was driven by the researcher's interest in phonics based instruction to help children learn to read. Specifically, using the PRESS phonics intervention to help meet the needs of each individual learner in the experimental classroom. The researcher, a first grade teacher in her fourth year of teaching, studied her students participation in the PRESS phonics intervention. The four week intervention was conducted using the students' fluency and early reading skills to analyze the effectiveness of the PRESS phonics intervention. Throughout the four weeks, oral reading fluency along with decodable word fluency was monitored and all progress was noted for all eleven students participating in the study. Findings revealed this intervention showed increased improvement on both assessments given. These findings support the recent research about the use of research- based methods to meet student needs.

Keywords: phonics, PRESS interventions, first grade, fluency

Phonics – The Breaking Apart of Words to Help All Children Learn to Read

To achieve success in first grade literacy, the first step is to choose from among the research-based strategies available. Educators want to choose the one which will provide the most growth during the school year as well as meet the needs of all learners in a particular classroom. The problem is there are many strategies, and it is crucial to determine which is the most effective. Literacy instruction has been an ongoing debate since the 1950s. In 1955, Rudolf Flesch's published his best-selling book titled, *Why Johnny Can't Read: And What You Can Do About It.* This controversial book harshly criticized the American education system because phonics instruction was not included in elementary classrooms (Flesch, 1955). As a result, educators were challenged, and more research began on the topic of phonics (Erhi, 2020). While there has been more interest in the benefits of phonics compared to the whole-word approach, there is still controversy surrounding literacy instruction and the most successful way to meet students' needs. A cursory search on the internet using phonics verses whole-word will bring up a plethora of sources defending or refuting each side. The goal of phonics instruction is to provide students with the tools necessary to decode any word during reading.

The purpose of this action research project is to commend phonics as a more effective strategy than the whole-word approach. Phonics instruction research that has been done since the year 2000 in elementary schools will be presented in the literature review. Notably, a phonics program called PRESS (Path to Reading Excellence in School Sites) recently developed by the University of Minnesota, will be tested in a first-grade classroom that has a variety of learners from different backgrounds. Data from action research will be analyzed to determine best outcomes and recommendations on which program to implement. With this information a deeper

understanding of phonics programs can be gained which, in turn, can help elementary schools implement the most effective literacy strategy.

With such a large pool of resources, it was important to determine which were most highly respected. Using peer-reviewed sources that focused on strategies for successful phonics instruction, a diversity of thought in the field is included. The research done narrows down the search by using methodology as the criteria and looked for research conducted in elementary classrooms only. It was also important to include sources that were critical of phonics instruction. Finding sources that are more recent helped ensure that they are addressing contemporary situations.

Using these sources, many studies clearly exposed the difficulties of whole-word instruction. On the other hand, phonics was shown to assist kids in being able to read words that they had never been exposed to previously. When taught phonics at a young age, students performed better on comprehension assessments in upper elementary grades (Roberts & Meiring, 2006). According to multiple studies, systematic phonics instruction is the most effective way to teach children from various backgrounds to learn to read. This is valuable information as it helps the many educators, who are seeking more explicit direction, which approach to teaching literacy to their students will yield the best result. This action research will determine if the PRESS phonics interventions will help improve decoding and fluency in first grade students.

As phonics instruction is investigated, it is important to consider why whole-word teaching has been so popular. The literature review will begin with that discussion and explain its deficiencies. Moving forward from whole-word instruction, the research will discuss the properties of phonics instruction and why that is beneficial for children learning to read. With a variety of phonics strategies, the differences will be explained. Reviewing the various studies,

the literature review will cover systematic phonics instruction; explicit phonics instruction; implications of ELL and special education students taught using phonics; and the PRESS phonics intervention. The literature review will examine the pros and cons of each. The scope of this literature review follows a thematic pattern within the different interventions and strategies.

Literature Review

Opposing Viewpoints

According to Merriam-Webster, whole language is defined as "a method of teaching reading and writing that emphasizes learning whole words and phrases by encountering them in meaningful contexts rather than by phonics exercises" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Watson discussed and defined in his article the whole language approach to literacy instruction in 1989. At that time, there were many common misconceptions about this topic and the author wanted educators and sceptics to be aware of the benefits that corresponded with this method. Watson mentioned that it was difficult to define whole language, making clear that the whole language approach is not something that can be labeled, nor can it fit into a tidy box. This practice defines teachers as classroom researchers, participants, coaches, learners, resource persons, listeners, and advocates for students. Whole language focuses on reading and retelling stories, making social and personal connections, writing, and offering teachers a flexible mindset. This reading strategy also supports the use of choice in the classroom, as well as focusing on student responsibility for learning, self-pacing and intrinsic motivation (Watson, 1989). Teachers from this study reported that their students made sufficient growth; had a new-found joy in reading; and were more creative (Watson, 1989).

Phadung, Suksklchai, and Kaewprapan published an article in *2*016 that advocated for the use of the whole language approach and using interactive electronic stories to help with word memorization and application. The methodology included a set of 30 students from the southern part of Thailand at the kindergarten level. Another group of 30 kindergarteners were in a control room and used a paper version of the electronic story used by the other group. Both groups were taught using a whole language approach for 45 minutes a day for 8 weeks. The pre-test and post-

test included a word recognition and story application. The results of this study showed that when they had an interactive story instead of a paper copy, the children showed significant growth in word recognition and story application (Phadung, Suksklchai, and Kaewprapan, 2016).

Sperline, Barrwasser, and Grünke (2019) used a 'reading racetrack' to commit sight words to memory to evaluate the importance of memorizing sight words to build reading fluency. The study is testing the belief that memorizing words is crucial to reading fluency success, with the intent to prove that the focus on memorizing words rather than teaching decoding skills will greatly benefit learners on their reading fluency assessments. The subjects of the study were three German students with a learning disability, who spoke English as a second language. There were also multiple baseline students who were used to assess the effectiveness of the intervention with the specified kids. The results of the study showed that all three students improved their sight word fluency, and that fluency can be achieved using very simple means (Sperline, Barwasser, and Grünke, 2019).

Systematic Phonics Instruction

Richland (2020) defined systematic phonics instruction as, "a method of teaching students how to connect the graphemes (letters) with phonemes (sounds) using a clear and well thought out scope and sequence to teach kids how to read and spell." (Richland, 2020, p. 1). Instead of the focus on teaching children to memorize words as the whole language approach does, this tactic takes the time to lay out a specific plan and sequence for teaching children how to break apart words to learn to read. That way, when children come across a word they do not know, they have the skills necessary to decode the word themselves. Ehri published a study in

2020 titled, “The science of learning to read words: a case for systematic phonics instruction.” This article studied the importance of learning the science behind words. When kids learn this method and use it regularly, they become more fluent and successful readers. The researchers did several studies throughout the course of a few years with different age levels and altered methods of instruction. Ehri (2020) tested whether systematic phonics instruction was the most effective way to learn to read. Their initial studies were on third and fourth graders in their school district. They also spent time studying first graders and the effect of teaching this method of phonics instruction to them and on the outcomes when they enter third and fourth grade.

Ehri (2020) studied ten first graders. To half of them, they taught sight word reading to the students in isolation. The second half were taught the sight words through the use of meaningful sentences, how to use them, and the science behind them. They found that the first group was able to read more fluently, but the second group was able to understand what they were reading. With the third graders, they tested students by having them read texts and tested their understanding of them. They measured fluency and the ability to stop and think about what a word meant as well as what it has to do with the story (Ehri, 2020). Ehri showed that when the teacher took the time to teach the words in a meaningful way and teach the science behind the words, rather than having students simply memorize the words, they were able to more effectively understand what they read. On the other hand, while the students in the control group, the first half of first graders who learned sight words, were able to read faster, they struggled on the comprehension questions. The outcome of the study showed that the goal of reading instruction for elementary students should be to decode unfamiliar words and store spellings of words so they can read by sight. The study found that this was the best way to teach children how to learn to read more effectively (Ehri, 2020).

Roberts and Meiring (2006) completed a study titled, “Teaching phonics in the context of children’s literature or spelling: influences of first-grade reading, spelling and writing in fifth-grade comprehension.” The goal of this research study was to track how first grade reading, spelling, and writing instruction influenced fifth grade reading comprehension. The participants of the study were 61 children enrolled in two first grade classrooms. There was large number of non-Caucasian students involved in the study, with 40% being African American. Their ability level ranged from low, medium, to high as you would see in any general education classroom. They were randomly assigned two groups. Each child was individually administered four tasks for reading, three spelling tasks, and one writing task at the beginning, middle, and end of first grade. One group focused more on learning phonics through experiences with individual words, and the other group focused on learning phonics skills alongside a connected text. Roberts and Meiring (2006) found that focusing on using spelling as a context for phoneme correspondence, blending, and segmenting, had a greater positive influence on both reading and spelling than teaching phonics in the context of literature. They found that the children that learned this way performed significantly better on their assessments in fifth grade compared to their peers.

The final study by McGrane, Stuff, and Hofenbeck (2019) evaluated systematic phonics instruction, determines whether the role of early reading phonics development at a young age is a solid factor in later comprehension success in the rest of their schooling. The goal is to have all six-year-old’s master fundamental literacy skills and have solid phonemic awareness. This study was not looking at a particular intervention, but rather if having phonemic knowledge will help these students comprehend more efficiently when they enter fifth grade. This was a study completed in England. Data was collected from 4,641 students from 162 English schools. This included 202 classrooms and they followed students in early elementary for 4 years. The phonics

screener was administered to children in the first year of the study. This screener had 20 real words and 20 nonsense words. If the child read 32 out of the 40 words, the child was reading at grade level. From this screener, they were placed into three groups. The first group was a pass-pass group. This group scored 32 and above correct. The next group was a fail-pass group made up of students who showed some struggle with reading the 40 words. Finally, there was a fail-fail group, whose students fell way below the mark. McGrane, Stuff, and Hofenbeck discovered that the students who failed the phonics screener the first time, and then passed the second time around (the fail-pass group), faired very well on their comprehension assessments four years later. The findings of this study show that if early reading phonemic difficulties are addressed at a young age, it will help improve the student's reading performance down the road. The study also showed that phonics checks are crucial for schools to use to identify those children to allow the students to receive adequate, robust intervention which they need to help them improve and 'catch up' to their peers performing on grade-level (McGrane, Stiff, and Hopfenbeck, 2019).

Explicit Phonics Instruction

"The term "Explicit Instruction" means that the teacher is the one who takes center stage. The teacher controls the student's learning by teaching the student. All concepts are directly and explicitly taught to students with continuous student-teacher interaction, guidance and feedback." (Richland, 2020, p. 1). There are several studies that prove that explicitly explaining phonics strategies to children is appropriate and necessary to reach understanding. However, it is not meant to be the only method of phonics instruction, rather one that is used alongside systematic phonics instruction and independent practice. A few of the research articles discussed using explicit phonics instruction alongside numerous other strategies to aid in learning. Beverly,

Giles, and Buck wrote the first article, titled “First-grade reading gains following enrichment: phonics plus decodable texts compared to authentic literature read aloud.” Written in 2009, They wanted to assess to see if using decodable texts alongside explicit phonics instruction was comparable to using different reading enrichments. There are so many options out there for interventions such as decodable books, Basals, easy readers, authentic literature, and nonfiction. All these different types of interventions and strategies have been tested and approved. However, it is hard to know which one to use and which is the most effective. That is what the author wanted to study and learn more about. Decodable books focus on a specific phonics skill with limited information per page that have a basic story structure. While there are many who endorse the use of decodable readers, there has been a lack of research regarding the usefulness of these in relation to phonics (Beverly, Giles, and Buck, 2009).

Thirty-two first graders participated in this study, and they were placed into three groups. One group practiced reading decodable texts after phonics instruction, the other heard literature read aloud, and the last group had a combination of phonics and literature. There was an unrelated classroom that did the curriculum provided by the school (Beverly, Giles, and Buck, 2009). Beverly, Giles, and Buck found that there were more gains in the three groups rather than in the unrelated classroom. They found that lower-achieving readers benefited more from phonics plus decodable text, but the higher achieving readers benefited from literature read aloud. It was determined that starting kids out with explicit phonics instruction followed by decodable texts and then moving forward into challenging and meaningful literature as they advance, was a beneficial approach (Beverly, Giles, and Buck, 2009).

Bradely and Noell (2018) looked at the importance of explicit phonics instruction. The researchers wanted to establish whether instituting explicit phonics instruction with the use of

delay and reward would be a successful way to help struggling readers improve in the time frame allotted. Six first grade students were a part of the study. They were identified by their teachers as struggling readers, with frustration reading rates. The setting in which they met were quiet classrooms, meeting one-to-one at the child's school. Bradely and Noell used pseudo words that matched the skill and ability level of the child they were working with. They had five sets each. When the child met with the researcher, the child would read the words on the list of the specific set they were working on. The child was allowed five seconds to read the word (known as the '5 second delay' method). If they did not get it right within the time frame, the researcher would model the sounds to the child and allow them to repeat what had been modeled. The children were rewarded with praise when they said the correct sounds. As they pass the group of words, they move on to the next until they are caught up to grade level (Bradley and Noell, 2018). Of the charts for each child, it showed an upward trend of the words that they researched, which meant that the methods they used were working. Using praise and the delay method showed an increase in the words read correctly and these children had a much better response than the control group. The study also showed that learning the phonics skills in the pseudo words had a positive impact on their scores further down the line (Bradley and Noell, 2018).

According to the research listed above, explicit phonics instruction should be utilized alongside other effective strategies. Children need to be explicitly taught phonics rules and have them modeled, and this strategy should be used before moving into independent practice. Van Gorp, Segers, and Verhoeven (2017) suggest that they must also be given specific feedback when reading on proper ways to sound out an unknown word.

Special Education and English Language Learners with Phonics

Special education, English Language learners, and children in title reading highly benefit from learning to read through phonics instruction. There are several studies to prove that phonics instruction works well for all types of learners. In the first article, Mariage, Truckenmiller, Brehmer, Hicks and Chamberlain (2020) studied 48 preservice teachers taking a literacy course in special education as they looked at the primary grade struggling readers they were tutoring at the time of the course. The researchers wanted to analyze the reading scores of the children participating by utilizing phonics instruction with those students would improve those scores or not. They found that when they switched their focus to phonics instruction in the tutoring sessions, each of the children showed improvement in literacy and self-confidence. The study also showed that even when training pre-service teachers to teach special education students in this format, the performance of the students that they were teaching was similar to the performance of the students under more experienced (Mariage, Truckenmiller, Brehmer, Hicks, and Chamberlain, 2020).

Vadasy and Sanders (2012) looked at the effectiveness of phonics instruction with English language learners. This study followed a low skilled group of language minority and native English speaking students who participated in a study of a kindergarten phonics-based intervention. The researchers wanted to find out if the phonics intervention worked for English language learners coming into an American elementary school setting. There were 140 English language learners, and 103 English speaking students that took part in this study. Half of the students were being retained for simple treatment effects modeling. The other half was retained for classroom instruction modeling. Simple treatment effects on longer term outcomes were detected on word reading, spelling, and comprehension outcomes for language minority students (Vadasy and Sanders, 2012). Vadasy and Sanders found that when more time was spent on

phonics instruction, the students improved their reading abilities by the end of their second grade assessments. While the study found that the native English speakers did well staying in the classroom for the whole group instruction, the English language learners benefitted from phonics interventions in addition to whole group instruction (Vadasy and Sanders, 2012).

To continue looking at English language learners, Robinson (2018) evaluates and examines two reading methods – phonics based instruction and whole language learning for English Language learners. The goal of this research was to determine which was the best method for teaching non-native English speaking students to read. This study took place in a K-12 international school with 110 students in first grade, and 83 students in second grade. During the first year, whole language was taught. During the second year, intensive phonics instruction was taught to the students (Robinson, 2018). They found that the first grade students significantly benefitted from having intensive phonics instruction become as major part of the reading instruction (Robinson, 2018).

It has also been found that phonics instruction works well for children who attend title for reading; qualify for special education services in reading; and for the English language learners. One of the most common and well known interventions is called Orton-Gillingham, named after two famous researchers (Orton and Gillingham). “The Orton-Gillingham Approach always is focused upon the learning needs of the individual student. Orton-Gillingham (OG) practitioners design lessons and materials to work with students at the level they present by pacing instruction and the introduction of new materials to their individual strengths and weaknesses.” (2019). The goal of this program was to meet the needs of all learners in any classroom.

A study was completed by Sayeski, Earle, Davis, and Calamari (2019) on this intervention. This article was written by special education teachers that wanted to test how Orton

Gillingham helps students with dyslexia. They investigated numerous peer reviewed sources and peer reviewed journals. Their study was provided to the teachers that want to learn more about Orton Gillingham and the effectiveness of the practice (Sayeski, Earle, Davis, & Calamari, 2019). The features of the Orton-Gillingham approach are: direct, systematic, incremental, and cumulative lessons. Cognitive explanations help explain the skill during the process, as well as diagnostic and prescriptive methods. The focus of the program is phonics and the premise is that children learn to read best when breaking down words and learning each of their meanings. Earle found that reading programs that provided basic and advanced phonemic awareness instruction, decoding instruction, and provided several opportunities to connect reading skills to a text have shown to have great success in reading programs. Orton Gillingham has all of these features except the advanced phonemic awareness aspect of the preferred system (Sayeski, Earle, Davis, & Calamari, 2019).

Ritchey and Goeke (2006) review Orton-Gillingham looks at the effectiveness of the Orton-Gillingham based reading instruction. They did 12 studies to test the quality and effectiveness of this reading program. Their goal was to determine the best method for providing reading interventions to special education students. In their studies, they were comparing their schools reading intervention program to the Orton-Gillingham approach. (Ritchey & Goeke, 2006). Of the twelve studies reported, five stated that this method was more effective than the control interventions, four mentioned that this was more effective than at least one (but not all) of the interventions, two stated that the control intervention was more effective, and one did not see any significant differences. Part of the reason for the differences was determined to be the grade level of the participants in the study, finding that the younger grades performed better. Ritchey and Goeke (2006) stated that when they gave the interventions to the high risk students

in a first grade class, they saw their performance increase from .75-2.88. Therefore, this program shows to be most effective when taught in an elementary setting.

The PRESS Framework

The Minnesota Center for Reading Research defines PRESS as an acronym for the Path to Reading Excellence in School Sites. “It is a framework that structures literacy achievement in grades K-5 within contexts of multi-tiered systems of support or Reponses to Intervention. The primary goal of PRESS is to work with teachers and administrators to establish school-based systems and practices for all K-5 students to become capable readers.” (Minnesota Center for Reading Research, 2018) (see Appendix A). PRESS believes that in order to be a fluent reader that is able to comprehend what is read, the child must have a solid foundation for this to take place. Each skill builds upon the other. A child cannot be proficient in phonics without first being proficient in phonemic awareness, and so on (Minnesota Center for Reading Research, 2018).

There have been some research studies completed using this framework, either during the process of the research development or after completion of the program. Burns, Karich, Maki, Anderson, Pulles, Ittner, McComas and Helman (2015) examines children in tier 1 reading. The main reason for the study was to focus research around children reading at grade level and determine ways to help them, thereby encouraging more growth. Other studies have tended to focus on tier 3 students to find the best ways to meet their needs to increase reading fluency. For this study, the researchers felt it was time to find the best ways to increase tier 1 engagement and success. Determining how to help tier 1 students is the pathway to success to building success in

Response to Intervention programs (Burns, Karich, Maki, Anderson, Pulles, Ittner McComas, and Helman, 2015). The PRESS intervention was administered to 41 students in two fourth grade classrooms. The researchers found that only 35% of the nation's fourth grade students scored in the proficient range of their state testing, so the goal was to increase that numbes. The study revealed that this intervention helped improve reading proficiency with fourth graders and helped give tier 1 fourth grade students the skills and strategies they needed to meet the standards of state wide assessments (Burns, Karich, Maki, Anderson, Pulles, Ittner McComas, and Helman, 2015). The authors encouraged more research to be done on children reading at grade level to help increase proficiency on state reading exams.

The same group of researchers performed a study on the relationship between language proficiency and growth during the PRESS reading interventions. In their article, they discuss English language learners and their difficulties with basic English as a result of low language proficiency. The authors looked at the PRESS intervention to analyze and chart the growth of reading proficiency to determine if using this program with ELL students was successful (Burns, Frederick, Helman, Pulles, McComas, and Aguilar, 2017). For this study, 201 second and third students with a variety of home lives participated in this study. Burns, Frederick, Helman, Pulles, McComas, and Aguilar selected students that had a low reading score in fluency and fell below benchmark. The children received the intervention four days a week for an entire school year. Students who participated in the study had the highest growth on the ACCESS test for English Language Learners in the period from the spring of the prior year to the following spring (Burns, Frederick, Helman, Pulles, McComas, and Aguilar, 2017).

Not only did the PRESS intervention show great growth in ELL students, but it helped children reach proficiency on the fourth grade high stakes reading test. Given the good outcome,

the researchers decided to compile another study using the PRESS intervention with kindergarten students. This article examines the best practice to see which component of phonemic awareness helps early learners improve their letter to sound knowledge. Burns, Maki, Helman, McComas, and Young (2018) used several assessments to track the data they gathered. They used the PRESS intervention with the kindergarteners to focus on phonemic awareness skills. This study included 192 kindergarten students from a high poverty urban elementary school. The data from the study supported that phonemic awareness was important to develop in the kindergarten level (Burns, Maki, Helman, McComas, and Young, 2018).

Ittner, Helman, Burns, and McComas (2015) reviewed attempted to determine which intervention or reading program would help all students become more proficient in reading in third grade. The study also looks at literacy coaches and how they can initiate professional learning among teachers. The project was three years in length with six different schools that were a mixture of public and charter schools located in the Twin Cities metro area in Minnesota. They worked on quality core literacy instruction, using data based instructional decision making, implementing the RTI model, as well as augmented teacher learning through professional learning. There was one university faculty member at each of the school sites. Based on the initiative established by the program, they saw great success at each of the six schools they were in. Ittner, Heman, Burns, and McComas found that using a solid literacy instruction in the class, plus using the RTI program, improved literacy scores significantly (Ittner, Helman, Burns, McComas, 2015).

Looking at all of these different studies, it is clear that phonics instruction has been shown to be the most effective way to teach all children to read, even students with learning challenges such as ELL and special education students. While the whole language can be

effective, the results are inconsistent. As the studies that were reviewed showed, there were gaps in the success rates of the students that were tested from different categories of learning ability or background. Phonics instruction has tended to have more consistent success among all categories of learners. It is true that literacy instruction will continue to be heavily debated because there are studies that support whole language and other teaching strategies. However, PRESS intervention promises to bridge the gaps that the other strategies failed to bridge. Using PRESS intervention, research can show that students will succeed at higher levels more consistently.

Methodology

Participants

This action research study was completed in a first grade classroom with eleven first grade students participating in the PRESS phonics interventions. The goal using PRESS is to cover essential reading components necessary for reading success. The research was completed four times per week for four weeks. Each intervention session lasted approximately fifteen minutes each. Of the eleven students participating, four are enrolled in Special Education. All four of those students have reading goals on their IEP. Of the remaining seven students, one student is considered urgent intervention and two other students are considered at risk in the FastBridge assessment site, which was determined after winter benchmarking in the subject of reading. Another student receives English Language supports and is enrolled as an ELL student. The remaining three students read at grade-level.

The eleven students participating consist of nine Caucasian and two Hispanic students. All of the students participated in a 120 minute reading block where they receive explicit and systematic phonics instruction, reading comprehension, read aloud time and small group interventions. The PRESS phonics interventions were completed during small group instruction block. Due to Covid-19, the students were in the state of Minnesota's hybrid model of instruction, with smaller class sizes. In this model, the students who receive special education services receive push-in services, with the classroom teachers serving in place of the special education teachers. This allowed for the interventions to be implemented by the same teacher.

Measures

The PRESS intervention is a research based intervention program and is provided through the University of Minnesota. It is designed for kindergarten through fifth grade students. Prior to implementing this intervention in their classrooms, teachers receive instruction on using the program through an online self-paced course. The PRESS manual, as well as the PRESS community website, offers a variety of interventions and the necessary supplies for five categories: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Burns, Maki, Helman, McComas, Young 2018) (see Appendix A). The teacher will use the appropriate inventory provided by PRESS, as determined by each child's individual abilities. These inventories help the teacher understand specifically which intervention each child needs (see Appendix B, C, and D).

The growth of student reading and fluency is monitored by the school district using the FastBridge reading assessment of early reading as well as CMB-r fluency assessment three times each year. For students in the urgent intervention and at risk categories, the district also monitors their progress weekly using the CMB-r assessment. These benchmarks help educators understand which reading instructions and interventions will be successful. The data given from these assessments help drive goals, curriculum development, and professional development in reading.

For this research project, FastBridge was used alongside PRESS, as a comparison, to measure and track the data collected and helped determine whether the PRESS phonics intervention was successful. The researcher had set up weekly progress monitoring in both decodable word assessments and CMB-r fluency assessments for all students for the duration of this project. The decodable word screener has a sheet of 50 consonant-vowel-consonant words that the child must read in a minute. It tracks mistakes in mispronunciations, omissions, and substitutions. It allows the educator to click on the exact letter where the mistake was made,

permitting the educator to focus on the letter sounds or vowels needing more attention. The CMB-r gives the child at their grade reading level, and they are given one minute to complete the assessment. The educator tracks along with the child on the website and marks missed read words or omissions. The reason both assessments were used was to show whether their fluency aptitude in grade-level passages improved along with their reading assessments.

Procedures

The PRESS intervention was implemented to attempt to increase phonics skills, and to build a solid foundation for reading comprehension in later grade-levels. The intervention used an inventory that was given to each child in the classroom to identify the areas on which each child needs to focus. Appropriate interventions are given to help fill in the gaps. Following the inventory assessment, five children were identified that needed a vowel team intervention, five needed a consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) intervention, and one needed a phonemic awareness intervention. The researcher worked with the vowel team intervention group and had a list of twelve words to be matched up with the skill needing attention. During the first week, all twelve words the students studied had the vowel team ‘ai.’ First, the children wrote their words on their whiteboards. Then, when they finished, they were each given the list of words to read to a partner. Finally, they read a connected text that used ‘ai’ words in the passage to a partner.

For the CVC intervention group, the researcher provided a cookie sheet with magnet letters. The intervention provided word lists with twelve words, and the children needed to build the words with the magnet letters. The children were then asked to segment and blend together

the sounds that they saw. Next, they read the twelve words on the word list to a partner. Then they read a connected text with that same partner.

For the phonemic awareness intervention student, the researcher used flashcards provided by PRESS with words that contained the necessary focus sounds with the student. The card was placed in front of the student. The student identified the picture and then was asked to say the ending sound of that word. Once this was mastered, the researcher switched to medial sounds with the child. The procedure was the same except the child needed to say the middle sound in the word.

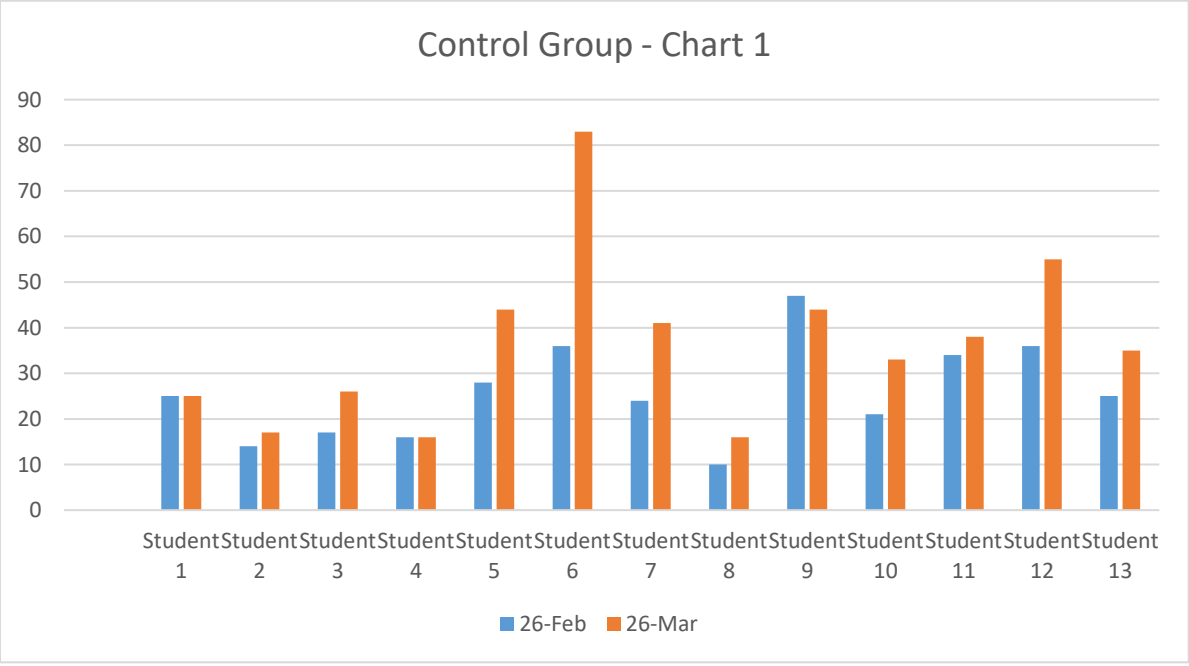
Each of these interventions lasted around fifteen minutes each and were completed four times a week. The decodable words assessment and the CMB-r fluency assessment mentioned in the paragraph above were completed each Friday. All of the students participated in a 120 minute reading block daily. This reading block is broken down into thirty minutes of explicit and systematic phonics instruction; fifteen minutes of reading comprehension; fifteen minute of read aloud time which is followed by sixty minutes of small group interventions. The PRESS phonics interventions were completed during the sixty minute small group instruction block. To ensure these interventions were completed with fidelity, the researcher investigated each intervention through the PRESS community website and watched videos on how to successfully implement. The researcher also had the administrator and school psychologist observe the interventions to act as a ‘literacy coach’ to investigate and determine the success of this program.

Findings

Data Analysis

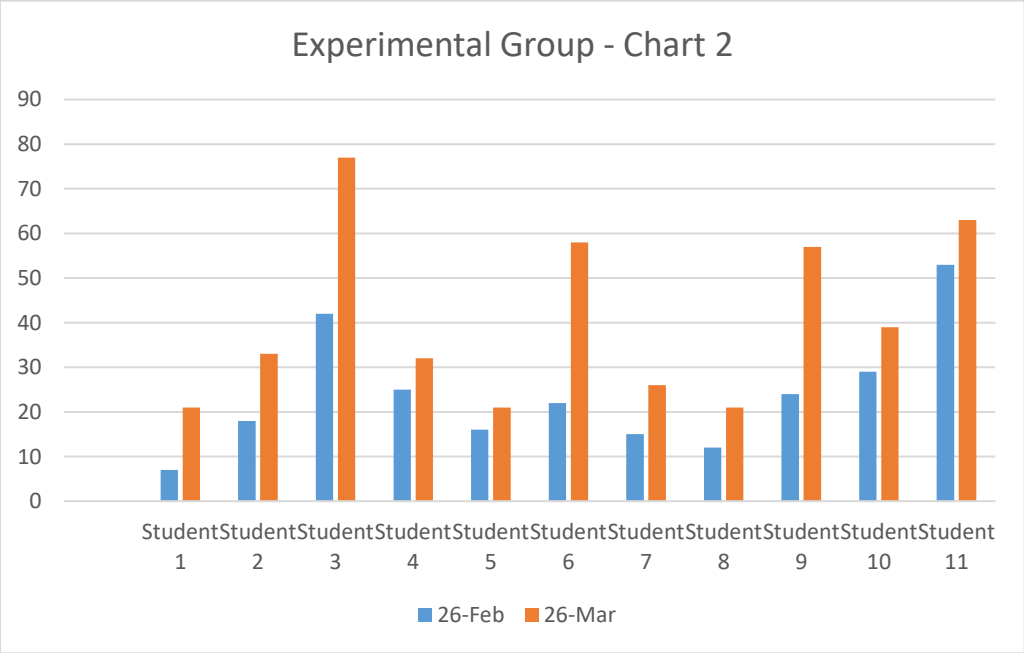
The initial screening data for the experimental group and the control group was completed on Friday, February 26, 2021. The interventions began Monday, March 1, 2021. A control group of thirteen students received instruction from the standard literacy curriculum used for all first grade students in the school district, with no reading interventions. Chart 1 contains the data from the initial screening of the control group using the decodable words screener, compared with the final screening at the end of the study. The control group baseline data, which included all students in the classroom, recorded an average score of 26, with the lowest score being 10 and the highest score being 47. The average ending score for the final screening completed on March 26, 2021, was a score of 36.

Chart 1



During the initial screening of the experimental group of eleven students, the average baseline score in the decodable words screener was 24, with the lowest score being 7 and the highest score being 53. The average ending score from the screening given on March 26, 2021 was 41 and included all students in the class. Chart 2 displays the average score from the baseline test before the intervention was completed and the ending score after four weeks of the intervention.

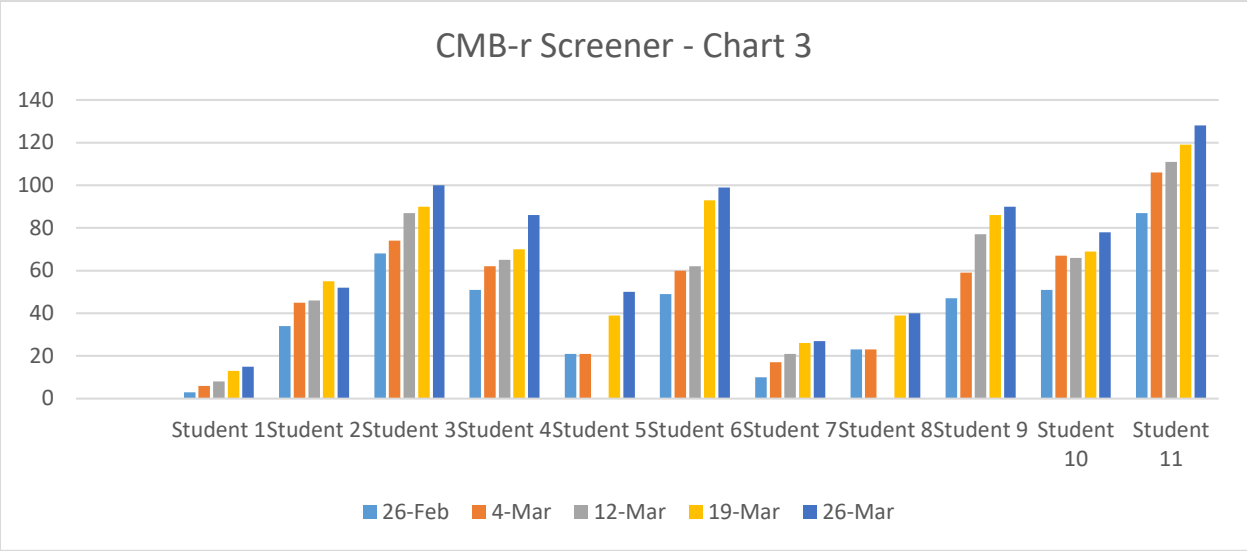
Chart 2



As an added level of testing, the experimental group was administered the CMB-r fluency screener. The baseline CMB-r screener was given on February 26, 2021, as well. The average

baseline score for the experimental group was 40 words per minute. Chart 3 displays weekly growth from this screener beginning with the baseline score to the final ending score on March 26, 2021.

Chart 3



In the experimental group, five of the eleven students have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), and all receive reading supports and have reading goals on the IEP. One student failed to meet the winter benchmark score for both Early Reading and the CMB-r fluency screener. As a result, this student was labeled for urgent intervention. Two students fell slightly below the winter benchmark targets on both assessments and were labeled as needing intervention. Those eight students receive interventions from the classroom teacher. Due to the school district's COVID-19 classroom adjustments, the classroom teacher signed an out-of-field permission form to teach special education and provide services to meet goals from the IEP and provide interventions to students in the teacher's classroom. Throughout the school year, those

students have been receiving whole group instruction and the required interventions from the classroom teacher which included phonics, vocabulary, and sight word fluency to meet their IEP goals. The standard interventions used for these students are generally not as targeted or explicit as the PRESS phonics intervention used in this study. Since the adjustment to using PRESS interventions, all eight of the students improved in both the decodable word screeners and the CMB-r. fluency screener. All eleven students from the experimental group had their progress in reading monitored once a week using both the CMB-r and decodable words screener. The qualitative data from Chart 1 and Chart 3 show the growth from the four week PRESS phonics intervention and the outcomes from each individual student. These two charts show that every student displayed a slow increase each week to a higher ending score than their beginning baseline score.

Discussion

This action research study results convey to teachers, researchers, and stakeholders that PRESS phonics intervention is successful for assisting students in both early reading and oral reading fluency. The study states that 100% of the participants in the experimental group made growth on both the decodable word screener and CMB-r oral reading fluency screener with correct words per minute. The average number of words increased is 16 on the decodable word screener and 33 on the CMB-r screener. The reasoning behind this finding is that the PRESS intervention is specifically targeted and structured to individual needs. The training for teachers is straight forward and easy to implement for both whole group instruction and small group intervention.

Students were able to complete this four-week intervention by engaging in the intervention with fidelity. The researcher used direct instruction, modeling, and checking for understanding to ensure the correct steps were being taken before engaging in the intervention. The researcher followed the intervention plan for each group and progressed through as they successfully completed each intervention step. Implementing these interventions throughout the four weeks provided significant finding from this research to show an increase in both the decodable word scores and correct words per minute in the fluency screener. Overall, the individualized and targeted approach is beneficial for all students regardless of their background or learning style.

Future Research

The next step will be to implement this action research into all classrooms kindergarten through fifth grade. Teachers will be presented with the findings and analysis of the results to encourage the other teachers to decide to use this targeted intervention with their students. First, teachers will participate in the online training module with videos to understand the procedures, materials, and how to teach and implement the interventions and give the screeners in the five areas: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (see Appendix A). This process ensures that each teacher is able to implement the PRESS phonics intervention correctly and help them be successful in their literacy instruction.

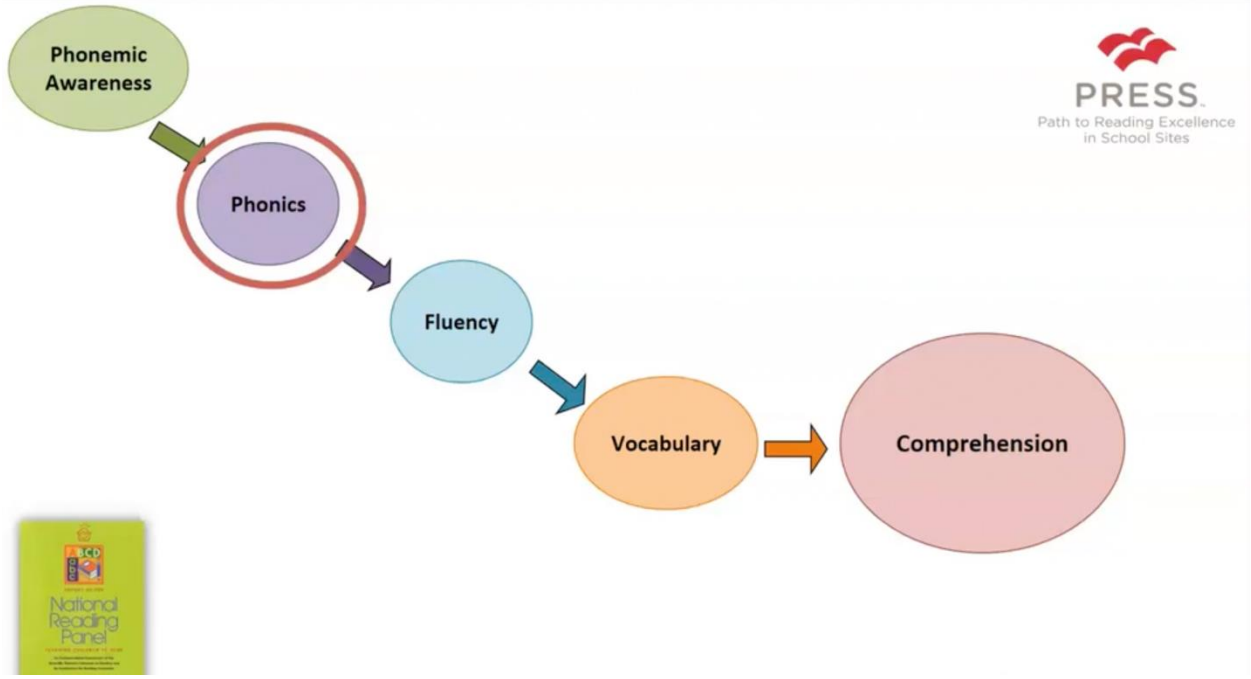
Another future step will be to continue to monitor the eleven students that were a part of the experimental study throughout the school year to ensure adequate growth and success on the oral reading fluency screeners. The researcher will continue to implement the PRESS phonics intervention as a small group intervention for the remainder of the school year. At the end of the school year, the researcher will compare the baseline scores to their ending scores. The findings will be able to support this intervention if the numbers continue to increase.

Overall, the PRESS intervention is the focus for the researcher and other teachers for next year. The focus will be to target the missing pieces and instructional gaps in literacy skills that students may have to help them become more successful readers.

Conclusion

This study provides support by using a small group targeted phonics intervention to help increase literacy scores and oral reading fluency for all students. Using PRESS intervention as a reading intervention, it will support the growth of phonics skills to build a solid foundation for oral reading fluency and comprehension. The eleven students from the experimental group in this action research benefitted from engaging in a four-week PRESS phonics intervention to help increase their literacy skills. The results of this study indicate this type of intervention increases 100% of the students in the class regardless of their ability level or background.

Appendix A


Phonemic Awareness
Phonics
Fluency
Vocabulary
Comprehension
PRESS
Path to Reading Excellence in School Sites
National Reading Panel

Appendix B

PRESS PHONICS DECODING INVENTORY

Student:_____ Teacher:_____ School: _____

Date: _____Administered by:_____

Purpose: This diagnostic tool is designed to identify the student's instructional need for initial placement in a tier 2 phonics intervention.

Skill Assessment	Student Score	Intervention Recommendation
Letter-Sound Correspondence		**≤ 21** Move back to the *Phonemic Awareness Inventory* and/or try P-1 intervention **> 21** Move on to A
Low Frequency Decodable Words		
A. Short vowels in CVC words		**≤ 8** Try P-3 intervention **≥ 9** Move on to B
B. Digraphs with short vowels		**≤ 8** Try P-3 intervention **≥ 9** Move on to C
C. Consonant blends with short vowels		**≤ 8** Try P-4 intervention **≥ 9** Move on to D
D. Vowel Spellings: silent e and vowel teams		**≤ 8** Try P-5 intervention **≥ 9** Move on to E
E. Variant vowels		**≤ 8** Try P-5 intervention **≥ 9** Move on to a fluency intervention

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Appendix C

PRESS PHONEMIC AWARENESS INVENTORY

Student:_____Date:_____Administered by:_____

Isolated Sounds

Say to the student, **"I'm going to say some words and then you will tell me the first sound in each word. For example, the first sound in big is /b/. Now you try."** Say the three initial sound words and record the student's responses.
"Now, I am going to say some more words and you will tell me the last sound in each word. For example, the last sound in pal is /l/. Now you try." Say the three final sound words and record the student's responses.

	Initial Sounds "What's the first sound in ____?"			Final Sounds "What's the last sound in ____?"		
Word	**sun**	**top**	**met**	**can**	**dip**	**fog**
response						
correct						

⩽ 5 consider PA-1 or PA-2 > 5 move to Segmenting*

Segmenting

Say to the student, **"I'm going to say a word and you will say the sounds you hear in the word. For example, if I say the word pen the sounds are /p/ /ĕ/ /n/. Now you try."** Say the following words and record the student's responses.

Word	**fan**	**set**	**bin**	**dot**	**nut**	**sad**
segmented sounds						
correct						

⩽ 5 consider PA-3* > 5 move to Blending

*Consider assessing blending skills as well to determine the most appropriate intervention.

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Appendix D

PRESS PHONEMIC AWARENESS INVENTORY (CONTINUED)

Blending

Say to the student, **"I'm going to say some sounds and you will say them fast to make a word. For example, the sounds /d/ /o/ /g/, make the word dog. Now you try."** Say the following sounds and record the student's responses.

Sounds	/b/ /a/ /t/	/p/ /e/ /t/	/s/ /u/ /n/	/h/ /o/ /p/	/p/ /i/ /g/	/s/ /a/ /t/
response						
correct						

⩽ 5 consider PA-4	> 5 move to Manipulation

Manipulation

Say to the student, **"I am going to say some words and you will change a sound in each word to make a new word. For example, if I change the /c/ in cat and put /h/ in its place, the new word is hat. Now you try."** Say the following words and sounds to manipulate and record the student's responses.

	Initial Sounds		Final Sounds		Medial Sounds	
Word	**can** "Change the /c/ in can and put /f/ in its place." [fan]	**bet** "Change the /b/ in bet and put /n/ in its place." [net]	**tip** "Change the /p/ in tip and put /n/ in its place." [tin]	**sad** "Change the /d/ in sad and put /t/ in its place." [sat]	**dog** "Change the /o/ in dog and put /i/ in its place." [dig]	**fun** "Change the /u/ in fun and put /a/ in its place." [fan]
response						
correct						

⩽ 5 consider PA-5 or PA-6	> 5 move to the Decoding Inventory

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